Conscience and Its Enemies: A Conversation with Robert P. George and Hamza Yusuf

December 15, 2014
The Religious Freedom Project (RFP) at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs is the nation’s only university-based program devoted exclusively to the analysis of religious freedom, a basic human right restricted in many parts of the world.

Under the leadership of Director Thomas Farr and Associate Director Timothy Shah, the RFP engages a team of international scholars to examine and debate the meaning and value of religious liberty; its importance for democracy; and its role in social and economic development, international diplomacy, and the struggle against violent religious extremism.

The RFP began in 2011 with the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation. In 2014 that support continued, while the project also began a three-year partnership with Baylor University and its Institute for Studies of Religion under Director Byron Johnson.

For more information about the RFP’s research, teaching, publications, conferences, and workshops, visit our website at http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rfp.

The Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University, created within the Office of the President in 2006, is dedicated to the interdisciplinary study of religion, ethics, and public life. Through research, teaching, and service, the center explores global challenges of democracy and human rights; economic and social development; international diplomacy; and interreligious understanding. Two premises guide the center’s work: that a deep examination of faith and values is critical to address these challenges, and that the open engagement of religious and cultural traditions with one another can promote peace.

The research for this RFP publication was carried out in collaboration with the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University. This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.
On December 15, 2014, the Religious Freedom Project, in partnership with Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion, hosted a conversation between two distinguished scholars: Professor Robert P. George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton University; and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, co-founder of Zaytuna College, the nation’s first Muslim liberal arts institution.

In their fascinating discussion, Professor George, a Catholic, and Shaykh Hamza, a Muslim, each draw upon a deep well of academic and policy experience to discuss the topic “Conscience and Its Enemies.” Each is convinced that a robust liberal arts curriculum, such as the one at Zaytuna College, encourages young adults to live with a greater sense of responsibility and fosters respect for tradition, morality, and religious freedom. Both affirm the critical historical importance of religious freedom in the United States, and muse on its role in addressing a major concern they share—the moral degradation of American society, a phenomenon visible in modern film, music, and culture.

Read on! Whatever your views on religious freedom or morality in America, we think you’ll find this little book filled with provocative and worthy insights about God, man, and politics—that is, the way we organize our lives together.
TIMOTHY SAMUEL SHAH: Good evening ladies and gentlemen, friends, distinguished guests, and our speakers—Professor Robert George and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf. It is a privilege to welcome so many dear friends of the Religious Freedom Project to this dinner and celebration of the work of the Religious Freedom Project. I know this will be a substantive, engaging conversation on the topic of “Conscience and Its Enemies.”

I’m delighted to introduce our after-dinner speakers.

Before I do, however, I should say that we meet this evening with a very somber backdrop. Despite the happiness of our dinner and our conversation, we meet in a global context in which attacks on conscience and freedom of conscience are pervasive, systematic, and growing. The reason the Religious Freedom Project exists is to cast a bright light on threats to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion everywhere, including in our own country, in other Western democracies, and in countries all around the world. And our mission is to shine a light on threats to religious freedom as they affect all people, regardless of what they believe, what they look like, or where they’re from.

As you look around the room, you’ll notice lots of different people from lots of different backgrounds. We actually don’t agree about much, those of us who are gathered here. Maybe you’ve already discovered that, talking to your neighbors at your table. We’re not of the same party. We’re not of the same faith. We’re not of the same ethnic background. But we do believe in one thing, and that’s why we are here. We are fervent believers in the universal, fundamental right of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion for all people.

I’m delighted that Professor Robert George and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf are here to lead us in a conversation about this very serious issue, about how much we hold dear this extraordinarily valuable freedom, but also about how this freedom is very much under threat all across the world. So it is an enormous pleasure and privilege to welcome these two extraordinary intellects to Georgetown for this conversation.

Professor Robert George holds Princeton’s celebrated McCormick Chair in Jurisprudence and is the founding director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions. He’s vice chairman of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. He has served on the President’s Council on Bioethics, and as a presidential appointee to the US Commission on Civil Rights. He has also served on UNESCO’s World Commission on the Ethics of Science and Technology, of which he continues to be a corresponding member. He’s a former judicial fellow at the Supreme

Shaykh Hamza Yusuf is an American-born Muslim scholar and educator, and the president of Zaytuna College, which he co-founded in 1999. Zaytuna is an extraordinary institution. It is America’s first accredited Muslim institution of higher learning. It was preceded by the 1996 founding of the Zaytuna Institute, which is committed to presenting a classical picture of Islam in the West and reviving traditional study methods in the sciences of Islam.

After becoming Muslim in 1977, Shaykh Hamza spent 10 years in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and North and West Africa receiving teaching licenses in Islamic subjects. He then returned to the United States and earned degrees in Religious Studies and Nursing. Hamza Yusuf is the first American lecturer to teach in Morocco’s most prestigious and oldest Islamic university. He also advises Stanford University’s program in Islamic Studies and the Center for Islamic Studies at Berkeley’s Graduate Theological Union. And he was one of the 138 Muslim signatories of A Common Word Between Us and You, a very robust but also respectful response to Pope Benedict XVI and his invitation to interreligious dialogue following the Pope’s controversial Regensburg address.

Before we begin, I want to say why we are so delighted that Professor George and Shaykh Hamza are going to be talking to us this evening. I think the primary reason is that they model for all of us the kind of authentic engagement of differences across very deep divides of faith and history, but in a way that draws on their own deepest religious convictions and the deepest sources of their religious traditions. We often are told, or it’s suggested to us, that in order to have a civil conversation, we need to put aside our deepest religious beliefs. We need to bracket them. We need to put them under a napkin or under the table in order to engage in a civil conversation as a culture, as a public, and as a university.

Professor George and Shaykh Hamza model a very different kind of conversation. Rather than setting aside their religious convictions, religious identities, and acquaintance with their respective religious visions, they engage them and they bring them to the surface. And yet they do so in a way that’s extraordinarily friendly, warm, and in the service of common goals and common values such as the sanctity of life, marriage and the family, religious liberty, and freedom of conscience.

Both articulate and advance a robust notion of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, not in opposition to their respective religious traditions, not with an attitude of diffidence or embarrassment about their religious traditions, but precisely by drawing on the deepest sources of their faith in their respective religious traditions. And as they have done that—and they’ve been doing this now for some years—Professor George and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf have repeatedly collaborated from their very different religious traditions. They’ve established a relationship of tremendous mutual respect and friendship. These two men of extraordinary faith—and with a caliber of intellect attained by few—have found in each other a peer and a friend.

The two have plainly been influenced by each other’s writings, and they speak of each other in glowing terms. And now three times they have conducted major public dialogues on the importance of Muslim-Christian understanding and cooperation, including as recently as this afternoon. They’ve done that at Princeton and now they’ve done this twice here at Georgetown. We are deeply honored
that you have brought your friendship and your civil and yet very frank conversation and discussion of these issues into our midst. We have been enriched profoundly by the friendship and the deep conversation you have modeled.

In a world that is so deeply divided along lines of faith and along lines of race—as we’ve seen in our own country in recent weeks in Ferguson and New York City—in a world that is so deeply distrustful along so many lines, it is truly inspiring and encouraging that we have Professor Robert George and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf to talk together before us and with us about issues that affect all of us.

CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

ROBERT GEORGE: Thank you, Tim. I do want to say a special word of thanks to Tim, and also to Tom Banchoff and to Tom Farr. I’m very honored to be here. I know I speak for Hamza as well in saying what an honor it is to be again under the auspices of the Berkley Center and Georgetown University. The work that you are doing is the Lord’s own work, and we’re just pleased to have a small part in it.

HAMZA YUSUF: Ditto to all of that.

ROBERT GEORGE: I want to echo Tom Farr’s words of congratulations to Rabbi David Saperstein. I was delighted to learn of his confirmation as Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. I had strongly and enthusiastically supported Rabbi Saperstein’s nomination. The work that he has done in the international religious freedom field has been exemplary.

I have had the privilege in my life of knowing some great teachers. And by that I don’t mean classroom teachers. I mean teachers who teach other people, who teach us, who teach all of us. One was the late and very, very great Father Richard John Neuhaus. Another is my dear friend, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. And another is Shaykh Hamza. These three men—a Christian, a Jew, and a Muslim—are my teachers and our teachers.

And I noticed something about these great teachers: They transcend their particular traditions. Father Neuhaus had a message that wasn’t just for Christians. Chief Rabbi Sacks has a message that isn’t just for Jews. Shaykh Hamza has a message that isn’t just for Muslims. And yet I can’t help but notice that in all three cases, what makes it possible for them to be great teachers who transcend their traditions is a rootedness in the tradition. They don’t flee from the tradition. They don’t abandon the tradition. They draw their strength from the tradition. They draw on the resources and the wisdom of the tradition to teach others.

Hamza is, of course, a great force within the Islamic community, not only here in the United States but in the world. It is my fervent hope that Hamza’s influence will continue to grow beyond the Muslim community because in my work with him, I have noticed what a profound and insightful teacher he is when it comes to issues that all of us either are wrestling with or should be wrestling with. Whether we are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist, or whatever we are, we are all trying, for example, to bring up our children as people who respect themselves and respect others; who honor their own dignity and the dignity of others; who maintain the faith that we transmit to them in a culture that in so many ways is working against us, that promotes a kind of selfishness, a self-indulgence, a living for pleasure, for power, for prestige, for status—all the wrong things. And yet we find ourselves up against that in bringing up our children. That’s not just true for Catholics or Christians. That’s not just true for Jews or for Muslims. That’s true for all of us. And so we have something to learn from each other, drawing on our traditions of faith and being in discussions with each other, tearing down the old barriers that keep us apart. We don’t do this by neutralizing our faith commitments. What Tim said earlier is so true: The worst thing we can do is neutralize those commitments.
What made Father Neuhaus great, what makes Rabbi Sacks great, what makes Shaykh Hamza great, is that they draw on the strength of the tradition. They draw their strength from the tradition. They draw on the resources of the tradition. So in that way they teach us and we learn from them. When we were invited by Tom Farr and accepted the invitation to have another one of our public discussions here at the Berkley Center, I got in touch with Hamza and said what do you want to talk about? He said let's talk about your book, *Conscience and Its Enemies*.

HAMZA YUSUF: Well, first of all, let me ask you about the title. *Conscience and Its Enemies: Confronting the Dogmas of Liberal Secularism*—just that title alone says a lot about what you’re trying to get at in the book. “Conscience” is an interesting word because it means “with knowledge”—you know, scientia.

ROBERT GEORGE: The book is in some ways—I hope I can use this term in the old-fashioned, non-pejorative sense—a polemic against what I believe is a corrupt idea of conscience. It’s an idea of conscience that was identified and criticized and rejected by Cardinal John Henry Newman in the nineteenth century. Newman called it the very counterfeit of conscience and described it as the right of self-will. He made that statement in a letter that he wrote to the Duke of Norfolk actually defending Catholicism against William Gladstone’s critique of Catholicism as conscience-denying, as people giving over their consciences to the Pope. And in that brilliant letter, Newman made the point that conscience has rights because it has duties and that when we honor conscience, we are honoring people’s right to fulfill their most solemn and sacred obligations.

It’s not the right to do what you want, whatever you want, with whomever you want, however you want to do it. That’s the right of self-will, Newman said, the very counterfeit of conscience—a sort of radical, Ayn Randian, libertarian idea of conscience—conscience as “the permissions department.”

Instead, Newman said that conscience has rights because it has duties. When we honor it, we honor the right of the person to act in line with his or her best judgments of what he or she is morally required to do, whether or not he or she wants to do it or has to overcome the most profound aversions to do it.

And so in our own time, I find that in dealing with my own students, the culture is teaching our young people the dogmas of liberal secularism, the dogmas of the Me Generation. This was my generation. For some of you, it was your generation. And if you think back to the founding era of the Me Generation, the motto of the Me Generation was “if it feels good, do it.” And what’s even worse—that’s at the heart of my critique of this misguided conception of conscience—is the false belief that I am only being true to myself when I am acting on my feelings and desires in doing what I really want to do. In fact, if I restrain myself except for very special reasons, if I restrain myself from doing what I really want to do—at least where it does no immediate palpable harm to others—then I’m allegedly acting inauthentically, I’m not being true to myself.

So, you see, if we understand conscience in Newman’s sense—which of course was St.

“[Conscience] is not the right to do what you want, whatever you want, with whomever you want, however you want to do it. That’s the right of self-will…a sort of radical, Ayn Randian, libertarian idea of conscience.”

Robert George
Augustine’s sense, which was also the sense of Aristotle or Plato in the ancient world, the sense of the great teachers of mankind and the great religious traditions—then we see this counterfeit idea of conscience as being the very reverse of what conscience is. It is a reduction of the idea of conscience to the right of self-will. So that’s what the provocative title is really about. It’s meant to signal that polemic against the counterfeit idea of conscience, what I believe is a corrupt idea of conscience.

**HAMZA YUSUF:** There are two foundational principles of the modern culture that we live in. One of them is the idea that it’s morally acceptable to do whatever you want as long as you don’t hurt anybody. That’s the first principle. And the second one is that you have to tolerate the behavior of other people as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.

I think our generation is the transitional generation—the people who grew up in the ‘60s and the ‘70s. And it’s not to look nostalgically at the 1950s or ‘40s or ‘30s—I mean, there were undeniably problems in each of these periods—but there were still some fundamental principles that were accepted by the vast majority of people in the country which have been completely swept aside since then. And so for those of us who know something about history and what these harbingers indicate, we have to be deeply troubled. Kierkegaard said that no individual can save a generation, but he can at least help them see where they’re going. And that’s part of the role of people who are committed to conscience: They are witnesses.

The other day we had an event, and I spoke about Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Everybody should really know Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. He’s one of these historical figures that should be known, but he’s not. It’s very strange. India celebrates Education Day on his birthday. He was the first education minister appointed by Jawaharlal Nehru. He was Mahatma Gandhi’s best friend, and he was a Muslim. He was a Muslim scholar. He was born in Mecca. His mother was an Arab, and his father was from Bengal. He was completely committed to nonviolence. He began his career as a radical and wanted to change things violently in India. But he realized that it was insane and ended up becoming Gandhi’s interlocutor for years. Azad was committed to Hindu-Muslim coexistence in India, and he was opposed to Partition.

So I spoke about it. The next day, in a very bizarre event of serendipity or providence, a group of Hindu proselytizers came to my house which has never happened in my life.

“There are two foundational principles of the modern culture that we live in. One of them is the idea that it’s morally acceptable to do whatever you want as long as you don’t hurt anybody…And the second one is that you have to tolerate the behavior of other people as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone.”

Hamza Yusuf
It was so weird. There were nine of them. They came in and the first thing they said was, “This house feels very, very peaceful. You must do a lot of prayer.” Then they sat down. I was with my children at the time. I was actually teaching them. And they sat down, and we just sat in silence.

And then I just said to them, “We’re living in the Kali Yuga, and we have to be witnesses that we are more than matter.” And I used a Hindu term that they can understand. The Kali Yuga in Christianity and Islam would be the latter days. The Kali Yuga is the dark cycle, when everything is turned upside-down, when child rebels against parent. You know, it is like Odysseus’s great speech in Troilus and Cressida about the degree. When it’s untuned, chaos follows.

They were so moved by that. They just got up and hugged me, and then they left. I was genuinely moved. I really meant what I said. It brought me to tears with them, just sitting with them, because I really felt how difficult it is for people to be religious in this age, whether they’re Hindus, Christians, or Muslims. It’s really difficult to be a believer in a culture that is telling everybody that there’s nothing to believe in other than pleasure or materialism or—

ROBERT GEORGE: Or success.

HAMZA YUSUF: —all of these other things. And I think the witnessing that we have to do, the witnessing of conscience, involves bringing it into the public space with courage. Unfortunately, there’s a great deal of craveness in religious communities, you know, a fear. But we have been told in all of our traditions that if you speak the truth, you have people that get deeply upset about it.

ROBERT GEORGE: I suppose that’s one point on which the religions converge: the need to tend to the soul. There is a more than merely material component of the human being, of the human person. The project of a human life must involve doing more than attaining pleasure or even psychological benefits like prestige, status, and power. It must involve a kind of tending of the soul.

HAMZA YUSUF: The Prophet Muhammad said that prestige and wealth are not less harmful to the religion of a man than a hungry wolf in the midst of sheep. You know, they eat away at faith, and that’s why all of these traditions focus so much on mortification, which is such an anathema to modern people—this idea of actually sacrificing. I read a really interesting op-ed by this woman in the Los Angeles Times about how she hated the fact that they played It’s a Wonderful Life ever year, because she said the film was such a negative message about a man who sacrificed his life for others and never pursued his own dreams. [Laughter] You know, the Arabs say that the worst things make us laugh.
ROBERT GEORGE: In my book, I told a story of an experience I had along those same lines. At Princeton when I invited the wonderful documentary filmmaker Michael Pack and his collaborator, the biographer Richard Brookhiser, to come to Princeton to present what would become the rough cut of their great documentary on George Washington—it was later aired on PBS and in theaters and so forth—one of the things the students encountered in the documentary was learning that Washington, because he wanted to become virtuous, knew he had progress to make. He knew he wasn’t there yet. He wanted to become virtuous. He would imagine himself as a truly virtuous person. He would think of a hero from antiquity or some great-souled person, and he would try to become that person. And the documentary says that he would enter into the persona of that person like an actor on a stage. And being an old-fashioned, you know, fuddy-duddy from the Middle Ages, I’m thinking, “Wow, that’s cool.” He realized that there was an ideal of virtue and he tried to make himself into it by stepping into that persona.

Well, not all, but a substantial percentage of my students had a different reaction. They were just scandalized that Washington did that. He was, they said, being “inauthentic.” Instead of doing what he wanted to do, he was trying to be somebody else. And I tried to get through to them with the idea that he’s trying to be George Washington—he’s trying to be a virtuous George Washington, or a more virtuous George Washington than what he is.

HAMZA YUSUF: Right, an idealized self.

ROBERT GEORGE: I think that what has been lost is that sense of authenticity.

HAMZA YUSUF: Well, the idea of artifice has also been lost. Artifice in the Middle Ages was quite different. An “artificial” musician was actually considered a great compliment, because artifice was actually the discipline where you mastered the art. And living is an art. In fact, the art of living—there are medieval titles with that in it—is an art to be learned. It’s a skill to be mastered. And that’s interesting is so much of the modern world—if you look at all traditional cultures, even the folk cultures of, say, the Gaelic culture—you have to master things.

I have a Greek side of my family. Greek dancing is very interesting because you have to learn how to dance, but at a certain point you’re allowed to lead, and at that point you can improvise. But before that, you don’t do the improvisation. And musicians know this. You have to master a great number of skills before you become an artist, a liberal artist. You’re free then to express yourself.

ROBERT GEORGE: Picasso reproduced Rembrandt before he became Picasso.

HAMZA YUSUF: Exactly. And Ezra Pound was a master of metrics before he started playing with free verse. But we’re living at a time when nobody wants to do the mastery in order to do the experimentation. It’s a time where dancing becomes just throwing your arms around instead of actually learning how to dance, learning the discipline of dancing. Music has increasingly become making noise—even more so today than ever before. I mean the Beatles were called noise, now they’re called the classics. [Laughter]

Actually, the Beatles spent three years in Hamburg mastering their craft playing eight hours a day for six days a week, and this is what so many young people today are unwilling to do. I had a friend of mine who’s a musician, who came to a class that I helped teach at the junior college. He asked how many people played an instrument, and only one person raised their hand. And he was very struck by that because he said that when he was young, everybody would have raised their hand. And he was very struck by that because he said that when he was young, everybody would have raised their hand. So increasingly people become masters on the game Guitar Hero. They can play these games. And it’s interesting because a high level of skill is necessary in these games, and they actually get feedback and can correct their mistakes. But in other areas of pursuit, the idea of artifice, of actually learning the craft, is lacking.

Rhetoric has also been attacked in the modern world. Traditionally, people studied rhetoric
to be able not just to speak well, but also to understand what the magic of the person who could speak well was doing. “Emotions” was a chapter in any book on rhetoric, in order to understand how emotions are used by speakers. And one of the most classical ways is the manipulation of fear and dread, which is in any book on rhetoric, where they say beware of demagogues who use fear and terror to frighten you. I’m taking this literally from Edward Baines’ book on rhetoric, which my great grandmother studied in Wisconsin in a public high school. His chapter on emotions warns the students—and she was probably 16 years old when she studied it—to beware of politicians who use fear, because people are willing to give up things when they’re afraid that in more reasonable times they would not.

**ROBERT GEORGE:** James Madison writes about this in the tenth *Federalist Paper*.

**HAMZA YUSUF:** Yeah, he was a great rhetorician.

**ROBERT GEORGE:** Yeah, passionate. Let me tell you what I think our problem is culturally. It’s not something new. It’s actually something old. I think we live in a culture that is increasingly Gnostic.

**HAMZA YUSUF:** I couldn’t agree with you more.

**ROBERT GEORGE:** Well, here’s what really worries me—you can tell me about Islam. Gnosticism has crept into Christianity big time, both on the Protestant and on the Catholic side. I can’t say anything about where things are with your Greek Orthodox relatives, but the Orthodox churches may be in a better position. I’m not sure.

But within both the Protestant and Catholic theological worlds, it looks to me like Gnosticism is seeping in from the general culture. What we call the “secularization of religion” is actually the “Gnosticization of religion”—the sense that the human person essentially is a psychology, a center of consciousness and feeling and emotion that inhabits and uses a material body which is a kind of distinct substance. So we’re non-bodily persons—feelings, centers of emotion—inhabiting and using non-personal bodies.

And once that happens, then sin becomes illness and not sin. You don’t need reform. You need therapy. We don’t need priests anymore. We need counselors. Even when it comes to grieving, we don’t look for spiritual counseling. We don’t call the rabbi or the priest or the minister. We call the grief counselor as a kind of professionalization of the therapeutic. Do you see anything similar to that in contemporary Islam?

**HAMZA YUSUF:** I think in Islam, no, I really don’t. I think the Muslims are not yet ready to think about that. I think that Christianity is a culture that has really gone through a great deal to arrive at that point. And I think the Muslims are going through that now. A lot of the disruptions that are happening in the Muslim world which are incredibly traumatic, I think, are going to lead to this type of alternative. And I think a lot of people feel now that religion increasingly is the problem, as opposed to humans being the problem. Religion is enlisted in the army of the humans to justify all of their pathologies.

I was once watching a Muslim preacher who was clearly insane. And the person next to me was a psychiatrist from Ghana, a Muslim psychiatrist.

“What we call the “secularization of religion” is actually the “Gnosticization of religion”—the sense that the human person essentially is a psychology, a center of consciousness and feeling and emotion that inhabits and uses a material body which is a kind of distinct substance.”

Robert George
and he leaned over and whispered to me, “Isn’t it extraordinary how people can express their personal pathology in public spaces with the ornamentation of religion?” And I thought that was a completely accurate insight.

And this is where I’m coming increasingly to the conclusion that people should not be allowed to speak publicly until they’re at least 40 years old. [Laughter] And even then, they need to pass a test. Because everything that I’m ashamed of, I said before I was 40.

ROBERT GEORGE: Aristotle had a similar view about when it was proper to start talking about morals and philosophy.

HAMZA YUSUF: He was 47 when he said that the intellect reaches its pinnacle at 47. [Laughter] Or maybe he was 49. The challenge that I find in the Muslim community right now is the need for a restoration of the centrality of knowledge and a knowledge-based religion.

ROBERT GEORGE: As opposed to what?

HAMZA YUSUF: As opposed to ignorance. You know, our scholars differentiate between three types of ignorance: simple ignorance, compounded ignorance, and then some of them added complex-compound, which is even more difficult. But generally it’s simple and compound. And what they meant by simple ignorance was somebody who is ignorant but they knew they were ignorant, and so you could teach them. But as for the ignorance of somebody who thinks that they know, that person cannot be taught. Their ignorance has to be exposed to them. It’s very difficult to do that because they are convinced that they know. So when you have fallibilism—which is to me one of the most important virtues to inculcate into religious people—when I might be certain about the truth of Islam and you might be certain about the truth of Catholicism, we have to recognize the fallibility of our own understanding of religion. Often we arrogate to ourselves this divine position of knowing everything, that there’s only one way to understand it. And this dovetails into the problem of judicial despotism, where you have these arbiters who decide what the conclusion of something that sometimes is insoluble. It’s just simply one of these human problems that we’re not going to get to any final solution in this world, and we have to recognize that there are going to be differences.

So what I mean by “restoring knowledge” is restoring a very specific type of knowledge.

Reverend Eugene Rivers, Congressman Chris Smith, and Dr. Jacqueline Rivers converse after dinner.
The first and foremost is that in a complex society—and I’ve lived with aboriginal peoples—you have to have literacy. It’s absolutely essential in a complex society to have literacy, because the foundation of a complex society is language. Aboriginal cultures are very simple. In a simple culture, you have about 17 jobs. We have tens of thousands of jobs in our civilization, and each one of those jobs has nomenclature. It has skillsets that have to be acquired and learned.

In a complex society, you’re in trouble if you don’t have fundamental literacy of language and language skills that get back literally to understanding how language works. I’ll give you an example. I was at Vassar College recently, and I was horrified at how far I felt Vassar had fallen from the liberal arts tradition, because it’s one of the Seven Sisters. It was a great liberal arts institution. It was established at the outset of the Civil War. It has a beautiful campus. At the heart of the campus is a church which is now basically a museum. I remember somebody asked me if I wanted to see the church, and I asked whether the students ever go there. They said no, it’s quite rare.

When I spoke to the students, I said that there are two ways to view religion. A modern secularist today feels that religion was a scaffolding that we built our civilization with. But now that the civilization is built, we can simply remove the scaffolding and everything is going to remain standing—all these institutions that were all built. Harvard was a seminary. Princeton was a seminary. Yale was a seminary. They were established by people that were deeply rooted in faith. And that was their understanding, that knowledge was part of faith. In fact, if you just look at this wonderful Latin motto that Georgetown took, which is basically faith and reason, the unity of those two—both out of one (Utraque Unum)—that is what Georgetown was based on.

Now they just say, “No, we can just do away with the scaffolding and everything is going to stay.” But my argument is that it was the foundation. If you remove it, you’ve simply removed what’s holding up the civilization. I think it has produced what we’re seeing out there today, this incredible degradation of culture, the “hookup culture” of our young people. You can see it in their faces, the meaninglessness that’s out there, the nihilism.

Violent nihilism is one way of expressing it, which is happening in the Muslim world. But hedonistic nihilism is another way of expressing it. Robert Frost talks about the two ways that we’ll destroy ourselves, fire and ice,
“A modern secularist today feels that religion was a scaffolding that we built our civilization with. But now that the civilization is built, we can simply remove the scaffolding and everything is going to remain standing…. But my argument is that it was the foundation. If you remove [religion], you’ve simply removed what’s holding up the civilization.”

Hamza Yusuf

and that’s how I view it. I think the Muslim world is ice. There’s too much hatred. There’s all that deep sentiment and resentment about the way the world has reconfigured and their place in it now. But we’re filled with the fire of passion, and we’re burning out. I mean, I think it’s clear to anybody who has eyes to see that this is what’s happening. And I think we should all be profoundly troubled because—

ROBERT GEORGE: It’s a weird combination, a combination of opposites. There’s a kind of radical libertarianism that manifests itself in things such as the hookup culture, but then a very overwhelming, almost totalitarian moralism that comes down like an anvil on anybody who dares to speak up against the radical libertarianism or individualism or selfishness.

HAMZA YUSUF: And you addressed that several times in the book.

ROBERT GEORGE: So you have this phenomenon: On the one hand, there is groupthink, which is obviously toxic to any intellectual community. I mean it’s like trying to survive with all the air sucked out of a room. And on the other hand, there’s just the personal chaos and all the tragedies that ensue as a result of that.

HAMZA YUSUF: Taking a step back, I was just going to say that at Vassar what struck me was what somebody asked me after the lecture. I mentioned that they don’t teach grammar anymore, and somebody asked me—he was an older gentleman—“Why don’t they teach grammar anymore?” It just struck him as very odd. I thought about it and gave an answer that I wasn’t satisfied with, and I went back.

I actually have a book in my library that I hadn’t looked at for a long time called The War Against Grammar by David Mulroy. I read that book, and it was so shocking to see what happened. You know, in the early ’50s Charles Fries, a professor of linguistics, wrote a dissertation about how grammar didn’t exist. It is total nominalism, the idea that there are thousands of parts of speech and to reduce them to eight is ridiculous. And what happened in the early ’60s was that there was a paper that was done saying that grammar actually harmed students, and it was adopted by the National Council of English Teachers, and so they actually stopped teaching grammar.

I thank God I went to Catholic schools and actually had grammar drilled into my brain. But when I went to the Muslim world, the focus on grammar struck me when I was studying in the traditional method or system. And Imam Magid, who is here in the audience today, knows this. I mean, the Muslim scholars were obsessed with grammar because they were obsessed with meaning. And one of the things that David Mulroy does—he teaches at an excellent university in the United States—is give the opening to the Declaration of Independence to his students (“When in the course of human events…”), and then he asks them simply to write in one sentence the main point of that sentence—and it’s a complex sentence with three or four subordinate clauses.
ROBERT GEORGE: Like “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.”

HAMZA YUSUF: Right. Exactly. Well, that’s it. I mean, my brother summed it up by saying, you know, if you break up with somebody, you should tell them why. [Laughter] But most of the students—about 90 percent of the students—will say things like, “It’s important to follow God’s laws.” They don’t get the main point. He said 90 percent of his students don’t get the main point. And his argument is that we have a higher illiteracy in this culture. What I’ve noticed about comments on the Internet is all of the really stupid comments are always written in poor English, and the really intelligent comments are always written in good English. And so I’m convinced that we should educate people in language skills and in the importance of language.

We should add logic to that, too. Logic was taught for 2,500 years. Were they all stupid? Were they all wrong? Was Kant an idiot for learning logic? Our entire legal system is predicated on logic. And if you look at the logical fallacies that come up in these briefs that are presented to the Supreme Court, any second-year student of Aristotelian logic could literally identify the fallacies. So why is logic no longer taught, despite the fact that our legal system is entirely based on logical principles? And this isn’t like you’re profoundly skilled in analytics. It’s not pedantic, you know. I mean, obviously logic can become a very funny thing that pedants fall into. “He was in logic a great critic, profoundly skilled and analytic. He could distinguish—”

ROBERT GEORGE: That’s right. That’s very good.

HAMZA YUSUF: Yeah. That’s making fun of something. But one of the things that Jacques Maritain and others have shown is that Descartes completely misunderstood the scholastic tradition. He didn’t understand it. And so, you know, he writes a book that ends up having a massive impact on our civilization. And then you get somebody like Bertrand Russell who, despite the fact that he mastered logic, and he knew logic very well, completely undermined the teaching of logic by creating a propositional logic that removed the metaphysical importance of logic. Because the centrality of logic is in that first principle of understanding what a concept is, understanding what the relationship between a word and the phantasm in the mind is. This is central to meaning. If you remove that, you’ve removed meaning as a foundation of language, and therefore we can’t really talk.

ROBERT GEORGE: This brings us back to a point that you made earlier, and that is—if I can put it in my own terms—the fact that we seem as a culture now to be living off the accumulated ethical capital which we’re depleting and not restoring. So just to show you that grammar and logic are not sufficient just in themselves, let me—

HAMZA YUSUF: I agree.

ROBERT GEORGE: I know you do. But a good example is my colleague, Peter Singer.

HAMZA YUSUF: But they are necessary. They are not sufficient, but they are necessary.

ROBERT GEORGE: Singer is logically very scrupulous. He’s a brilliant writer. His books have sold millions of copies in part because they’re so intelligible. He knows how to put words together. In lots of ways you have to say he’s a good thinker, and yet—

HAMZA YUSUF: He makes fundamental errors, yeah.

ROBERT GEORGE: He has eliminated the metaphysical principles that are the foundation of any civilization.

HAMZA YUSUF: Our crisis is a metaphysical crisis.

ROBERT GEORGE: So you have a situation where for Dr. Singer, he’s got a strict separation—this takes us back to the Gnosticism point—of person and body (or human being, considered as a biological reality), and he’ll just take it from there. So you’ve got the metaphysical mistake right at
the beginning, the anthropological mistake right at the beginning. And then since the body is one thing and the person is another thing, a human being, a possessor of a body, is not a person until several months or a year or more after that individual is born. So not only is abortion morally justified in Singer’s view, but infanticide is as well. And the same separation underwrites—

HAMZA YUSUF: The same is true for somebody with dementia.

ROBERT GEORGE: That’s right. So just as you can have a human being who is not yet a person, you can have a human being who was once a person but is no longer a person.

HAMZA YUSUF: Because if you want, you can remove the metaphysical concept of a soul.

ROBERT GEORGE: Then there are some human beings who are not persons, and never were persons, and never will be persons, and these are people who were born with significant congenital cognitive defects.

HAMZA YUSUF: It’s interesting because even in the traditional Muslim world—and I’m thinking of Taqi al-Subki from the eight-century Islamic era, the Middle Ages—al-Subki actually wrote that euthanasia for animals wasn’t permitted. He said if it was a pet, then it should be cared for until it died.

And this gets back to the transition of the world as a sacrament and the complete deracination of meaning from the world which is the hallmark of the modern world. This is why, you know, rape is so common in our culture now in educational institutions. I mean, these are places where people are supposed to be educated. And it’s common in the army, where they’re supposed to be disciplined, right?

Because once you remove true personhood—which is the dignity of the soul—and you objectify, and the other becomes an instrument—so you instrumentalize human beings for your own pleasure—this is the result. This is what happens, and this is where we end up. This is why, in the end, the only thing that will work now is “might makes right.” And this is what John Calhoun argued, that once you remove virtue from a people, then tyranny becomes necessary to control those people.

And that’s why all of us should be concerned about this, because this is the wisdom of the ages that has been replicated. This is science. It can be shown. Toynbee showed it in the 21 civilizations that he studied, and he watched how they rose and how they fell. They don’t like Toynbee anymore. But Toynbee showed that arete is the essence of the power of a civilization.

ROBERT GEORGE: Arete as in the sense of virtue.

HAMZA YUSUF: Virtue and excellence. And when you remove that from a civilization, the only place where we still have excellence, as far as I can tell, is in music and sports. Not necessarily in the virtue of sports—because now they gloat, and true sportsmanship should have never been about gloating—but in terms of actual skill. Athletes have stunning skills. People are mesmerized by it, which is why athletes get paid millions of dollars. But the real skill of the ancient civilization was the saint, the one who mastered his soul. That’s why Cormac McCarthy says that every civilization has an ideal human being, and he says that the ideal human being of the Greeks was the warrior. But the ideal human being...
of the Semitic culture was the penitent, the man of God, and he said that Europe adopted this. The point is that this was the ideal of so many civilizations, that the human being that embodied virtue and lived virtue.

ROBERT GEORGE: I think the most fundamental thing that we can pass along to our children, I'm speaking now generally, is a sense that the project of a human life is a project of self-mastery. It's a lifetime project.

HAMZA YUSUF: Exactly.

ROBERT GEORGE: You know, it's not to control other people or even to control the environment. Of course, you want to exercise a certain amount of control over the external life, too. You obviously want to make things happen. You want to get things done. You want to accomplish things. We hope that they're worthy.

HAMZA YUSUF: But with virtue toward the commonweal.

ROBERT GEORGE: Yes. And that means that in the end the most important thing is being a master of oneself. And the reason that's a project is that you're constantly fighting with yourself. You're constantly fighting this out.

HAMZA YUSUF: Every day.

ROBERT GEORGE: That's right. It's the desires, the passions, the emotions, the feelings.

HAMZA YUSUF: The ethical moment. It's every moment. Ibn al-Munkadir was a great scholar and the scholar of Imam Malik. He was a teacher, one of the great eponyms of Islamic jurisprudence. He said, “I struggled with myself for 50 years before I surrendered to God.” And I remember I was in Kuwait at the airport with my teacher Shaykh Abdallah bin Bayyah, and a young athlete came up to him. He was a soccer player on a professional team. He saw that he was a teacher and he went up and said, “I'm really struggling with myself, like I do things and then I really feel bad about them, and I repent, and then I go back and do them again.” Shaykh Abdallah said to him, “Good, keep doing that. Keep struggling.”

ROBERT GEORGE: Keep struggling. Keep fighting.

HAMZA YUSUF: I think the worst thing that our culture tells people is to give in to the self, because giving in to the self leads to such misery. People suffer greatly from giving in to the self. They hate themselves. They really do. People hate themselves. They hate themselves for their overeating. They hate themselves for their one-night stands. They hate themselves for their alcohol addiction. All of these things are acts of self-hatred. And so to encourage people in a culture that says, “Go for it, just do it”—

ROBERT GEORGE: The ideological overlay, though, which is something relatively new, that justifies the capitulation to one's own desires, is the idea that authenticity is living in line with my desires as opposed to conquering them. So, just as Newman said, there's a counterfeit of conscience; there's a counterfeit of authenticity.

HAMZA YUSUF: And the paradox is that the culture doesn't believe in the self. It's like you have to be authentic, but then you don't really have a self. You're just a bundle of desires.

ROBERT GEORGE: Well, that's what the self is. I mean there are even informal philosophical treatments these days. Many people see the self as a bundle of desires and memories.

CONFLICTING CLAIMS OF CONSCIENCE

TIMOTHY SAMUEL SHAH: I'd like us to connect these extremely searching observations about conscience, its connection to dignity, and the worries that you've articulated about the trivialization of both conscience and dignity to the context in which we live, the context in which we see
massive attacks on freedom of conscience. I’d like us to engage our friends who are listening. I think they are ready to speak.

If I may, I would really be delighted to invite Rabbi Saperstein, America’s new Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, if he would like to begin the conversation with a comment or question that perhaps connects some of his own concerns and observations about freedom of conscience and freedom of faith, and perhaps linking them with some of what we’ve heard this evening. Sorry to put you on the spot! We’re so excited about your new role. And again, thank you so much, Rabbi Saperstein, for being with us.

DAVID SAPERSTEIN: Thank you. I’m deeply honored by that new role and deeply appreciative of how many people in this room helped make it happen. It really means a lot to me. If I were already sworn in to the new job, my simple question would be: In situations of competing claims of conscience, like the battle over defamation laws, how do we think about such laws? There’s a battle over defamation laws and the conscience claims of free expression.

But, since I’m not sworn in, indulge me, if you would, one minute to say something as a rabbi here, before I put on a different hat. I was struck by what you said about Cardinal Newman in the beginning and the idea that rights are the consequence, the outcome, of the fact that we have duties that God has called us to do. What is the difference? I’m curious about what Islam says about duties versus rights.

But there’s that strand of our thought embodied in the Declaration of Independence—“we are endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights,” the concept of the Bill of Rights, rights at the center of our political order and our social order—that’s connected with the idea of duties. Indeed, in classical Hebrew, as Professor Robert Louis Wilken will attest, there is no term for “rights.” There’s a term for duties or responsibilities. It is a system of duties and responsibilities. When exercised, it creates the effective rights for those people who are the recipients of the consequence of those duties. But what is the difference between a system structured on duties as opposed to rights? What’s the outcome of approaching it in that different way?

And if you’ll indulge me, I’d like to take just one more second to say something again as a rabbi. For me, this is powerful. This cause of religious freedom is powerful for Jews, who have been the quintessential victims of religious persecution in the history of the world. Many peoples have been buffeted, but no one as systematically, and in so many times and climes, as the Jewish community. And it’s also fitting that this event is happening the day before Hanukkah, which is our Festival of Lights—our festival which began as a nationalistic struggle of a very small group of fighters against one of the most powerful forces on earth, and the miraculous victory that took place.

But over the centuries, the rabbis transmuted this military victory into the idea of spiritual victory: “Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.” That became the hallmark of what the holiday is about. The story that only appears much later—the story of the miracle of the oil that leads to the lighting of the menorah—is also turned into this kind of spiritual victory in that the temple is reclaimed, that Jews are
allowed to worship freely. I can’t think of a more fitting topic for us to be talking about at this particular time.

So tomorrow night, in every Jewish home across the world, there will be one candle lit in the darkness of religious oppression—and night after night another candle is lit until it is all ablaze with the light of freedom for people. That’s what the Religious Freedom Project is all about. It’s what the work of so many here is about. And you have blessed all of us who have benefited because of what you have done. Thank you.

ROBERT GEORGE: David, thank you for the beautiful reflection there at the end. To go back to the question—and I’ll take the first crack at it and then hand it on to Shaykh Hamza—in the book there’s a chapter entitled “Religious Liberty and the Human Good,” in which I put forward a kind of neo-Aristotelian defense of religious liberty. I distinguish this from the kinds of defenses of religious liberty that are more familiar, I think, to people—the types that came out of Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke, that sometimes call the idea of religious liberty an abstract right. According to this approach, religious liberty is something that you just have, or it’s a consequence of the working out of logic itself.

Here’s the chain of inferences. There’s a right to religious freedom because people have a duty to pursue the truth (especially the truth about religious matters), to engage in a religious quest, and then to live lives, as best they can, of authenticity and integrity in line with their best judgments as to the truth of those questions. And I defend the end of the chain—so we move from right, which is in turn grounded in duty, which is in turn grounded in a value and a good—I defend the idea of a good in this way. Anyone, any reasonable person, can see that a life lived without even raising the questions of meaning, value, destiny, dignity, or purpose is a diminished life as a human life.

Richard Dawkins, for all his atheism—we’re old friends; I spent five years as a member of the Senior Common Room of New College, Oxford, where he was also, so we had many coffees together and ate many lunches—I can assure you that even Dawkins would not want to lead a life or have his children lead a life where they never engage the great existential questions, because he realizes, as much as you or I realize, that such a life would be a diminished life. Now, he has a set of answers at which he has arrived, and he’s quite evangelical about them as you know. And yet nobody, unless they’re just being intransigent and stubborn, will refuse to admit that a life that failed to engage those questions—just completely ignored them, laid them aside, never had anything to do with them, never thought about it—would be diminished as a human life.

Now, if that’s true—if that is an aspect of our well-being and fulfillment as human beings to be taken into account in trying to assess what the integral directiveness of the human good in all its variegated wholeness requires—then the logic works back the other way. If that is a human good, an aspect of the wellbeing and fulfillment of human beings, it’s got to be a duty of ours to pursue it—not to live a

“This cause of religious freedom is powerful for Jews, who have been the quintessential victims of religious persecution in the history of the world. Many peoples have been buffeted, but no one as systematically, and in so many times and climes, as the Jewish community.”

David Saperstein
diminished, frivolous human life. And yet if it is a duty, then we must enjoy the effective freedom to fulfill that duty.

The only question then becomes: What is the scope and what are the limits of that freedom? The Religious Freedom Restoration Act—which David, you and I and others in this room worked back in the ’90s to get into law—that is one way of attempting to capture what the scope and limits are, to give government a workable set of criteria for determining how far religious freedom should extend. And it’s got to be pretty far, but it can’t be unlimited. It’s clear that it can’t be unlimited because if it were to be unlimited, it would be self-contradictory. Someone could violate someone else’s religious freedom in the exercise of his religious freedom. So you need some set of workable criteria. But the specific answer to your question about the relationship between the right and the duty is that the right is grounded in the duty, and duty is grounded in the value.

HAMZA YUSUF: In Arabic, early Muslim jurists articulated divine rights and what were called the rights of God’s servants. The *haq*, the Arabic word for right, probably had a different connotation to the medieval scholars, but it corresponds relatively well with the modern concept. The idea is that God has rights, and one of his rights is to be worshipped, and it’s a debt owed by humans. That’s why the word *din* in Arabic, which is religion, is from *dain*, which is debt. So the religious practice that we do is actually the debt that we fulfill for the gift of life, and so that’s a right of God. But according to our tradition, the right of the human being is that God provides and sustains you. So this is God’s promise, that “if you worship me I will provide and sustain for you.”

ROBERT GEORGE: It sounds like a covenant, David. Like the idea of a covenant.

HAMZA YUSUF: You know, there are so many similarities in these traditions. And the Qur’an clearly states that the Prophet Muhammad is bringing nothing new, and this is why the medieval rabbis recognized him as a vehicle of providence—the great Andalusian rabbis—that he was preparing and ushering in monotheism for the world in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. So they clearly understood that.

You know, when I was studying in the madrasa we had to memorize poems. But one of them says that the first obligation of every human being is to know their Lord, that that was a duty of the human being. And the pursuit of that knowledge is with the condition of intellect. So before you have intellect, the duty is not incumbent on you.

The Maturidi, which is the dominant theological school in the Muslim world, said that irrespective of revelation, you were obliged to seek out this thing [God] and that you would be accountable for doing that. The Ash’ari said no, a prophet has to come and give you that message. And if the prophet hasn’t come to you, then you’re free from the duty to pursue knowledge of God. Imam al-Ghazali, one of the great theologians from the twelfth century, wrote *Faysal al-Tafriqa* (*On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance*), a very important work translated by Dr. Jackson into English. Imam Al-Ghazali, who is considered one of the greatest theologians in the history of Islam, actually argued that anyone who pursued the truth sincerely—whether or not they achieved it by the end of their life—would be forgiven by God and given paradise, irrespective of their race or their creed.

And the word in Arabic for “disbelief” is *kaffara*, which means to cover up what you know to be true. So it’s a denial of truth once recognized.

ROBERT GEORGE: So ignorance is identified with innocence.

HAMZA YUSUF: Exactly. Yeah.

ROBERT GEORGE: St. Paul talks about this in the second chapter of his letter to the Romans, where he makes reference to “a law written on their hearts,” even for Gentiles who don’t have the law of Moses. And that law, which is a moral law, is sufficient for accountability.
HAMZA YUSUF: It’s the natural law, exactly. And this is the natural law of the Maturidi because they are more natural law theorists. The Ash’aris—who are argued to be fideists, but they’re not—are actually very committed to reason and the centrality of reason. They argued that if revelation conflicts with what is known through absolute certainty by the intellect, then the revelation was misunderstood and has to be reinterpreted.

ROBERT GEORGE: Just a final point, Tim, before we move on, because I want to add this to what I said in response to David’s excellent question. There is a leading alternative to the view of religious freedom that I defended very briefly—and that is the idea of religious freedom as a *modus vivendi*. It’s the idea that if you agree not to impose on me, in return, I agree not to impose on you. And there we reach a deal. We form a mutual nonaggression pact. Because after all, we’ve seen what violence in the name of religion is like. We all want to be free of that and so we reached a mutual nonaggression pact, a *modus vivendi*.

Now, if that’s the best we could do, I would take the deal. But I don’t think that’s the best we can do. And if that’s your defense of religious freedom, the one thing you can’t claim to believe in is a human right to religious freedom. On that understanding, it is not a right—much less a human right. It’s not a right at all. All you have there is a deal.

And yet, I’ll sometimes ask students about the origins of rights at the beginning of my civil liberties class. Why do you have a right to something like religious freedom or a right to freedom of speech? The students run like a shot to the *modus vivendi*. Now why is that? I think it’s because the culture has not provided them with the fundamental ethical resources to construct the idea of a genuine human right, which is again that loss at the metaphysical level that Hamza was talking about in his opening comments.

REVEREND EUGENE RIVERS: Professor Yusuf, at some point in your presentation you made reference to one of the few places where you saw excellence. I believe it was in athletics.

HAMZA YUSUF: And music.

REVEREND EUGENE RIVERS: And music. Could you expand on that? Because the question that occurs to me sitting here as I listen to you and Professor George is, how do I translate this? How do I take the philosophical arguments which are developed here and translate them into other cultural contexts? You talked about music, and what came to mind when you talked about music was when my wife and I were in St. Louis about a month ago and Wynton Marsalis came to perform. And the thing that was absolutely stunning about Marsalis was his philosophical commitment to the virtue of excellence, and he made that a philosophical point. He said the tradition out of which he came is one that extols human dignity, the artistic expression as freedom, and he referred to the human spirit. It was actually genuinely philosophically elegant. And then there was this absolutely stunning performance.

Now my question, my big concern, is how do I speak to a generation of young people across the world? Because my market must be global in order to translate some of the core philosophical points. How do I take your work and Professor George’s—and Professor George and I talk about this from time to time
time—how do I flip this so that in various other mediums we begin to translate this so it is not confined to a largely academic context?

HAMZA YUSUF: I’ll just say that one of the things that the self-esteem idol has done to us is that we have to suffer the intolerable fact that our publishing industry is just turning out tripe constantly.

ROBERT GEORGE: Garbage.

HAMZA YUSUF: Real garbage. I really mean it. It has no merit whatsoever, and yet people are writing and publishing constantly, so there’s no excellence in writing. And I really feel sorry for somebody like David Foster Wallace. It’s interesting that he was a master of grammar and very committed. His students actually call him a “grammar Nazi.” And whether you like his writing or not, his sentences are impeccable. I mean, he was a true master of the sentence. And I think he had a very difficult time in this culture because in *Infinite Jest*—and I haven’t finished it, I’ll be honest with you, it’s a little infinite—a lot of what he is just looking at is the mediocrity and the madness of this culture.

Mediocrity is accepted in so many areas in our culture. Dylan says, “I’ll know my song well before I start singing.” And yet YouTube has millions of people that can’t sing. People would have been embarrassed to do that 50 years ago, to sing in public if they didn’t know how to sing.

REVEREND EUGENE RIVERS: Point taken. From our perspective, what, then, is the strategy?

HAMZA YUSUF: One of the things that I think that Dr. George does really well in this book—and I wish we had discussed this earlier because he wrote a very interesting chapter about affirmative action—is explain that we don’t deal with these problems holistically. The real crisis in the African-American community is the collapse of the family; the family was based on the black church, and the black church was incredibly strong. And this is why you had these wonderful black communities that were really strong, even if they had their difficulties.

I’ve spent a lot of time with elderly African-Americans in the Muslim community that grew up in the South. They told me about the way it was, but that has broken down drastically. And so we have affirmative action instead of rebuilding. How do we rebuild the family that can inculcate the virtues of knowledge? And then the federal government also puts more emphasis on the school systems in these inner cities that are so poorly run. I mean, Dunbar here in Washington, DC, was one of the greatest high schools in the United States of America. And it was an
African-American high school committed to the liberal arts. They taught them Latin and Greek. They gave them the skills. If you read W.E.B. Du Bois, the man was a master of the liberal arts and argued that this is how we elevate our community. This is not mastering the master narratives, so the slave master is the master narrative. That’s not what he means. What he was saying was that these tools are universal tools. They are human tools.

ROBERT GEORGE: Let’s go directly to your question. One of our problems is really a lack of courage. There are people who know the truth, but lack the courage to speak the truth. Your wife, Dr. Jacqueline Rivers, basically told a story that Shaykh Hamza just told in brief when she was at the Vatican Colloquium, about the consequences for the African-American community of the breakdown of the family, the loss of authority structures within the community, and so forth. But we’ve known that since 1965. Daniel Patrick Moynihan issued this report in 1965. What happened? For political and ideological reasons, some people called him a racist. They accused him of blaming the victim. That absolutely terrorized everybody else. So instead of doing what needed to be done, instead of just sloughing off that criticism and that fear and moving to protect the black family, people just walked away. It was an abandonment. That’s what it was. And the reason for that abandonment wasn’t a lack of knowledge. It was a lack of courage.

REVEREND EUGENE RIVERS: That’s true.

CONGRESSMAN CHRIS SMITH: I’ve been in the pro-life movement for 42 years and in the religious freedom movement since 1980 when I got elected to Congress. And I have been amazed by how people can cling to untruth so aggressively. Solzhenitsyn said—when it came to the Marxists in the Soviet Union—that it wasn’t a nonbelief or an atheism; it was militant atheism, a hatred of God. And I think we’re suffering more from that than we realize in today’s society. It is a hatred of God. It is radical secularism. That produces a culture of denial, where you can just say over and over again, for example, that an unborn child is a nonperson. He or she can be dismembered or chemically poisoned, and they try to justify that as a right.

I do believe that guilt is to the soul what pain is to the body. What happens to a society when the guilt is talked away, wished away, argued away? And again, it’s coupled with this idea of radical secularism.

HAMZA YUSUF: The foundation of Islamic tradition is the Cain and Abel story as told in the Bible and in the Qur’an. It’s a very interesting story because in the Qur’anic version, like the Bible, Cain raises his hand to strike Abel. And Abel says, “If you raise your hand to strike me, I’m not going to raise my hand to strike you because I fear God, the Lord of the world.” Our commentators said that the first law that God gave to men was that of nonviolence, and that Abel was actually the stronger of the two brothers and could have defended himself but did not.

And then violence was given in order to repel evil out of necessity, but there’s no concept in Islam of a holy war. War is the devil’s game, getting people to fight one another. This is why our Prophet said that the devil has despaired of being worshipped by the Muslims, but he’s content with sowing dissension amongst believers.

ROBERT GEORGE: Now there’s no question that there are some circles in which—I think they’re more prominent in Europe and perhaps some other places than the United States—you could genuinely talk about a kind of hatred of God. That’s for real. I’m not downplaying it. But I wonder if it’s the chief problem.

In his great work that comes down to us as the Laws, Plato identified what he called the three forms of godlessness. Now we could translate the word as atheism, secularism, unbelief, or irreligion. But for the sake of argument, let’s just translate it as atheism or godlessness—the three forms of godlessness. The first is what we usually think of when we hear the term atheist: the belief that there is no more than a merely human source of meaning and
value, no divine superintendent, no supreme being—the Richard Dawkins view.

The second is the idea that we would today, I think, try to capture with a word like deism: the idea that there’s a god out there who is ultimately responsible for there being anything, but god just doesn’t pay any attention or god is not interested. He tuned out. He just winds up the clock and lets it go, lets it tick, and that’s it.

The third form of atheism or godlessness believes that there is a god who is somehow concerned with the affairs of the world and is somehow involved in the affairs of the world. But in the third form of atheism, people believe that god is soft-spirited, easily appeased, easily bought off by sacrifices. God is a being that makes no strict moral demands. It’s a kind of “I’m-okay-you’re-okay” god, a “if-it-feels-good-do-it” god, a “do-what-you-want” god. Just try not to hurt other people.

Wherever you are in history there are always three forms of atheism, and Plato is talking about something that’s a constant. Our problem here in the United States on the whole is more the third form of atheism than the first. Even in our churches, especially in our churches, the god that is believed in is not the god that would be recognized by Jesus or, I dare say, by Muhammad or by Moses—a god who is anything but soft-spirited, a god that does make stringent moral demands on us. Now it’s the “I’m-okay-you’re-okay” god, the soft-spirited, the easily-appeased god. So that’s what I am more worried about than the kind of active hatred of God.

THE LINK WITH VIRTUE

IMAM MOHAMED MAGID: This is a very interesting night. I’m so glad that I came. I have a question about the definition of virtue. For example, the word “love.” What happens if I tell my daughter, for example, that she cannot date, that she has to wait until she gets married? Her counselor in school will say, “You’re in high school, I don’t believe your dad said that. You know, he doesn’t recognize the feeling of love. He fell in love with someone, he should recognize love.” The counselor says those kinds of things. For the usage of a word like love, even the word courage is ignored. I heard the other day the ambassador from South Africa say that there’s a difference between having courage and being reckless.
HAMZA YUSUF: Recklessness.

IMAM MOHAMED MAGID: Yes, recklessness. I do believe that the people of faith—theologians and religious people—are really in a dilemma of redefining some of those terminologies. How would you see that happen? How can we reclaim some of those terminologies that define human relationships and define the virtues that you're talking about?

The second question—and I'm going to be very frank—is in the Muslim community, for example, there's a dilemma between being conservative and being liberal. In the Muslims' eyes, the conservatives generally don't like Muslims. You can turn on the TV and radios and hear religious people, like the 700 Club or other clubs, who are really passionate about Muslims. A conservative Muslim finds himself in a moral alliance with that conservative preacher, but he also finds a liberal person standing up for his rights, though he disagrees with them on the moral issues. Which camp should they go to? That's the real question about the freedom of religion in America.

The third point—and I'd like to stop here—is the issue of school and faith. How much does the relationship of public schools and education and the issue of faith impact the role of religion in the long run?

HAMZA YUSUF: One of the interesting things about our tradition—I'm not going to speak for the Catholic tradition, but I have studied it, and also the Jewish tradition to a certain extent—is that we share a belief in virtue ethics. Obviously, Aristotle had a huge impact on all three traditions, but the cultivation of virtue was at the center of the ethical tradition in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. And they identified the virtues. They understood them profoundly. They understood the idea of the golden mean of virtues, the moral virtues. In fact, even Ibn al-Arabi, an eleventh-century scholar, said that the four moral virtues are agreed upon by all nations. He made that claim.

But his point was that rationally, you have to come to the conclusion that generosity is a moral virtue, but it's not the virtue. The real virtue is courage, because in order to be generous you have to be courageous. Because the thing that prevents people from generosity is fear—fear of losing their wealth, fear of its diminishing. So they took these virtues back to the matrix of those four foundational virtues. And the way to inculcate them has been beautifully addressed in so many books of our tradition. But many modern people, you know, they're so averse to these traditions.

And then the intellectual virtues are cultivated. The Muslims also share this. There are three primary intellectual virtues—the nous, the episteme, and the sophia—versus five intellectual virtues. Nous is the idea that the intuitive intellect grasps first principles; it's the foundation of all knowledge, and it's the closest to the divine intellect. And then you have the episteme, which is the acquisition of knowledge—so the cultivation of the intellect through the acquisition of learning. And then there's sophia, which is the working of these two together—the virtue of wisdom, hikmah, comes out of this. And then you have practical virtues like prudence, art, and skill, and the theological virtues which we share. The highest virtue in the Islamic tradition

“In the Muslim community, for example, there’s a dilemma between being conservative and being liberal…. A conservative Muslim finds himself in a moral alliance with that conservative preacher, but he also finds a liberal person standing up for his rights, though he disagrees with them on the moral issues. Which camp should they go to?”

Imam Mohamed Magid
was love. It’s *mahabba*, which is the highest virtue. St. Thomas said it’s the only one that goes into the next world with us.

**ROBERT GEORGE:** But they’re there for this world.

**HAMZA YUSUF:** They’re there for this world. But once you’re there, faith is a certainty. There is no longer a need for faith. You have absolute certainty. And then there’s no need for hope because you’re there in the love of God. So these are shared in this tradition, and this is why I feel that public schools are increasingly impossible for religious people to put their children into, because these schools will remove from their children the foundation of faith. And I really believe this. I don’t think this was true maybe 34 years ago, but I truly believe it today. We can’t confuse our children like this. They don’t believe in binary relationships. They don’t believe in certainty. They don’t believe in truth. In relativism, we’re going to create moral relativists. By the time they get to the university, they’re so lost.

**ROBERT GEORGE:** I think what’s being created (I’m just judging from what I know of students in my own acquaintance) is a combination of people who are at once moral relativists and very strict moral absolutists—absolutists about things that they really should be relative about like openness to hearing other people’s point of view, and relativists about things that they shouldn’t be relativist about.

Imam Magid has raised a very important question for American conservatives in his second question. I mean, the truth is that American conservatives—and I am one, I’m an ex-liberal; I’m a recovering liberal, but I am a conservative—but some of my friends in the conservative movement, over my objections, have put Muslims in this country in a nearly impossible dilemma because, as the imam says, the vast majority of American Muslims share many of the convictions of conservatives, especially on moral and social issues. And yet they feel as though American conservatives would like to drive them out of the country. Too many conservatives don’t regard Muslims as loyal Americans, the way in an earlier generation Catholics felt that Protestants did not regard them as loyal Americans. They allegedly had dual loyalties. Today Jews are sometimes regarded as disloyal because they could have an allegiance to Israel. So this calling of people’s loyalty into question puts Muslim Americans in a very awkward position.

In the great journal of religion and public life, *First Things*—whose board Professor Wilken chairs and which was founded by Father Richard John Neuhaus—I published an article entitled “Muslims, Our Natural Allies.” And in that article I said that we must not make Muslims afraid of us or promote a fear of Muslims. Now there are two reasons for that. There may be more than two, but I know two. First of all, and most fundamentally and importantly, it is wrong. It’s morally wrong to be afraid of our Muslim...
fellow citizens and to treat them all as if they’re terrorists and to make them afraid of us non-Muslim Americans.

Second of all, it’s stupid. Some people would say that’s even worse than wrong. It’s stupid to drive away allies that you need in the struggle to be able to have a decent society in which to bring up our children, a society in which our children learn the virtues of honesty, integrity, dignity, chastity, modesty, self-control, and self-mastery as opposed to societies in which—and I don’t blame her so much as I blame the suits behind her—little girls are taught to glamorize figures like Miley Cyrus. I don’t care whether you’re Muslim, Jewish, or Christian, you don’t want your daughter thinking that is what is glamorous, that is a wonderful life, that is something to be emulated. The Muslim community—even more than the Christian community today—

“...It’s stupid to drive away [Muslim] allies that you need in the struggle to be able to have a decent society in which to bring up our children.... So my message to my fellow conservatives is: For heaven’s sake, straighten up and smarten up. You have allies here. You have friends.”

Robert George

does not want their daughters to think like this. In fact, as I said, Muslims set an example for the rest of us in many areas such as modesty. We can learn from them.

So my message to my fellow conservatives is: For heaven’s sake, straighten up and smarten up. You have allies here. You have friends. Yes, there are Islamist radicals, and they must be opposed with all our might. But the vast majority of our Muslim fellow citizens are people like us, they are not Islamist radicals.

I’ve heard in my life three truly profound pro-life speeches. One was by Father Richard John Neuhaus near the end of his life at the National Right to Life Convention—a magnificent speech. The other two were by Muslims. One was Shaykh Hamza’s speech at Respect Life Sunday at Princeton a few years ago; and the other was by the Muslim writer Suzy Ismail, who’s also from New Jersey and who spoke on the Princeton campus. And yet the Christians in the pro-life movement in the United States don’t even know that they have Muslim friends who share their convictions. It’s not the Muslims’ fault that they don’t know. It’s the Christians’ fault for not having an open mind and an open heart to welcome them.

Shaykh Hamza and I have collaborated. We have waged a campaign to try to persuade the business leaders and the CEOs of the major hotel chains to take the pornography out of the hotel rooms. Pornography is degrading. It degrades those who produce it, those who pose or act, those who look at it or watch it. This is no way to make money. This is demeaning to women and diminishes our humanity. We know that pornography is tied to the human trafficking trade. There’s this fantasy that large numbers of women freely consent to be in pornography. Well, some do. But there are many who are victims.

TIMOTHY SAMUEL SHAH: Thank you very much. You gave us what you promised. You promised that you’d talk about conscience and its enemies. We’ve talked about a long list of enemies, of an elevated view of conscience and human dignity. Thank you very much Shaykh Hamza and Professor Robert George.
Religious Freedom Project
BERKLEY CENTER
for Religion, Peace & World Affairs
G E O R G E T O W N  U N I V E R S I T Y

3307 M Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, D.C. 20007
berkleycenter@georgetown.edu
202-687-5119
http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rip