

American Exceptionalism, Truth & the Future of Freedom

Featuring Dr. Robert P. George

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TRANSCRIPT

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Welcome to Cornerstone University's Wisdom and Influence podcast. Our special guest today is a McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University. He has served as chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and is a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and the President's Council on Bioethics.

Our guest has also been the U.S. member of UNESCO's World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology. He's a graduate of Harvard University and Oxford University, and also served as judicial fellow at the U.S. Supreme Court. He's a recipient of the Presidential Citizens Medal and Princeton University's President's Award for Distinguished Teaching.

He's the author of numerous books and articles, including *Making Men Moral* and *Seeking Truth and Speaking Truth*. He also co-authored *Truth Matters* with the great Dr. Cornel West, who, by the way, was also recently featured here on our podcast. And lastly, I should note that our guest today is no stranger to Cornerstone University.

He was one of our distinguished Wisdom Conversations panelists at our recent America at 250 event where he, along with Dr. Cornel West, spoke so movingly to the Cornerstone community about the beauty and promise of America and the Christian faith. Today's guest is none other than one of America's leading Christian public intellectuals, Dr. Robert George. Professor George, welcome to our podcast.

Robert George: Oh, it's my very great pleasure, Dr. Moreno. Thank you.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Thank you so much for being with us, by the way. It's a real honor to have you as a part of our podcast, and I just want to tell you that the Cornerstone community really, really loved and enjoyed you and Cornel West being with us just a few weeks ago in May.

Robert George: We had a wonderful time. It was just such a great experience. Thank you. It's a great university.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Well, thank you. I want to start by asking you to comment or speak with us about the exceptionalism of America. You know, we've just celebrated our 250th anniversary, and I came to this country 45 years ago as an immigrant. The promise of America — I have never ceased to

believe that and believe in the exceptionalism of our country. But as you know, it's something that's come under a continued criticism and attack. But I thought we could at least begin our conversation with the exceptionalism of America. Why so exceptional?

Robert George: Well, we are an exceptional country. Now, when people hear the phrase American exceptionalism, sometimes they misinterpret that or misunderstand it, supposing that it means that we Americans are beating our chests and saying how wonderful we are—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: —and in our arrogance and hubris, imagining that we're better than other people. Well, it doesn't mean that at all. Everyone knows that we're made out of the same flesh and blood. We have the same faults and foibles and failings as our other fellow human beings, fallen creatures that we are.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: So it's not about us being better than anybody. It's not about us being especially virtuous. No, it's something altogether different from that, and here's what it is. In most times and in most places throughout history and up to today, nations have found their sources of unity and strength, the things that bind them together, enable them to stand up together in hardship. They've found their sources of unity and strength in common ties or bonds of race or ethnicity or religion or a shared cultural history or heritage.

Now, that's sometimes referred to as blood and soil—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: —or throne and altar. But America's sources of strength and unity are not, because they simply cannot be, Dr. Moreno, in shared bonds of race or ethnicity or religion or cultural heritage or history. Our shared bonds are not in blood and soil or throne and altar. No, we're from many different races, many different ethnicities. We are truly a nation of immigrants. We're of different faiths. From the very beginning, even when it was a predominantly Christian nation, there were very few Catholics. It was mainly a Protestant nation, and represented were many, many different Protestant traditions, some not very friendly to each other.

There were Congregationalists and Anglicans. There were Presbyterians and Unitarians. There were all sorts of different traditions. So if our strength and unity as a nation are not to be found in blood and soil or throne and altar, where are they to be found? How do we hang together despite our differences of race and ethnicity and religious tradition and cultural heritage?

Well, what unites us as Americans, and here's what's exceptional about America, is a shared commitment to the basic principles articulated in the Declaration of Independence and the institutions and understandings and ideals set forth in our Constitution. That's what Abraham Lincoln referred to when he talked about our ancient faith. He was talking about the American creed, the proposition, as he called it, that all men are created equal—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Sure.

Robert George: —that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those principles, and above all that master principle, all men are created equal, is at the foundation. That's the basic source of our strength and of our unity as a nation. That's what binds us together despite our differences of race and ethnicity and everything else. Our Americans and their ancestors have come from Croatia and Japan and from Poland and from China and from England and from Ghana and from Scotland and from India.

We're not bound together by common ancestry.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: No.

Robert George: It's a common commitment to those principles, the American creed, and the culture that we have formed and continue to form is one that has been shaped in decisive ways by that creed. The creed alone, of course, can't hold us together. You need a shared culture. But notice that the culture is not separate from or independent or hermetically sealed off from the creed. The creed has helped to shape the culture. So that's what's meant by American exceptionalism, and I have to tell you, I'm all for it. You yourself came as an immigrant. My grandparents came as immigrants. Maybe we're fellow citizens with a guy whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower, or were brought in chains from Africa in slavery, or Americans today who are descended from the indigenous tribes who came to the Americas many, many centuries earlier. But we're bound together as Americans by that ancient faith, as Lincoln called it.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Professor George, share with us — we're part also of a larger story, which I'll call the West. And perhaps you can discuss also with us the West and the importance of the West and the exceptionalism of the West. A lot of conversation about that, and as you know, many universities have eliminated things along the line of, or educational curricula along the lines of the Western canon, the Western tradition. A lot of conversation and criticism, but talk with us about the importance of the West and its connection and grounding in many ways with Christianity, Judeo-Christianity. If you look at the creed, the ancient creed, the ancient faith as Lincoln called it, it's built on this proposition that all men are created equal, and it has other dimensions.

Robert George: There are other principles, there are ideals, there are institutions that have been built to effectuate the principles. Did these come out of nowhere? Did they suddenly appear in people's heads in 1776? No, obviously not. There was a broader tradition, and that tradition was not monolithic. There were streams of thought that fed what we call the Western tradition.

There was the stream coming from Athens—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: —the thinking of the great Greek philosophers, figures like Plato and Aristotle. There was the stream coming from Rome, the great jurists and thinkers of Rome such as Cicero. And then there's that crucial stream coming from Jerusalem, from the Bible. Now, it's sometimes said that the American founding is an Enlightenment project. It's a product of the Enlightenment. That's true, but it's only a half-truth, because the Enlightenment itself has a history, and the American founding is shaped in part by Enlightenment thinkers like Locke or Algernon Sidney, other Enlightenment thinkers. But it's also shaped by these other traditions from Athens and from Rome, and so critically from Jerusalem.

And you don't have to take my word for this, Dr. Moreno. Who was the principal draftsman of the Declaration of Independence? It was Thomas Jefferson.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: It was originally supposed to be John Adams. He handed the pen over, he handed the lead position over to Jefferson, noting that Jefferson was tall and pleasing and that he, Adams, was short and obnoxious. And saying that in addition, Jefferson writes 10 times better than I do, Adams said. All of the things Adams said were true, by the way. Adams was a great, great man, the greatest political thinker of the founders, greater than Jefferson, but he wasn't the wordsmith. He didn't have the eloquence on paper.

Jefferson was not a great speaker, but when it came to putting words on the page, Jefferson was the master, and Adams knew that. I bring up Jefferson as the draftsman of the Declaration of Independence for this reason. And it goes to this question — was the American founding an Enlightenment project? And often that's meant to suggest it was a secular or secularist project. Well, here, Jefferson himself, shortly before his death on July 4th, 1826, 50 years to the day of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, same day his friend, then enemy, then friend John Adams dies. But shortly before his death on that day, just a couple of months earlier, few months, Jefferson responds to a question that had been put to him by Henry Lee, who asked Mr. Jefferson, the former president now, "Where did you get the ideas for the American founding? Where did you and the other draftsmen on the committee of the Declaration of Independence get the ideas?" And the implication of Lee's question was that these were new ideas, these were new insights, you know, flashes of new knowledge.

Jefferson responded, and this was not being falsely modest, it wasn't being self-deprecating. Jefferson responded that there were no new ideas, that he was simply giving voice to what he called the harmonizing sentiments of the American people—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —as they had been shaped by conversations and discussions, and by the great works, the great books, as he called them, of elementary right of justice. And then he gave a non-exhaustive list of four examples. Plato — I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it wasn't Plato. He didn't cite Plato. Aristotle, who was of course Plato's student. Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, and Sidney, two Enlightenment thinkers and two thinkers from antiquity, one Greek, one Roman. But it was a non-exhaustive list.

There were other influences. And of course, one of the central influences undeniably is the Bible.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: And as a matter of fact, there's no way you can get to the proposition that all men are created equal without having the Bible in the picture. You can't get there from Aristotle. Aristotle didn't believe in natural equality.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's right.

Robert George: He believed in natural inequality.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: Now, the founders got a lot of great ideas—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Sure.

Robert George: —from figures like Aristotle and Cicero, but they didn't get that fundamental principle of all men are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. They got that rather from what's articulated in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, in which we're taught, as you know, Dr. Moreno, that the human being, man, though made from the mere dust of the earth, mere mortal material stuff who will someday die and body will dissolve in the grave, is nevertheless made in the very image and likeness of the divine creator and ruler of all that is, in the very image of God. This is the doctrine of the Imago Dei.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: And again, you can't get that from Aristotle. Much as I yield to no one in my admiration for the great thinkers of antiquity. I teach them to my students. I preach them. I've drawn so much wisdom myself from them. But you can't get it from Aristotle or from Plato. They have their limitations.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: You don't get it from Cicero. You get it from Genesis 1—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: —and the doctrine of the Imago Dei. Now, that's not to say that the American founding or the Declaration of Independence is a document that is purely influenced by Christianity or by the Hebrew Bible without any other influences.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: No. Jefferson makes clear, and he's clearly right, that the founders are drawing on multiple sources here, multiple traditions, those streams from Athens, from Rome, from Jerusalem. That's what those streams eventually got us to Philadelphia and the Founding.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: But the Christian, the Biblical, the Jewish, the Hebrew revelation is a critical element. Jerusalem is one of those streams, a crucial one.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Professor George, how have you helped us to deal with, or I'll call it, you know, sin and injustice, right? I mean, there's a lot of concern and criticism out there. You're fully aware of these, of what some will call America's original sin, slavery, and how that somehow invalidates the exceptionalism, as you have just pointed out, of our country or the West. I'm thinking several years ago, 2019, the 1619 Project came out, funded by the — showcased in the New York Times in the battle for U.S. history, that somehow U.S. history had not — had missed something. Historians had missed this thing, this original injustice that in many ways is just this blemish that will never go away, and should cause us to rethink what we've come to hold so dear. Help us to think through that because it seems to continue to propagate ways of thinking that are antagonistic to America, antagonistic to its vibrancy, its future.

I'm thinking of our college students here, your college students at Princeton and many other young people who are having to wrestle with that and don't know what to do with it. They see the injustice. They see it. They don't know what to do with it. They don't know how to frame it, how to think about it, how to wrestle with it. How have you done that in your own work, and what advice would you give our students and others who are listening to our podcast about how do we deal with the sin and injustice of the past?

Robert George: Sure. The vocation of historians, the job, the task, the mission of historians is the same as the mission of any other scholar. Philosopher, English literature scholar, political scientist, biologist, physicist. It's to seek the truth—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: —and then to tell the truth as best you grasp the truth. You'll never be able to grasp it perfectly and fully. You're always going to have some errors. There's always going to be room for improvement. But the job of the historian, like the job of any other scholar, is summed up in that oath that you take if you go onto the witness stand at a courtroom.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: And that is to tell the truth, the whole truth—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: —and nothing but the truth. Now, by that standard, a lot of historiography work done by historians doesn't hold up very well. And it especially goes astray when the project, even if it's conducted by historians, is not actually a project of historiography. It's not doing history. It's not trying to get the history right, but rather is an ideological project, and that was fundamentally what was wrong with the 1619 Project. It was not a history project. It was an ideology project—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: —that had an ideological aim and goal. And so history was manipulated to try to achieve this goal. Now, this is not the first time it's happened, and the left side of the political spectrum is not the only side that that kind of offense is committed on.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Sure, sure. Right.

Robert George: And very often in the past, especially in our teaching materials for our young people, historians or educators have tried to whitewash our history and pretend that some of the sins that were committed in our country and in our country's name were not committed or were not as bad as they really are. That's not telling the truth, or certainly not telling the whole truth. But we need to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We need to tell about what's glorious in our history. The establishment of a republican government, a government not only of the people, which all government is, not only for the people, which all good government is even if it's a government of benign despot, but government by the people. We've established, our founders established what a triumph. A republic where previous republics had all failed, often collapsed into the worst forms of tyranny, and this republic has lasted for 250 years now and is still going. What an achievement. Tell it. Shout it from the mountaintops. It's true and it's glorious.

The war we waged in the 20th century in your lifetime and mine, Dr. Moreno, against communism—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: The defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War, and before that, the defeat of fascism, of Nazism in Europe. These are glorious moments in our history. My father and my father-in-law, my beloved father and my beloved father-in-law, fought in World War II.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: My father was crossing the English Channel to fight in Normandy in Brittany when his troop carrier was struck by a German torpedo from a U-boat. Sank. 800 men died. The other 800, including my dad, survived, and my dad survived unhurt and went on to fight in Normandy. My father-in-law was captured at the Battle of the Bulge and spent the rest of the war in German prison camps.

These great men were fighting for a great cause—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: —and they prevailed over the Nazi war machine. Celebrate it. But by the same token, we need to tell the truth about the bad stuff. The treatment of the indigenous peoples. The sin of slavery. That very Thomas Jefferson—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —who wrote those words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal," was himself a slaveholder. He owned people. He bought them. He sold them. He leased them out to other people. He punished them when they tried to run. This is a great evil in our history, and it happened, and there is no denying it, and there's no denying how great the evil was. We have to

tell that. We have to tell the story. Now, this same Jefferson, let's tell the whole story, because it's not just the truth, but the whole truth we have to tell. This same Jefferson knew that slavery was wrong. He himself said, speaking of slavery, Dr. Moreno, he said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice will not sleep forever." He knew that slavery was a contradiction of the very principles the nation was founded on, and he knew that God would punish the nation for the sin of slavery.

When I read Lincoln's second inaugural address, in which Lincoln says that the war, the Civil War, with its unbelievable, unprecedented carnage, was a punishment brought by God on both the North and South for the sin of slavery, he is echoing Jefferson. He's now seeing what Jefferson predicted. Now at the same time, Jefferson couldn't find a way out of slavery, personally or politically. Personally, he was a spendthrift. He was constantly in debt. Couldn't afford to free his slaves. He couldn't even do what George Washington did, which was free his slaves in his will. Washington not only manumitted his slaves after his death, he made financial provision in his will for the slaves because he knew you couldn't just free them and send them out there. They would be preyed upon. They needed some financial security, and he provided that. Jefferson didn't do that. And politically, Jefferson thought you could not abolish slavery without catastrophic social consequences. And another famous line, just to quote him again, Jefferson said, "Slavery is like having a wolf by the ear."

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: "You know you can't hold on to him forever, but you dare not let him go." So this was the contradiction—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: —at the very foundation. And then once we abolished slavery, finally, at enormous incalculable cost. I'm talking not just about financial cost, I'm talking about the blood.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: My wonderful historian colleague here at Princeton, the great master of the Civil War, the historian James McPherson, says that the total number of deaths was probably 750,000, three-quarters of a million, in a population that was only 20 million something people.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: Think of that. I mean, it's just unbelievable, the carnage. So at great cost, we finally abolished slavery, but then what followed it? Reconstruction failed, and we got a whole perverse system of racial injustice, the so-called Jim Crow laws. Segregation, oppression, exploitation. That's part of our history.

If we're going to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, we got to tell that, too. But that's our mission. That's our mission as those who are historians or political scientists or others who are teaching about our history. But it's also true for us as citizens. We have to acknowledge, yes, there are dark elements of our history, but there are brilliant moments of light in our history as well. We have to tell the whole story. And as far as the failings of our founders, great men though they were, especially when it came to race, especially when it came to slavery, I'll let you in on a little secret. We human beings are not very good at living up to the principles we proclaim.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's probably the same, America, sort of human beings writ large, right?

Robert George: That's right. We're just human beings. We're just frail, fallen, fallible creatures.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: We got our foibles and our faults—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: —no question about that, and one of those is hypocrisy.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: True.

Robert George: None of us, honestly, none of us lives fully up to the principles we proclaim because we're imperfect, we're fallen. But that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with the principles. That doesn't mean we shouldn't try every day to do better—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Totally.

Robert George: —at living up to the principles. And what's true of us as individuals is true of our country. We as a corporate body, as a polity, should every day try to do better. There are still sins against our ancient creed, against the principle that all men are created equal, against the principle of inherent rights and fundamental dignity. We see it in abortion—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —the killing of unborn children at a staggering level. That's a fundamental violation, every bit as much as slavery was a fundamental violation of our ancient faith, of our commitment to the profound, inherent, and equal dignity of each and every member of the human family. The same is true if we now go down the road to euthanasia—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —the killing of cognitively disabled or handicapped people. You know, there's no inevitable progress here. We may overcome one evil only to step into another evil. But we've constantly got to be self-critical. We constantly have to do our best. We constantly have to be alert to, am I being a hypocrite? Am I proclaiming, "Oh, I'm a champion of human rights," while supporting something that's contrary to human rights? If they're human rights, that means they're rights you have simply by virtue of being human. And an unborn child is every bit as human as a three-year-old or a 30-year-old or a 90-year-old. So if you believe in human rights, you tell me you believe in human rights, well, that means you believe that there are certain rights people have just by virtue of being human. All we have to know is, is this creature a human being?

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: And then we've got to honor that person's rights and fundamental dignity. So that's the complex situation we're in. It's called the human condition.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: That's right. And Professor George, let's talk about — recently you wrote a wonderful piece in The Atlantic about truth being under attack. And you talked about relativism, fanaticism, and how those things can undermine truth. I wanted to ask you to discuss that with us, but also what I'll call the attack of truth by what I'll call the political, and here's what I mean. So often I hear at times in churches, at times at universities that believe or claim to be Christian universities, that things like abortion or pro-life are political issues. Those are not real moral issues or issues of truth or morality, they're political. And so can you speak with us about the importance of truth, of the whole truth about these issues, and why is it that we have become so — it's become so much easier for us to reclassify morality or issues of truth under the political so that they are somehow contested?

Robert George: Yeah. Well, you had the same thing in the era of slavery. There were some people who wanted to say, "Well, look, you know, slavery is divisive. It's a divisive issue. We can't allow it to infect our politics. It's, you know, different people have different opinions about it. Who's to say who's right? You shouldn't — you know, you Northerners shouldn't impose your opinion on the Southerners," and all that kind of stuff. Question, is there a human rights issue here or not? If there's a human rights issue, then you've got something that is ineluctably both a moral and a political issue, unavoidably. Same is true with abortion, same is true with euthanasia, same is true with gender ideology, same is true with the institution of marriage. There's no way to avoid these questions, but to sort of fence them off from politics on the grounds that they're moral issues that don't have a role in politics. They're inevitably issues that the community has to face. They affect the whole of the community. They affect fundamental rights and dignity. They affect the public morality, the whole moral ecology in which we bring up our children and try to bring them up as virtuous people. So there's no, at the end of the day, avoiding engaging these issues, divisive though they indeed are, engaging them at the political level. We should do it in a spirit of civility—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: —not calling people names, not shouting at people, making our arguments patiently but firmly, listening to the other side make its arguments, and then doing our best in the forums of deliberative democracies established by our Constitution, doing our best to advance the cause of justice.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Let me ask you, following that conversation, let's talk about the importance of law and culture as we speak about truth in the political. You've written extensively about this and how the power that law has to create, form, shape culture. I think about some of our recent court decisions, and Obergefell being one of the more recent ones, but many others that have had this incredible power to shape culture, shape opinion, shape the way we think about ourselves, life, marriage, children. And share with us how do believers and non-believer citizens address this issue? Because law is so powerful, indeed. It does create, it does shape. And if you can talk with us about that, how we can think about that, and also how do we involve ourselves, as you mentioned already appropriately, to address that and to address law and these issues that shape and will continue to have incredible influence in shaping our future.

Robert George: Well, we should be active citizens. That's what a republic is. A republic is a regime of politics and law—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —in which the people ultimately decide the great questions. Now, we don't do it directly. We don't all get together in one huge stadium or something and have a vote. We have an indirect democracy. That's why it's better to call us, as our founders prefer, a republic rather than a democracy.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: But in a republic, ultimately decisions are made, even if indirectly, by the people. Now, the question is, are people going to make good decisions or bad decisions? If we're going to make good decisions, the first thing we have to do is educate ourselves about the questions.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: Now, for a long time, you could take certain things for granted. You could take for granted that marriage is the conjugal union of husband and wife. Everybody understood that. It was not

controversial. There was no question. It wasn't until the 1990s that all of a sudden that is put into question. Well, now it is in question, which means we can't take anything for granted.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: It means we have to educate ourselves on the issue. If I can do a little self-advertising here, if you want to study the question of marriage, what it is, why getting the right definition is so critical politically to our government, to our polity, why it can't be just a private matter, why it has public significance, please just have a look at the little book I've done with my two former students, Sherif Girgis and Ryan Anderson, called *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*. Educate yourself.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: And I'll tell you what else I want everybody to do. I want you to look at the writings on the other side. See if the people on the other side of the marriage question, those who would redefine marriage as a form of sexual romantic companionship or domestic partnership so that they can accommodate same-sex couples as married partners. See if they've made arguments that can defeat the arguments that Professor Girgis and Dr. Anderson and I put forward in our book. If they believe that the other side has defeated our arguments, then support same-sex marriage. If, however, you think we've defeated their arguments, then I think it's time to stand up and say, "You know what? The Supreme Court has imposed a false understanding and destructive understanding of marriage on the country. This is undermining the basic institution of the family. We need to reverse that decision, just as we did *Roe versus Wade* on the abortion question, and restore the conjugal definition of marriage in our states across the country."

But there's no substitute for self-education.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: So read, listen to debates, listen to arguments. Educate yourself. Same when it comes to pro-life issues, when it comes to abortion, euthanasia. We need to educate ourselves. If we're to be effective citizens in a republic standing up for justice and truth, we have to be able to make sound arguments in the public square. This isn't somebody else's job. We can't slough this off on the politicians or the public intellectuals or some other class or the celebrities, Lord help us. We need to be able to do it ourselves.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: We need to be able to do it in our families.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: We need to be able to explain to our children why life is sacred in all stages, in all conditions, that nobody's less of a human being because of a cognitive disability or a physical handicap or because they're in the womb waiting to be born or because they've got Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia. We need to be able to explain this principle of the profound inherent and equal dignity of each and every member of the human family. Same with marriage and the family. We have to be able to explain to each new generation, to our children, to our grandchildren what marriage is and why it's so crucial to get it right, why marriage is so central to the flourishing of any society, why it's the case that if marriage collapses and the marriage culture collapses, you're bound for all sorts of catastrophes in all sorts of spheres of life, which of course we're seeing all over the country and indeed the West today.

So yeah, there's no substitute for it. Nobody else can do it for us. We got to do it for ourselves, educate ourselves, and then we've got to have the courage to speak the truth as God gives us to see the truth. We know we're never going to see it perfectly. We know we're never going to see it completely, but we've got to be willing to speak the truth. That's why I've entitled my book *Seeking Truth and Speaking Truth*.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: You've got to do both. You got to seek it, you have to educate yourself, and you have to speak it even when it's hard. Even when it's risky, even when it's dangerous. We saw a period very recently, everybody listening to this broadcast knows what I'm talking about, in which a cancel culture emerged which left people too frightened, too intimidated to speak their minds. When Ryan Anderson and Sherif Girgis and I published *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense*, there were people who warned us, "You guys are taking your lives into — at least your professional lives into your hands." You know? "Well, you're lucky, Robert George, you have tenure. They can't get you maybe, but gosh, Sherif Girgis will never have a career in academia. Ryan Anderson will never have a career in public affairs." Now, as it happens, things have turned out pretty well. Sherif Girgis is not only a professor at the University of Notre Dame Law School, he's just been offered an endowed chair at Harvard Law School.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: So you can speak the truth even when it's controversial—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: —even when it's tough, and survive. Ryan Anderson is the president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, DC. But they were willing, even as young men, they were brave enough, courageous enough to speak the truth as best they could understand the truth, and everybody's got to do it. Now, that's a special obligation of Christians.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: If we're speaking to a Christian audience—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: —hey, you know, you don't have the option. It's not on the table as a possibility that I'll just go silent and live my life. You are called as a believer to give testimony to the truth. To speak the truth courageously. And I think as parents, and certainly as teachers, it's our mission, as it is yours at Cornerstone University, you do such a wonderful job of it at Cornerstone University, forming young men and women to be determined truth seekers and courageous truth speakers.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: If we're not going to do that, if there's a Christian university that's not going to do that, sell the property and let them put up a data center there. You're wasting the — if you're a professor and you're not going to form your student—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yes.

Robert George: —determined truth seeker and courageous truth speaker, go get an honest job. Sell cars —

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: —or insurance or something. Don't pretend to be an intellectual, a professor, a teacher, a scholar if you're unwilling to speak the truth as best you understand the truth.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, Professor George, early in the podcast, you mentioned the defeat of communism, and yet it's begun to rear itself up again in our thinking in our country. It's amazing, isn't it?

Robert George: Right. It's incredible. You see it, you know, creeping socialism toward communism. It's unbelievable based on public opinion data I've seen, I'm sure you've seen as well.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: And I want to ask you, why do you think that is happening? It's easy, much of the media, even conservative media to say, "Well, it's the fault of universities," right? "The fault of faculty, the fault of universities." And there may be some truth to that, but it's certainly much more complicated or complex than that, and maybe you can speak to us your thoughts on, and observations on this new phenomenon that I think we should all be very concerned about and be speaking about and addressing.

Robert George: Well, turns out that I predicted this—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —something like 28 years ago. Now, I'd forgotten predicting it. But I was reminded that I predicted it by my son, who recently turned 40. And he reminded me, he said, "Dad, do you remember when I was 11 years old, a new book came out called *The Black Book of Communism*," and it was a book documenting all the crimes against humanity that had been committed in the Soviet Union—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —in China, and in Cambodia under Pol Pot, and in Cuba under Castro, and in Venezuela and in other communist regimes. He said, "Dad, you bought me that book when I was 11 years old, and you told me, 'David, you're not yet old enough to read this book, but I'm giving you this book because the time will come in your lifetime when people will forget the truth—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —how horrible, how unjust, how tyrannic communism was. And people will propose it again, and if they have any recognition of its crimes and evils, they'll say, "Oh, they didn't do it right the first time. We'll correct errors. We'll do communism —""

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Or someone once told me capitalists never gave a communist a chance.

Robert George: Yeah, that's right. And so he said, "You know, Dad, you told me to keep this book," and—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Wow.

Robert George: —and now here we are.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: Yeah. It's human nature. Again, we're back to the human condition. We can learn a lesson and then forget. We learned the lesson about communism, that it just brings nothing but misery and injustice and death.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm. And yet people forget, so we need to be reminded. You know, Professor George, I'm thinking about this question of agency and so much of the negativity that you see in the mass media about life, about our country, about so many different things — the negativity, the criticism, the

gloom, and the doom, and that at some point in time has an effect on people, I think. You know, it creates some kind of spiral of silence where people really get bogged down and begin to believe it perhaps, or at least to consider that maybe it's true that things are really that bad, and therefore we shouldn't say anything opposing that. I'm wondering if you could comment on the role of mass media today in fomenting a climate of opinion, a climate of thinking that is so antagonistic toward what is true, what is good, what is beautiful, what is right, and even when that applies to our country.

Robert George: Well, we've had mass media for a while, and we know its pros and cons. What we have now more recently is social media. And it too has pros and cons. I had been very hopeful when the internet emerged and social media sites emerged, because I thought, "Okay, this is going to solve one of the problems of mass media," that is the relatively small number of sources of information that create a kind of oligopoly. And when those sources are captured by one side of the political spectrum, that is basically the progressive left, in my early life, then people don't get the complete story or they don't get to hear competing points of view. So when it's just CBS and NBC and ABC and PBS, and The New York Times and, you know, a couple of other national newspapers, and then maybe The Wall Street Journal editorial page being the only dissenting voice—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, right.

Robert George: —you know, when people are basically getting one side, and I thought, "Okay, well now this is going to open things up. This is going to bring in more players." People will have alternative sources of news, and they'll be able to listen to — they'll be able to hear what's being said on one side of the question, but then also the best arguments and evidence and reasons and so forth on the other side of the question. Well, what I hadn't counted on is this: that in the age of social media, people would tend to put themselves in silos.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm.

Robert George: It wasn't that they would start listening to the competing points of view and then think independently and make up their own minds. They would decide which tribe they're in, which team they're on, and basically just listen to a variety of sources, but on that side. So I mean, look at the situation today. We got half the country that, if they read a newspaper it'll be The New York Times. If they watch a news cable network, it'll be MSNBC or CNN. If they read a political magazine, it'll be The Nation or The New Republic or something on the left. But then you got the other half of Americans who, if they read a newspaper, it's The Wall Street Journal, and they'll only read the editorial page 'cause the news pages are liberal. If they watch TV, it'll be Fox News and only Fox News. Or maybe only Sean Hannity at 8:00.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Only Sean Hannity.

Robert George: Yeah. But if they read a magazine, maybe it'd be National Review or something like that. So it has not fulfilled the promise.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: My hopes have not been realized that we'd have more independence of thought because people would be hearing competing perspectives. Still, I like social media in this respect. It does give everybody an opportunity to go to their social media accounts and set forth some arguments, some ideas.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: If they've got some evidence, they can put it out there. Now, there's a lot of lying that goes on. There's a lot of falsification, a lot of fabrication. We all know that. It's hard to sort through all that. We don't want government being the arbiter of what's true and what's false, and what's fabricated and what's authentic, and so forth. It's a bit of the Wild West out there, so we need—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: It is.

Robert George: —to approach it and teach our children to approach it with a very critical attitude. We need genuine critical thinking. But that's, you know, our job as educators, our job as parents and grandparents and others who are responsible for the upbringing of children.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: You know, one of the things when we speak about social media, and this is becoming more important than ever now, is freedom of speech and the importance of freedom of speech. And there's, again, as you know, a rising wave of censorship on all sides of the aisle. And so I want to ask you to help us think through freedom of speech and how we as Christians, people of faith, deal with freedom of speech on the one hand, and the reality of sometimes the evil, right, that is communicated through freedom of speech. Sometimes that tension's so real for some, and so it's easy then to think about censorship then as being an important value. And so perhaps you can help us think through freedom of speech and the importance of it, because in some ways it could be one of the most important freedoms right now given the direction of our culture. How do we think through this, Professor George?

Robert George: Free speech is a critical civil liberty. We need it, and we have to be really quite strict about it, and that means honoring or allowing the speech of people we dramatically disagree with, we're sure are wrong, and sure are wrong about some very, very important, profound things. But free speech pertains to ideas and the expression of ideas.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: Somehow somebody got it into his head at one point that free speech pertains to things like pornography. It doesn't. Pornography is not about ideas—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah, right.

Robert George: —obviously, and the expression of ideas. So I think we can dismiss that nonsense. But I think we need very, very broad — and fortunately, we have them in this country. The Supreme Court doctrine on this is quite good.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: We have very broad protections for freedom of speech. There are only a very narrow set of categories of speech that are unprotected. Genuine threats. Incitement to imminent violence, deliberate incitement to imminent violence. Obscenity, genuinely obscene materials. False advertising, criminal conspiracy. Relatively small number of categories. Everything else, no matter how much we hate the speech, no matter how much we disagree with it, no matter how wicked we think it is, is protected speech, and it should be because we don't want the government deciding—

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Hmm.

Robert George: —what we can and can't consider, hear, weigh, think about, reflect on, criticize. We need independence, freedom of speech for that. Now, there's a second area where you can have legitimate restrictions even on protected speech, and those are in the form of what are called time, place, and manner regulations. That's where you're forbidding some speech not because of the content of the speech or of the viewpoint represented, but because that's not speech that is appropriate in this

particular setting. If you've got a library, you can tell people, "No demonstrations in the library." You have to be silent and no noisy demonstrations in the library.

If we have a rule in a residential community that you can't have a sound truck blaring a political message or any message in a residential neighborhood at 3:00 in the morning, that's a reasonable time, place, and manner restriction.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Mm-hmm.

Robert George: But you have to allow the same sound truck to blare political messages, "Vote for the Libertarians," "Vote for the Socialists," "Support the Democrats," "Support the Republicans," on a viewpoint neutral basis in the town center at 3:00 in the afternoon. So we have to make sure that where time, place, and manner restrictions are placed on speech or regulations on speech, that they're reasonable and that they are content and viewpoint neutral. But we need a broad protection for free speech because we're fallible.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Yeah.

Robert George: We can get things wrong. We know that every single one of us right now on the entire globe has some false beliefs in his head. There's nobody who has nothing but true beliefs in his or her head. Now, we don't want to have false beliefs in our head. We'd like everything we believe to be true. We'd like to believe things because they're true. That's why we believe things, 'cause we think they're true. But we know that some of our beliefs are false. We just don't know which ones they are. If we're to make some progress towards swapping out as many of the false beliefs as we can and replacing them with true beliefs, then we're going to have to allow free speech. We're going to have to allow our views, our beliefs, our principles, no matter how deeply we cherish them, no matter how central they are to our sense of our own identities, we need them to be challenged. We need to allow them to be challenged. And we need to listen to the challenges in an honorable, truth-seeking spirit, even if we radically disagree, even if we find the challenges offensive. That's why free speech is so important.

Gerson Moreno-Riaño: Professor George, thank you so much for being with us at The Wisdom and Influence podcast here at Cornerstone University, and thank you for all you do. Incredible life of service, teaching, and ideas. May God bless you with many, many, many more fruitful years, and once again, thank you for being with us today.

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