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Is religious freedom really the 'first freedom'?

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

Peter Manseau, scholar in residence at Washington College in Chesterton, Md., has an essay up at *The New York Times* that dives into the question of whether religious freedom is our country's "first freedom," which several bishops have repeatedly trumpeted this year. Manseau says this notion that religious freedom is the "first freedom" is quite muddled as a historical matter. And regardless, not all people view it that way.

Says Manseau:

Of all the potentially explosive issues of 2012, none has fizzled quite like religion. Mitt Romney's Mormonism never mattered as much as expected, and questions about Barack Obama's faith remain relevant only to his most obdurate detractors. Yet there is one way in which religion has been a constant in this campaign, and, surprisingly, it concerns something on which the candidates claim to agree.

He goes on to point out:

The First Amendment, adopted four years later in 1791, does protect "the free exercise" of religion -- but only after barring government from "establishing" religion. Viewed strictly in terms of sequence, the First Amendment's "first freedom" might be seen as freedom *from* rather than freedom *of* religion.

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