Religious Freedom Under the Gun

The Obama administration neglects a key foreign policy issue. **By Thomas F. Farr**

The State Department recently announced that it was dropping coverage of religious freedom from its annual Human Rights Report. The declared reason: to avoid duplicating coverage available in the annual Report on International Religious Freedom.

There may be other reasons. Given the Obama administration’s consistent downgrading of religious freedom at home and in foreign policy, this move may be part of a larger reprioritization in human rights policy in favor of the advancement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights.

Whatever one thinks of that initiative, however, the failure to promote religious freedom abroad is likely to have significant humanitarian and strategic consequences for the United States.

We are today in the midst of a global crisis in religious liberty. In two exhaustive studies, the Pew Research Center recently concluded that 70 percent of the world’s population lives in countries where religious freedom is severely restricted, by either governments or private actors. And the problem is getting worse. The second report, in 2011, found that between mid-2006 and mid-2009 the situation deteriorated in twice as many countries as it improved.

---

Overall, many of the roughly 70 nations with the highest restrictions on religious freedom are non-Western, Muslim-majority nations. Of all the religious groups subject to persecution, Christians came out on top: They are harassed in 130 countries, Muslims are harassed in 117.

However, historically Christian Europe is the region with the largest proportion of nations where hostility toward religion is rising. Social hostility in the United Kingdom has increased so much that that country now stands with Iran and Saudi Arabia in the category of “high” social hostility to religion. French government restrictions have increased, too, moving it ahead of Cuba in that category.

On balance, it is fair to say that religious freedom is not faring well in the lands where it was first articulated. This should be a warning for Americans. Of course, what is happening in Europe does not approach the levels of violent religious extremism and persecution seen elsewhere—torture, rape, murder, unjust imprisonment, or unjust execution.

And yet, the root cause is quite similar: a belief that religious freedom is not only unnecessary for human flourishing or social development, but that it poses a threat to these and other goods. Such views are not new. Modern tyrants from Stalin, Hitler, and Mao to Mexico’s Plutarco Calles, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, and Syria’s Bashar al-Assad have sought either to eliminate religion altogether, or to control and suppress it in order to keep their regimes in power. Historically, religious freedom has been the bane of tyrants.

What is new, and profoundly troubling, is that religious freedom is being rejected by democratic majorities as well as authoritarian regimes. By contrast, the problem is an aggressive secularist majority that refuses to permit religiously informed moral arguments into public life. Recently Georgetown’s Religious Freedom Project held a major conference in Oxford on the rising tensions between religious liberty and assertions of homosexual equality. In his keynote address, Philip Tartaglia, the Catholic bishop of Paisley, Scotland, noted that one of his priests had expressed fear after watching a popular audience-based television program. The consensus was ominous: Once same-sex marriage is legalized in the United Kingdom, the audience agreed, dissenters should be “pursued by the law.”

Once upon a time (in the late 18th century), anti-Catholic penal laws in Scotland criminalized the mass and outlawed priests. While Scotland may not be moving in so radical a direction today, it would be foolish to presume that the growing intolerance of traditional Christianity in Europe and North America cannot devolve into persecution laws and practices. In Canada, it is estimated that since the adoption of gay marriage in 2005, between 200 and 300 proceedings have been launched against defenders of marriage in courts, human rights commissions, and employment boards. The Catholic bishop of Calgary was threatened with litigation and charged with a “human rights violation” for circulating a letter within his diocese repeating Catholic teaching on marriage. (Intimidated, he settled out of court.)

At Oxford, Bishop Tartaglia (who seems unlikely to be intimidated) said that he expected one day to be standing before a judge because of his public defense of Catholic teaching. Some at the conference made it clear that they simply would not brook any “special” consideration for religious ideas, which they argued had no more relevance to human flourishing than any other idea under the sun.

In short, religion in much of the West is no longer seen as intrinsic to human dignity and social flourishing. It is generally understood as merely an opinion and, as a species, a dangerous opinion at that. While it is fine to practice your religion in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples, democracy requires that you leave it there. To bring it into politics endangers democracy.
This malevolent idea, which was famously championed by the American political philosopher John Rawls, is gaining considerable purchase in our own country. It gives reason for profound concern, not only for religious individuals but for the whole concept of democracy grounded in ordered liberty.

And yet, at the very moment when religious liberty is under sustained pressure around the world, contemporary scholarship is demonstrating that societies desperately need it. The empirical work of sociologists Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, for instance, shows that religious freedom is highly correlated with the consolidation and longevity of democracy, and with other goods, such as economic development, the equality of women, and the absence of violent religious extremism.

The Obama administration has paid little attention to these data. Three recent public statements help clarify why: They suggest the stage is being set to edge traditional religious ideas out of the public sphere, both domestically and in foreign policy.

In his March 2009 speech at Notre Dame, President Obama asserted: “It is beyond our capacity as human beings to know with certainty what God . . . asks of us.” In other words, religion is emotive; it contains no basis for knowing with certainty anything—that God exists, or that each of us is equal in his eyes, or that to kill an innocent human being is always and everywhere wrong.

Second, in a December 2009 speech at Georgetown University, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the content of religious liberty, and of another right she believed equally important, this way: “To fulfill their potential, people . . . must be free to worship, associate, and to love in the way that they choose.” This lineup of fundamental rights has become her mantra (see Clinton’s May 24 remarks on the release of the Human Rights Report).

Third, in August 2010 federal judge Vaughn Walker overturned a California constitutional amendment affirming that marriage is a union between one man and one woman. In a ruling that pleased progressives, Walker declared the affirmation unconstitutional partly on the grounds that the reasons added in favor of marriage, and against same-sex unions, were based on “moral and religious beliefs.”

In sum: There is no rational content to religion; religious freedom means the right to worship, but not to bring religiously informed moral judgments into political life; the “right” to love as one chooses is comparable to religious freedom; to make religious arguments against that right is unconstitutional.

These propositions are not yet embedded in American law and culture, but they are no longer outliers. They seem intended to continue the removal from public life of traditional religion-based arguments, which stand in the way of sexual liberation and its fruits—such as the rights to abortion, sodomy, pornography, no-fault divorce, and (already in six states and the District of Columbia) same-sex marriage. They mirror Obama administration health care regulations that define religion as only what happens inside a house of worship.

The propositions also help explain Obama administration actions in human rights policy. The administration took two and a half years to get its ambassador at large for international religious freedom into the job, and when she arrived at the State Department she had little status and few resources. Meanwhile, the administration’s LGBT initiative began almost immediately and garnered considerable energy and resources. In its 2010 National Security Strategy—the premier statement of U.S. security policy—the administration asserted that U.S. national security interests were served by a defense of American values. Among those values were privacy and access to the Internet but not religious freedom. Obama and Clinton often refer to “freedom of worship” rather than freedom of religion—the former a very small slice of the latter, which includes the right of religious actors to engage in civic and political life.

Obama and Clinton officials deny that religious freedom has been downgraded in U.S. policy, pointing to the secretary’s involvement in persuading Muslim nations to back off their insistence on antidefamation resolutions at the U.N. Whatever the lasting significance of this achievement, it has had little or no impact on the vicious antiblasphemy laws and practices in places like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which victimize non-Muslims and deter liberal Muslim voices.

The evidence—both in the world and at Foggy Bottom—makes it reasonably clear that the United States is doing little to advance religious freedom in its foreign policy.

It should be doing a lot, for two compelling reasons. First, millions of people are suffering because of violent religious persecution. We should care about that, especially in places like Iraq, where U.S. military action—and our utter failure to advance the cause of religious freedom—has led to the devastation of Iraqi Christian and other minority communities (see the recent speech of Iraqi bishop Shlemon Warduni to the convocation of American Catholic bishops).

Second, the advancement of religious freedom would serve vital American interests. Both history and social science make it clear that highly religious nations like Egypt and Pakistan will not achieve stable democracy unless they embrace religious freedom in full. Nor will they be able to defeat the toxic religious ideas that feed violent Islamist terrorism, including the kind that has reached American shores.

In short, the Obama administration’s sideling of religious liberty—whether to remove obstacles to its LGBT initiative or for any other reason—is terribly shortsighted. America needs a resurgence of religious freedom, both here and abroad. The stakes are too high for this issue to be ignored any longer.

♦