

Background

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Religious Liberty in America: An Idea Worth Sharing Through Public Diplomacy

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Since the end of the Cold War, public diplomacy has been in a bit of turmoil. There was a sense that ideological struggle had largely ceased or had at least faded into the background, but the whiplash of 9/11 yanked attention back to ideological warfare—and it should stay there.

The United States should expect to be endlessly engaged in cold wars of ideas. America is a nation built on an idea, specifically, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights.”¹ That idea had its enemies in 1776, and it has them today.

In a war of ideas, one’s ideas had better be “in good fighting shape,”² to quote the late Adda Bozeman. Today, a number of the ideas central to the American order are not in prime fighting shape, including ideas about the importance of religious liberty and practice in American society.

Self-government demands a high degree of social awareness about the ideas that sustain the order. The principles and institutions of a free society are inherently more susceptible to corruption of purpose and meaning than are those of more authoritarian states.³ Despite this imperative of self-government, Americans have not been consistently diligent in defending the ideas at the heart of the American order. Our disinclination to study our own history and founding principles—much less the history of foreign cultures and thought—has left us with an “unconvincing national self-image.”⁴ A vague, unconvincing national identity makes it difficult to assemble a

Talking Points

- U.S. public diplomacy aims to impart to foreign audiences an understanding and appreciation of American ideals, principles, institutions, and policy. To do this, it must be firmly grounded in those principles and ideals, including those concerning religion.
- Today, the religious roots of the American order and the role of religion in its continued success are poorly understood.
- The American model of religious liberty and its thriving religious culture are significant defining attributes of the United States, and this success story should be told around the world.
- Religion defines the worldview of many whom U.S. policy seeks to influence.
- To win hearts and minds, advance freedom, and promote stability, U.S. public diplomacy must systematically engage the role of religion and religious audiences, explaining the role of religious freedom and practice in America and integrating this into the overall promotion of freedom around the world.

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coherent public diplomacy strategy, and it exposes America's defining attributes to mischaracterization at home and abroad.

U.S. public diplomacy aims to impart to foreign audiences an understanding and appreciation of American ideals, principles, institutions, and policy. This means that U.S. public diplomacy must be firmly grounded in those principles and ideals, including those concerning religion. Today, however, the religious roots of the American order and the role of religion in its continued success are poorly understood. The American model of religious liberty and its thriving religious culture are significant defining attributes of the United States, and this success story should be told around the world.

Furthermore, religion defines the worldview of many whom U.S. policy seeks to influence. As U.S. foreign policy seeks to win hearts and minds, advance freedom, and promote stability, it must systematically engage religious ideas and audiences. At present, this engagement is isolated and inconsistent. Public diplomacy strategy should include efforts to reach these audiences by better explaining the role of religious freedom and practice in America and by integrating this into the overall promotion of freedom around the world.

The Significance of Religion in America

The American model of religious liberty and its thriving religious culture are defining attributes of the United States. These features characterize the American order as much as its democratic political system and market economy.⁵ Religion has been a

dominant theme from the earliest settlements to the great social justice causes led by religious congregations in the late 19th century and again in the 20th century. Today, almost 90 percent of Americans say that religion is at least "somewhat important" in their lives.⁶ About 60 percent are members of a local religious congregation.⁷ Faith-based organizations are extremely active in providing for social needs at home and in sending aid abroad.

Religious liberty is an American success story that should be told around the world. The American constitutional order produced a constructive tension between religion and state. One of the major reasons for the success of the American experiment is that it balanced citizens' dual allegiances to God and earthly authorities without forcing believers to abandon (or moderate) their primary loyalty to God.

This habit of reconciling civil and religious authorities as well as the process of harmonizing the interests of competing religious groups helped to fortify the discipline of self-government. Meanwhile, the moral authority exercised by religious congregations, family, and other private associations helps to maintain limited government. The American Founders frequently stated that virtue and religion are essential to maintaining a free society because they preserve "the moral conditions of freedom."⁸

Today, the religious roots of the American order and the role of religion in its continued success are poorly understood. The constructive tension between religion and state is portrayed by some as a radical separation. However, that idea is more French than American. The American Revolution

1. The Declaration of Independence, para. 2.
2. Adda B. Bozeman, *Strategic Intelligence and Statecraft* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1992), p. 19.
3. Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, "Mediating Structures and the Dilemmas of the Welfare State," in Michael Novak, ed., *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1996), p. 160.
4. Bozeman, *Strategic Intelligence and Statecraft*, p. 216.
5. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Madison Books, 1991), p. 16.
6. Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "U.S. Religious Landscape Survey: Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant," June 2008, p. 22, at <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf> (December 31, 2008).
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 36 and 39.
8. Thomas G. West, "Religious Liberty," Claremont Institute, January 1997, at <http://www.claremont.org/writings/970101west.html> (August 18, 2006).

had a much different character than the French revolution, and French *laïcité*⁹ creates a much different climate than what has been known in America. Yet America has generally drifted toward that continental climate in recent decades.

One source of that drift is the notion of strict separation of church and state, which suggests that the government should have nothing to do with religion. This encourages the view that religion is a personal, private affair that is irrelevant to public policy.

Another source is the assumption that political and social progress will increasingly marginalize religion. However, data on religious belief and practice in the U.S. and around the world defy that theory.

The lack of understanding of religion's continued relevance in America's constitutional order prevents clear thinking about the relationship between religion and liberty. It also creates blinders to religion's influence abroad. If policymakers are unfamiliar with a religious framework for interpreting human action and motivation, they will be ill-equipped to communicate effectively with highly religious audiences.

Telling the Story of Religious Liberty and Practice in America

U.S. public diplomacy could take practical steps to better highlight the significance of religious liberty and practice. Specifically, U.S. policy should:

- Muster the full force of America's founding ideals,
- Better integrate the religious freedom agenda with the overall promotion of freedom,
- Enlist appropriate mediators to reach target audiences, and
- Find common interest in religious liberty between religious groups and state authority.

Mustering the Full Force of America's Founding Ideals. Public diplomacy leadership calls for

more than communications and marketing credentials. The message itself is even more critical than the modes and techniques for projecting it to the world. In this 21st-century war of ideas, it is critical that U.S. public diplomacy rely on the bedrock of the American founding principles. Pop culture and commercialism cannot do justice to American ideals. They are flimsy and inadequate in the fight against potent ideologies that present strong, coherent, and deeply misguided explanations of the nature and purpose of human existence. This war of ideas calls for stronger substance than Coca-Cola and Britney Spears.

U.S. policymakers need to understand and be able to articulate the role of religion in the American constitutional order. Foreign Service training should promote that end.

One idea proposed by Thomas Farr, a retired Foreign Service officer and former director of the State Department religious liberty office, is to create a sub-specialty career track in Foreign Service training and career advancement that would allow for specialization in religious liberty.¹⁰ This training should place religious liberty in the context of America's founding principles.

Unifying the Freedom Agendas. The international freedom agenda should better integrate the ongoing work to promote religious liberty, the "first freedom." In a 2008 article on the 10th anniversary of the International Religious Freedom Act, Nina Shea related the story of a senior State Department official working on Iraq policy who did not know that a religious freedom office existed at the department.¹¹ The office and the ambassador-at-large need to be more visible and integrated into the overall policymaking functions of the State Department.

Public diplomacy should more systematically assess and communicate about religious dynamics. Evaluating religious dynamics of target cultures

9. *Laïcité* is a French concept of secularist society, characterized by strict separation of church and state.

10. Thomas F. Farr, "Diplomacy in an Age of Faith: Religious Freedom and National Security," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 2 (March/April 2008), at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20080301faessay87209/thomas-f-farr/diplomacy-in-an-age-of-faith.html> (December 31, 2008). See also Thomas F. Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty Is Vital to American National Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

11. Nina Shea, "The Origins and Legacy of the Movement to Fight Religious Persecution," *Faith and International Affairs*, June 14, 2008, pp. 25–31.

should become a regular function of analysis, and articulating the role of religion in the U.S. should be a consistent feature of communications strategy.

The vision of religious liberty needs to be robust. Condemning and curtailing religious persecution is a critical goal, but a more expansive agenda should seek to promote political conditions that consistently apply religious liberty tenets rooted in constitutional government.

The case of Abdul Rahman, an Afghan convert to Christianity, shows the need to establish the fundamental relationship between religious freedom and democracy. Afghanistan's constitutional government does not engage in the systematic religious persecution that characterized the Taliban's rule, but apostasy and blasphemy charges are still brought. When Abdul Rahman was so charged, an international uproar ensued. U.S. pressure helped to rescue Rahman, who left the country.¹²

This may have been a humanitarian success, but not for religious liberty policy generally. Freedom of religion—including the freedom of conversion—is essential to the long-term success of democratic government in Afghanistan.

This calls for a wider view of the mandate of the religious liberty office at the State Department. With its annual reports, the office serves as an important human rights monitor, but U.S. foreign policy engagement on religious liberty should go further. The office should serve as a resource and offer strategic input in the essential task of establishing freedom of religion as the foundation of democracy.

Enlisting Mediators of the Message. Public diplomacy should broaden dialogue between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad,¹³ including religious individuals and groups. Engaging religious audiences to help

to develop the habits of a free and civil society is essential to promoting liberty in much of the world. Religious groups in the U.S. may be able to further the work of public diplomacy by reaching religious groups abroad in ways that the U.S. government cannot.

Religious Groups and Individuals. The U.S. should seek the counsel of religious individuals and groups with experience in the target cultures. Military chaplains stationed with units in critical locations can provide insight and assistance in communicating with religious audiences.¹⁴ Christian missionaries serving foreign communities through schools and hospitals and other mercy ministries are one example of largely harmonious interaction between the United States and non-Western cultures.¹⁵ People with such experiences acquire valuable insights about groups that continue to confound many U.S. officials.

For example, in January 2001, the Classical School of the Medes in Kurdish northern Iraq was launched by American Christians to provide English language education with a classical curriculum. The school had expanded to three campuses by the time of Saddam Hussein's fall. Today, the three campuses serve 1,000 students, and about 95 percent of the students are Kurdish Muslims. What could be better than a school teaching the classics to help to cultivate civil society?

Faith-Based Diplomacy. The U.S. should encourage and build on "faith-based diplomacy." This is a type of Track II diplomacy conducted by non-officials. It combines insights from religious faith with the practice of international relations.¹⁶ Pope John Paul II is the preeminent example of a "faith-based diplomat," but many other religious believers would also qualify. This sort of unofficial diplomat has moral authority and engages in conflict resolu-

12. Paul Marshall, "Apostates from Islam," *The Weekly Standard*, April 10, 2006, at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/012/059fjprn.asp> (December 31, 2008).

13. Edwin J. Feulner, "American Public Diplomacy: Roadmap to Recovery," remarks at The Heritage Foundation, June 14, 2005. Feulner was chairman of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy from 1982 to 1991.

14. Douglas Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 25–26.

15. See Walter Russell Mead, "God's Country," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 5 (September/October 2006), p. 42, at <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20060901faessay85504/walter-russell-mead/god-s-country.html> (December 31, 2008).

16. Johnston, *Faith-Based Diplomacy*, pp. xii and 15.

tion by appealing to transcendent spiritual resources, including sacred texts and prayer. Such diplomacy appeals to a religious tradition's own tenets, rather than trying to minimize deep and irreconcilable differences among faith traditions.

For example, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy is helping to reform Pakistani madrasas.¹⁷ The Institute for American Values is sponsoring an Islam–West series of conversations between scholars and religious figures from both parts of the world.¹⁸

“While most American and European foreign-policy elites may hold a secular worldview, much of the rest of the world lives in one of the great religious traditions,” writes Andrew Natsios, former director of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). By contrast, faith-based organizations “have much more in common with the rest of the world and thus may understand ethnic and religious conflicts, political movements driven by religious devotion, and the way in which the religious mind functions, better than secularized foreign-policy practitioners.”¹⁹

Finding Common Interest in Religious Liberty. U.S. public diplomacy must convey to majority religious communities that religious freedom will continue to promote a positive and public role for religion. The American model of religious liberty includes a favorable view of religious practice, both private and public. Far from privatizing or marginalizing religion, it assumes that religious believers and institutions will take active roles in society, including engagement in the political process and formulation of public moral consensus.

Religious believers seeking peaceful, strong, stable communities can find considerable common ground in their views of human life, family, and ordering society with respect for the transcendent.

They share concern about efforts to marginalize religious practice from public life.

U.S. public diplomacy should communicate the continued importance of religion and traditional values in American life. Most Americans continue to attach great significance to religious faith and practice, marriage, family, and raising children in a morally supportive environment—values shared in many highly religious societies around the world.

Conclusion

The historical and continued role of religion in the American order is not adequately understood today. This prevents clear thinking about the relationship between religion and liberty and creates blinders to religion's influence abroad. To win hearts and minds, advance freedom, and promote stability, U.S. public diplomacy must systematically engage the role of religion and religious audiences.

Policymakers can take specific steps to more effectively communicate the significance of religious liberty and practice in America. U.S. public diplomacy should convey a robust understanding of America's founding ideals, including religious liberty. The international freedom agenda should better integrate the ongoing work to promote religious liberty, with the religious liberty office at the State Department serving as a resource in establishing freedom of religion as the foundation of democracy. Religious groups in the U.S. may be able to provide unofficial support that furthers the work of public diplomacy, reaching religious groups abroad in ways that the U.S. government cannot. Finally, U.S. public diplomacy should convey that religious freedom is compatible with a positive and public role for religion.

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17. Douglas Johnston, “Pakistan Trip Report (August 3–11, 2006),” International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, August 21, 2006, at http://www.icrd.org/storage/icrd/documents/pakistan_trip.pdf (December 31, 2008).

18. See Institute for American Values, Web site, at <http://www.americanvalues.org> (December 31, 2008).

19. Andrew Natsios, “Faith-Based NGOs and U.S. Foreign Policy,” in Elliott Abrams, ed., *The Influence of Faith: Religious Groups & U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 200.