Human rights, including the right to religious freedom, are presently in the process of becoming globalized. But, the fact that religious freedom is becoming a universal aspiration doesn’t mean that religious freedom means necessarily everywhere the same thing. It may mean different things in different countries, and these different meanings may be in conflict with one another. Policies intended to implement international religious freedom may conflict with other cultures’ understandings of religious freedom, and will be resisted accordingly.

Thankfully, there is also a growing global trend of mutual recognition of cultures. There is increasing awareness of the need, if we are going to live together peacefully and constructively in a shrinking world, for cultures to have a right to protect themselves from imperialist, or overly aggressive, attempts to change them. It is this awareness that allows a balance to be struck between the individual right of religious freedom, with its accompanying right to proselytize, and the communal right to preserve a culture. Importantly, to be most favorable, this balance calls for religious freedom implementation methods and proselytizing methods that are contextually specific.

Interestingly, only in the last 15 years has there been a major global movement, not only in the United States but elsewhere, to expand the principle of religious freedom. However, the principle itself is of course very old, being written into government documents during the inception of the American colonies, and later being included in the United States’ Declaration of Independence and then in the first amendment of its Constitution. Around the same time, the principle took hold in France when the National Assembly proclaimed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. But even there we see already that the American Declaration and the French Declaration—the two key modern declarations of universal human rights principles—have been in tension for a very long time, as they articulated the right in distinct ways.

In addition to differences between cultures, changes within single cultures also complicate the promotion of human rights. For example, consider the Catholic Church, which for 150 years attacked the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen for being against God, against the Church, and against dignity. And yet, in the last 40 years, the Catholic Church has become one of the

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global carriers of the principle of the sacred dignity of the human person. Cultures and religious confessional groups have dynamic conceptions of human rights; approaches to religious freedom that make simplistic assumptions about the static monolithic nature of certain groups will miss important opportunities, and can even be counterproductive.

An area where the complexity of the religious freedom issue comes into especially bold relief is cross-cultural religious proselytizing. I have witnessed these tensions first-hand many times. For example, for several years after the fall of the Berlin Wall I traveled regularly to Poland and Ukraine. The planes I flew on frequently also carried groups of enthusiastic American evangelicals intent on taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to the native inhabitants of these countries. As I interacted with and observed these missionaries, it became abundantly clear to me that they had no familiarity with the culture where they were going, and no idea what Eastern Christianity was. To these evangelicals, the people in Eastern Orthodox cultures could not be considered real Christians, because they believed that, in order to be a Christian, one had to be specifically an evangelical Protestant. Most often, they didn’t even know anything about the language; for instance, most had not bothered to learn that there is a difference between Ukrainian and Russian. Yet, they were convinced of their right to proselytize, sometimes very aggressively.

An extremely negative counter-reaction to Western proselytism occurred in Russia. Here, this process of culturally insensitive proselytizing led to an attempt by part of the Russian Orthodox Church to once again become allied with the Russian state. The Russian administration at that time eagerly became allied with the Russian church to protect its own control of society. What this episode illustrates is that while aggressive proselytizing in one cultural context, such as in the U.S., can be accepted as part of a healthy, robustly pluralistic civil society, in other cultural contexts it can have severe repercussions. To be sure, I am not saying that the current U.S. policy of promoting international religious freedom is outright culturally insensitive or imperialistic. I am only saying that in some contexts this is the way that it may be perceived. And, if it is perceived in this way, then it may have negative repercussions.

As mentioned above, the principle of individual religious freedom is in tension with another principle: the right of indigenous people to protect their culture from external pressure. This right, which the United Nations has recognized, is part of what I would call an emergent global denominationalism, a system of global society where religious groups respect others’ religions, even as they defend and promote their own truth claims. This system would respect the right of cultural self-preservation not through crude instruments such as blasphemy laws and censorship regulations, but rather through a civil society that understands the need for cultural sensitivity. Global denominationalism would also defend the principle of individual religious freedom, which includes the right to conversion and the attendant right to evangelize, but would recognize that there are both appropriate and inappropriate ways to evangelize.

In an environment of global denominationalism, proselytizing groups would have appropriate amounts of respect for the religions of other cultures. In an environment of global denominationalism, proselytizing groups would have appropriate amounts of respect for the religions of other cultures and, because of the knowledge and the desire to not offend that comes with respect, they would thus adapt their proselytizing methods to be culturally specific. Mother Teresa is a great example of culturally contextualized evangelizing. She did not proselytize by explicitly trying to convert Hindus to Catholicism—she was just a witness of a Christian mission doing Christian
work in India. This is a way of “proselytizing” that did not cause the negative reaction of groups in India who may have felt that overt proselytism was tied to Western imperialism.

What positive role can the United States play, then, in promoting international religious freedom during an era of globalization? Approaches that emphasize diplomacy and sanctions based ostensibly on standards of international law can be a part of the picture, but we must not underestimate the risk that such approaches will yield counterproductive results. Further, the United States doesn’t have a very good record in recognizing the applicability of international law to itself. The United States sometimes claims that it should be above international law on various issues, which undermines the legitimacy of U.S. appeals to international law when it comes to human rights advocacy.

Rather than through foreign policy, the more effective long-term role for the U.S. in advancing international religious freedom may be through its example as a society. Indeed, we may even find here in the United States the chance to create the mother of global denominationalism. This is because the United States, being such a successful plural society for confessional groups, is already an approximate microcosm of the sought-for global system. A vivid illustration of the relative strength of respectful pluralism in contemporary U.S. society is what happened after Danish newspapers published cartoon caricatures of Islam. In Europe, many newspapers re-published these cartoons, notwithstanding the fact that they would not think of publishing cartoons lampooning Christianity or stoking anti-Semitism. In the United States, by contrast, newspapers did not re-publish the Danish cartoons, voluntarily exercising restraint out of a simple recognition of the need for inter-religious respect.

Still, when we talk of denominationalism in the United States, we cannot forget that it also took a long time to be established. At first there was only denominationalism for the Protestants. Catholics were not accepted into the system and there were very serious attempts to force the Catholics to “Americanize,” which is to say, “Protestantize.” As a reaction, the Catholic Church tried to create a separate Catholic cultural structure through the school system and many other kinds of social structures that were separate from the hegemony of American Protestantism. Eventually, Catholicism was incorporated into a more inclusive vision of American “civil religion” that expanded the boundaries of respectful-yet-robust pluralism, an incorporation that has still allowed it to remain adequately autonomous. Eventually Judaism was similarly incorporated, and today of course we are in a context in which virtually all the world religions are being incorporated. The United States is thus uniquely positioned to act as a model through which to create a global denominationalism. We just need to remember that it will take time.

In conclusion, truly respectful religious freedom—the product of a creative tension and balance between individual religious freedom and communal religious pluralism—is becoming a universal aspiration. And it is transforming many of the world religions. It transformed Protestantism, then Catholicism, and it is transforming Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism today. But we should be aware of the fact that, because cultural perceptions of religious freedom are different, this process may take different forms than the American evangelical Protestant one, and may unfold only over the course of several generations, not during the course of the next presidential administration.

1. Portions of this essay will also be published by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University (http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/).