Of Down Syndrome and Violence: Religious Freedom and US Foreign Policy
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Bishop Pates, Cardinal Dolan, Cardinal McCarrick, eminences, excellencies and distinguished guests, it is an honor to be invited to speak at this important conference. Thank you for having me. It is a particular treat to share the dais with Cardinal McCarrick, whom I have known for many years, and whose work in this field is widely known and justly applauded.

I’ve been asked to set the stage for Denis McDonough by focusing on two issues: the state of religious freedom in the world, and the efforts of the last three US administrations to improve that state, that is, to promote religious liberty in our foreign policy as required by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

The state of international religious freedom, to be blunt, is one of deepening crisis. I say this with some hesitation. Rhetorical overreach is a problem in our public discourse, and I try to avoid it. But the evidence points to a crisis -- one that is not simply "out there" in the third world, but one whose symptoms are appearing close to home.

Whether our foreign policy is up to the challenge is, in my view, a question of increasing concern.

The Nature of the Crisis

Let's start with a few facts. As they say, facts are stubborn things, and, in this case, they are also quite grim. In 2009 and 2011, the Pew Research Center presented two comprehensive reports that catalogued government restrictions on religion, and social hostilities toward religion, in every country of the world.

The first report showed that some 70 percent of the world's population lives in countries in which religious freedom is severely restricted. Most of those people live in 64 countries, or roughly one-third of the nations of the world. Of those nations, most are either Muslim-majority countries, have communist governments (e.g., China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba), or are other large non-Muslim countries such as India and Russia.

The second report in 2011 demonstrated that the problem is getting worse. Restrictions or hostilities increased in twice as many countries as those in which they decreased.

Many of the places where things got worse were Muslim majority states such as Egypt and Libya before the Arab Spring. Overall, most of the nations with the highest restrictions on religious freedom are Muslim, including the theocratic autocracies of Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also the nascent and struggling Muslim democracies such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

There were also a few surprises in the second report. Europe, compared with all other regions in the world, had the largest proportion of countries in which social hostilities were on the rise. For
example, social hostilities in the United Kingdom increased so much that it placed the UK into the category of "high" restrictions, alongside Iran and Saudi Arabia. Across the channel, French government restrictions increased enough to move France ahead of Cuba in that category.

As for the United States, government restrictions were graded as "low" in both reports, but social hostilities toward religion were graded “moderate.” Surprisingly, many less developed countries graded better than the United States, including Rwanda, the Congo, and Sierra Leone. Clearly, neither the US nor Europe are guilty of the kinds of violent persecution we are seeing elsewhere. But there are reasons for concern.

Here's a final set of facts: of the religious groups who were the targets of harassment, Christians fared the worst. Either government or social harassment of Christians was reported in 130 nations (66% of the world’s nations). Muslims came in a close second at 117 countries (59%).

To sum up: 70 percent of the world lives in countries that have severe restrictions on religious freedom; the problem is particularly acute in Muslim-majority countries, but also countries such as China, India, and Russia; the problem is getting worse; it is having an impact on Western countries, including the United States; worldwide, Christians are the most vulnerable to persecution.

Let’s put some faces on these statistics. Alas, there are literally thousands of cases to choose from: the slaughter of Egyptian Copts in Alexandria last Christmas; the murder of Iraqi Catholics at mass in Baghdad; the rape of Indian Muslim women by Hindu mobs in Gujarat, their babies ripped from their wombs and slaughtered before their eyes; the official stoning of an Iranian mother falsely accused of adultery; the reprehensible attacks on innocent Muslims in the United States after 9/11; the 9/11 attacks themselves. All of these are examples of religious persecution, defined as physical abuse because of the religious beliefs and practices of the victims, or those of their tormentors.

Let’s focus for a moment on a case of religious persecution currently in the news. It involves a fourteen year old girl named Rimsha Masih, who is Pakistani and Christian. Rimsha comes from a very poor family and has Down Syndrome. Last month, according to press reports, Rimsha was picking through garbage in her neighborhood, looking for items that she and her family might live on. Apparently she came upon pages of a Koran, which either were already burned, or which she unknowingly put with other items that were burning. Then this child, utterly incapable of discerning what she had done, if anything, was arrested, charged with blasphemy, and put in prison. In Pakistan, and elsewhere in the Middle East, blasphemy is a crime which can bring many years in prison, torture, and even execution.

Press reports indicate that over the weekend Rimsha was released on bail and rushed from the prison to an undisclosed location. This was done in order to avoid the very real danger that mobs would attack her or her family. Other reports suggest that her accuser, a local cleric, may have staged the incident in an attempt to drive Christians out of the neighborhood in which Rimsha and her family live. Meanwhile, the US State Department has called on the Pakistani government to make the proceedings against the girl “transparent.”
Let's consider for a moment the meaning of this event for the question of international religious freedom. At one level the arrest of this handicapped child was a humanitarian outrage. But there is a deeper issue here that is in danger of being missed. Violent actions against blasphemy in the Muslim world are symptoms of a dangerous pathology with strategic implications. At its root is the view, widely accepted among Muslims abroad, that anyone who offends Islam must be punished, either by the state or private actors.

Across the world we are seeing increasing levels of violence against anyone, Muslim or non-Muslim, accused of blasphemy, defamation of Islam, or apostasy. Last year two Pakistani officials, Shabaz Bhatti and Salmon Taseer, were murdered for their opposition to blasphemy laws and their defense of religious freedom. Polls showed broad public support for the laws and the murderers. Yesterday US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stephens and three other Americans were murdered by people offended by a film insulting the Prophet Mohammed. The walls of the US Embassy in Cairo were stormed by mobs because of that film.

Let me be clear. No one should insult the sacred beliefs of another. It is an assault on human dignity and respect for others. But the malevolent idea that the proper response to defamation of religion is criminal prosecution, let alone violence or murder, is a dangerous problem in the Muslim-majority world. My religion is insulted regularly by the New York Times and the Washington Post. I frequently am outraged. But I try to respond with my voice or my pen. That is the only way people with deep differences can live together in a civilized society.

It is frankly a source of great concern to me that the US Embassy in Cairo issued a press release yesterday, on the anniversary of 9/11, that did not condemn this violence against innocent people, but condemned those who “hurt the religious feelings of Muslims” and other religious believers. The issue here is not hurt feelings. It is violent religious extremism that is destroying lives and endangering American security. I would have thought that American diplomats learned decades ago that appeasement of tyrants does not work. It simply makes things worse.

This toxic attitude -- that anyone offending Islam must be punished -- is responsible for many of the growing numbers of attacks on religious minorities worldwide, attacks that are causing an estimated 150,000 Christian deaths per year. This tragedy, I would submit, warrants far more attention that it has received from Western policy makers and the media. It suggests that Christian minorities, many of whom are longstanding contributors to the cultures of their respective societies, are being targeted, like Rimsha, so that they will flee.

All this is bad enough, but the implications go even deeper. It is in the vital interests of the United States that nations like Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Egypt overcome violent religious extremism and achieve stable democracies and economic development. This will not happen so long as Muslims believe that those who offend Islam must be met with violence, either through criminal prosecution, mob action, or murder. In short, the United States must become more effective at supporting in these countries those Muslims who know that Islam can be defended without violence, and that embracing religious freedom is in their vital interests.
The IRF Policy of Three Administrations

Let me turn now to the question of how the US policy of promoting international religious freedom (IRF) has fared under three administrations since 1998. It is important to note that each administration has had successes. The Clinton policy, led by IRF Ambassador Robert Seiple, put China on its list of particularly egregious violators of religious freedom, overcoming enormous resistance from China experts within the NSC and the State Department. Under President Bush, and IRF Ambassador John Hanford, Vietnam was induced to ban some of its egregious persecutory practices, such as forced renunciations of faith. Under President Obama, and IRF Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook, the Organization of Islamic Conference has been persuaded to back off its longstanding quest to criminalize “defamation of religions” in international law.

Notwithstanding such successes, however, it is difficult to argue that US policy has had much impact on the global crisis of religious freedom. This is not simply a failure of the current administration – it can be laid at the door of all three. But the hard reality is that now, at the very moment religious liberty is under enormous and growing pressure around the world, our foreign policy is quite anemic. While the global crisis cannot be attributed to our failures, it is clear that our policy has had little long-term impact, either on reducing religious persecution or in advancing the institutions and habits of religious freedom.

Why has US foreign policy been so ineffective in advancing religious freedom? There are many answers to that question, among them a highly secularist culture at the State Department and a “realist” bent in the foreign affairs establishment that seeks to avoid involvement in religious issues. Perhaps most importantly, I believe that many US policy elites have simply lost the conviction of our founding generation that religious freedom is the “first freedom,” utterly necessary for the flourishing of individuals and societies. If we do not understand what religious freedom is and why it is important, is it any wonder that we fail to persuade others?

These and other factors have contributed to the isolation of religious freedom policy within the State Department. While other human rights issues, including women’s rights and the internationalization of LGBT rights, have received significant resources and status within the Department, religious freedom has not. The Ambassador at Large for Global Women’s Issues reports directly to the Secretary of State, but the IRF Ambassador at Large reports to an official many levels below the Secretary. The Ambassador for women’s issues was on the job within a few months of the new administration taking office, but it took two and one half years to get the IRF Ambassador in place. And when she arrived she found that she was bureaucratically isolated, with few resources, and virtually no policy influence within the Department.

All of this makes it quite clear to two critical audiences – them and us – that international religious freedom is a low priority for the United States. Foreign governments, extremists, and American diplomats alike understand that when an administration believes a policy is important, they not only make fine speeches about that policy, but they devote energy, resources, and policy weight to it. Much of that has been missing in our religious freedom policy.
Conclusion

Let me conclude on a hopeful note. At the July 31 release of the latest State Department Annual Report on International Religious Freedom (IRF), Ambassador Suzan Johnson Cook introduced the report, and the issue of religious freedom, with great effectiveness. On the same day, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton gave a very strong speech on why religious liberty is important, not only to the victims of persecution, but to America’s self-understanding and its fundamental interests abroad. “For the United States,” she said, “religious freedom is a cherished constitutional value, a strategic national interest, and a foreign-policy priority.” Religious freedom is “not granted to us by any government, rather it is the responsibility of government to protect” it. Religious freedom is “an essential element of human dignity and of secure, thriving societies [and is] statistically linked with economic development and democratic stability.”

In responding to a questioner, the Secretary of State said that the United States must send a clear message to persecuting nations, especially those such as Egypt who are struggling to make democracy stable and lasting: Without religious freedom “you will not be successful, you will not be stable, you will not be secure, and you will certainly not have a sustainable democracy.”

Precisely so. It could not have been said better. Let us redouble our efforts -- as Catholics, as Americans, and as advocates for the religious freedom of all people – to support the President and the Secretary of State in making our foreign policy more effective in engaging the global crisis of religious liberty. Success in this endeavor will help the millions who suffer religious persecution, and the vital interests of our great nation.

Thank you.