The Brandywine Review of Faith & International Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title=content=t920386926

PUBLIC RELIGION SECRETARY RICE, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Thomas F. Farr*

* Georgetown University, USA

Online publication date: 27 April 2010


To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/15435725.2005.9523204

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15435725.2005.9523204

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
PUBLIC RELIGION, SECRETARY RICE, AND U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

By Thomas F. Farr

Disagreements over religion in the public square dominate our domestic politics at the moment, but neither the left nor right has adequately addressed religion as an aspect of U.S. foreign policy. Some on both sides have an unhelpful view of Islam that could cripple American efforts to promote democracy in the Muslim world. As she sets her agenda at Foggy Bottom, Dr. Condoleezza Rice should take note.

The problem is this: even “moderate” Muslims fear that the secular democracy we are selling them is anti-Islam. This not only reduces our influence over political reform, it also plays into the hands of Islamist terrorists. Iraq’s Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani has said that U.S. sponsored secularism was “Iraq’s gravest threat.” Not surprisingly, Osama bin Laden has condemned as apostates anyone who seeks democracy, which he calls “the religion of unbelievers.”

This kind of opposition to democracy has been exacerbated by decades of U.S. backing for secular authoritarian rulers who punished even peaceful public expressions of Islam. Some believe we are changing those failed policies, but the facts are troubling. Even if we do encourage serious reform in places like Egypt, Pakistan, or Saudi Arabia, U.S. foreign policy has no systematic strategy in place to overcome the presumption that democracy is anti-Islamic. For all its talk of “engaging Islam” the Department of State simply does not “do religion” in the Muslim world. If anyone talks to the Iraqis on a regular basis about the relationship between religion and politics in an Islamic democracy, it’s more likely to be a U.S. Marine than an American diplomat.

If Muslims do not get the religio-political balance right in places like Iraq, even successful elections are unlikely to produce enduring democracy. And if the fledging democracies we midwife in the Muslim world do not endure, if they collapse into civil war or are supplanted by radical Islamism, America’s security will be plagued for the foreseeable future by a continuing stream of recruits to al Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

My 21 years in the Foreign Service left me with an abiding admiration for America’s diplomats. But, truth be told, many would prefer a root canal in a foreign dentist’s chair to a discussion on religion and politics with a Muslim leader. Often part of a secular elite

Thomas F. Farr is a 21-year veteran of the U.S. Foreign Service. He left the State Department in 2003, having served since 1999 as the Department’s first Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom. He holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of North Carolina, and is presently writing a book on religious freedom and U.S. foreign policy, which will be published by Oxford University Press.
that earnestly desires the privatization of religion, our diplomats are further handicapped by the absence of systematic training or any strategic context for discussing religion. This hands-off attitude was reflected in the 9/11 Commission Report, which simply ponted on the issue of reconciling religion and democracy. “Lives guided by religious faith … [the Report asserts] represent no threat to us.” Case closed.

Some members of America’s political class cling to a head-in-the-sand “secularization thesis” dominant among scholars of international relations. It holds that modernity necessitates the privatization of religion, if not its disappearance. Within democracies, religiosity will be relegated (if it survives at all) to the safe confines of churches, synagogues, and mosques, where it will not affect public policy.

Unfortunately, while most conservatives reject these views, many refuse to oppose their dominance in U.S. foreign policy, at least when it comes to the Muslim world. Most conservatives believe America’s founding generation grounded our democracy in religious freedom, not in order to ban religion from the public square but to ensure its flourishing as the very basis for public policy. They have fought, with limited success, against the tide of secularization to preserve a vital, religion-friendly democracy, based on the idea that all are created equal and endowed by God with inalienable rights.

But too many are unwilling to acknowledge and support Muslims who have a similar understanding of their own religion, and the political reform it can yield. Many are convinced that Islam is simply a launching pad for terrorism, too deeply flawed to warrant any latitude for its public manifestations. While there are certainly grounds for such fears, to allow them to paralyze U.S. efforts to promote democracy is foolish.

What can Secretary of State Rice do about all this? Part of the remedy is already in place at Foggy Bottom, but she will need to provide it her personal support. In 1998 Congress passed a law requiring the State Department to advance religious freedom as a core element of U.S. foreign policy and established an office headed by an Ambassador to spearhead the effort. In the pre-9/11 era, few of the law’s sponsors saw it as a weapon in the war against terror, and many who talk about post-9/11 diplomacy seem unaware of its existence. The Ambassador and his staff have made significant strides, and have had an impact on, for example, the interim Iraqi constitution. But the office is still viewed within State as custodian of a special interest issue imposed by Congress, its subject utterly unconnected to the broader goals of U.S. foreign policy.

U.S. religious freedom policy can and should be employed as part of the nation’s refurbished democracy project in the Middle East. American democracy was founded on religious freedom, defined not as the privatization of religion but its accommodation to the public square within carefully defined limits. America should provide models of democracy that will not ask Muslims to check their religion at the door, but will require them to elevate into politics those aspects of their faith that value human dignity and freedom. Our own nation’s security depends on it.

U.S. RELIGIOUS FREEDOM POLICY CAN AND SHOULD BE EMPLOYED AS PART OF THE NATION’S REFURBISHED DEMOCRACY PROJECT IN THE MIDDLE EAST