



MEMO TO THE STATE: RELIGION AND SECURITY

By Chris Seiple

If a government does not understand how easy it is to turn religion into an enemy of the state, then it might do just that. Indeed, even though the role of religion in international relations is now a hot topic among policymakers and in the academy, this dimension of the issue has been left relatively under-investigated.

Religious adherents worship something that is not only greater than themselves but also greater than their governments. The state's natural policy question is therefore simple: How can government reliably believe in their citizens when their citizens believe in something greater than the government?

In authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, the governmental reaction to this problem is most often to repress religion, with predictably counterproductive results. However, sometimes democratic societies also needlessly create or exacerbate problems because their governments have not adequately understood religion's relationship with security. A new framework is needed, one that facilitates the positive social contributions of faith so that the negative side-effects of repressed religion can be avoided. To that end, here are five recommendations for governments as they deal with the promise and peril of religion in public life.

Religion: Problem & Solution

This step is the most difficult, especially for the West's secular societies. Since the European Enlightenment, with its pivotal turn in philosophy away from tradition and toward rationalism and science, the Western world has attempted to separate matters of the state from matters of religion in the name of good governance. This principle, the separation of Church and State, has become a founding premise of most Western countries, and in many ways, the results have been positive.

However, too often the casualty of this division has been proper analysis. Failing to address the role of religion in public and political life can lead to a profound misunderstanding of global trends, events, and societies, including our own. By neglecting to factor religion into political analysis, secular democracies can "repress" religion through ignoring it or granting it mere tolerance rather than showing it respect.

The irony for the West, and especially the United States, is that this lesson has been

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learned before. Many of the first Europeans to migrate to America were minorities fleeing persecution for their beliefs. Yet some of these same people established colonies wherein they persecuted anyone who did not believe as they did. Fortunately this pattern was recognized and broken early on, when Roger Williams fled the theocracy of Massachusetts to establish the colony of Rhode Island. Here liberty was defined not as the opposite of religious fundamentalism, namely secularist fundamentalism, but rather as *religious pluralism*. This robust form of religious freedom was later institutionalized through the leadership of other Founders such as William Penn, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson. These American forefathers recognized the danger of not allowing religion a proper place in public discourse.

If governments cannot understand religion, then Samuel Huntington will be proven right—stereotypes will settle in as the clash of civilizations becomes inevitable. On the other hand, if governments and their citizens allow for the possibility that religion, and religious people, can play a positive role in preventing and resolving conflicts, then they are much closer to protecting national security through a dialogue about civilization. In many ways, however, the secular governments of the West are still collectively unequipped to engage religious-based worldviews—such that we can work with and promote its best in order to help it defeat its worst.

A Seat at the Table for Religion

Too many international relations experts worship at the wailing wall of “church-state separation”—often ignoring religion altogether—to the detriment of themselves and the policymakers they advise. The result is that religion is overlooked as a legitimate component of realpolitik.

Consider the example of the war in Iraq. In April 2003, as U.S. interagency teams waited

in Kuwait before going in to advise the various Iraqi ministries, there was debate about what to do with Iraq’s Ministry for Religion. One official simply stated: “We don’t do religion.”

Not surprisingly, when Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the leader of Iraq’s Shi’a majority, later issued a religious edict on 28 June 2003 regarding American plans for a transition to Iraqi rule, it was ignored. When the senior U.S. official in Iraq, Paul Bremer, was called home for emergency consultations in November

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2003 to discuss the transition, one Iraqi leader, who had been installed by the U.S. immediately after the invasion, said: “We waited four months, thanks to Bremer. We could have organized [this transition] by now had we started when Sistani issued his fatwa. But the Americans were in denial.”

It is no wonder that long-time national security writer Sydney J. Freedberg would observe in the 21 November 2003 issue of *National Journal*: “Americans are baffled by Iraq because we have spent three and a half centuries in a post-Westphalian world where state trumps faith and tribe.... Before we can understand our enemies, or our allies, in the Middle East, we have 350 years of assumptions to unlearn.” In retrospect, it is now clear that between June and November of 2003 the various sectarian groups organized—in part because the U.S. did not know how to address religion as a part of realpolitik, let alone take seriously the senior Shi’a leader and the majority population that he represented.

If they seek sustainable stability, then secular governments need people and organizations who operate at the intersection of religion and realpolitik. These “bilingual” ambassadors exist, and the world needs them more than ever before.

Good Faith vs. Bad Religion

Consider another American illustration: U.S. engagement of the Muslim world

since 9/11. The United States has primarily responded to 9/11 these past five years by focusing on gates, guns, and guards. Naturally enough after suffering a horrific attack, the explicit purpose has been keeping “them” out and “us” protected.

The problem with this approach, however, is that it remains all about “us.” We have made no sustained effort to understand “them.” And if we cannot begin to grasp the Muslim worldview—including its historical and cultural manifestations in particular places around the world—then we will never be able to communicate.

In order to communicate, Americans and their government must understand that the Muslim worldview is inherently rooted in faith. Islam is, of course, on the agenda of every security expert, but almost always in a way that is limited to the ideological dimensions of militant Islam. For example, the new term of reference is “Islamofascism.” Somehow, by invoking a 20th century concept rooted in the extreme nationalism and totalitarianism of the state, we are supposed to understand the theological roots of a non-state group that thinks of itself as religious. Meanwhile, the phrase clearly does not differentiate between Islam and Fascism, insulting Muslims everywhere.

Likewise vis-à-vis the word “jihad.” Jihad is a sacred concept to Muslims who regard it first as an internal struggle of purification. By describing terrorists as “jihadis,” American journalists and government officials validate the terrorists’ perception of themselves as religious, and in the process they needlessly insult pious Muslims.

If a government has no ability to understand the theology associated with the citizens of its various religious groups—and their co-religionists around the world—it will only heighten tension by misnaming and mischaracterizing motivations and actions. Instead, it should be the responsibility of governments to understand the faith systems of their citizens, if only to encourage them to police their own ranks in the name of their own faith. More specifically, governments need to encourage emerging authentic voices through theological

training. The more broadly trained religious leaders there are—that is, the more clerics who understand the very best of their faith and the diversity of its cultural expressions—the less likely it is that the faith will be manipulated by political entrepreneurs. It is imperative to the stability and development of societies worldwide that governments encourage and facilitate religious leaders literate in their faith and culture. “Seminary” is security.

Engagement on Common Ground

It is too often the case that people of one culture and region assume that people from another think the same way they do. This phenomenon is frequently manifested in the West’s promotion of universal human rights. While their premise and articulation make perfect sense to Westerners, their blunt, moralistic promulgation is often viewed as cultural imperialism by non-Westerners. Fair enough; the manner in which a message is conveyed is usually more important than the message when engaging a culture other than one’s own.

That said, there are indeed common principles that every culture shares. It is imperative for each of us—no matter our culture—to seek the tie that binds, to find ways to love and respect each other in a language and logic that the other understands.

By way of example, consider the Institute for Global Engagement’s current efforts in relational diplomacy in Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Province, a part of the world that serves as a hideout for the Taliban, al Qaeda, and probably Osama bin Laden. Over the last year the Institute has been working carefully and in a principled way with the Chief Minister of the province to promote justice and mercy—concepts common to Christianity and Islam—by enabling educational and socio-economic opportunity for people of all faiths. In short, in this geo-strategically important and largely closed region, taking the time to find common ground is what provided the Institute with a place to stand.

Responsible Religious Liberty & Counterterrorism

There are times, of course, when giving certain militant religious groups too much freedom can create serious security risks. One need only recall the case of Aum Shinryko in Japan, where, because of its religious cult status, it was constitutionally protected from investigation before its 20 March 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subways. We saw a similar thing with last year's "7/7" bombers in London, among whom was a former disciple of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). HT is banned in Germany, where they have historic experience with hate speech, but not banned in the UK.

However, governments should not respond in simplistic ways to the risk of religious radicalism. It is not enough for a government to grant wide freedom to religious groups it deems non-threatening and to suppress those it deems threatening. Religious groups are not static entities that can be assigned permanently to "good" and "bad" categories. Instead, they must be engaged holistically and preemptively, and with the objective of cultivating not just "tolerance" but rather *respect*—mutual respect between religious groups and between religions and the government. This will often be a matter of simply tapping the reservoirs of respect that already exist, rather than attempting to impose the value through indoctrination. Indeed, every society has religio-cultural mores

that support hospitality and respect for guests and minorities. If the government encourages these cultural mechanisms it will likely enjoy the approval of its people, minimizing the chances of religious groups becoming dangerously radicalized, and maximizing the chances of retaining nonviolent engagement options if a religious group does slip into extremism.

Conclusion

"Civil society" is only characterized by civility when there is a balance between the "freedom to" something (liberty) and the "freedom from" something (security). The fulcrum will vary according to historical and cultural context, but the true test of the civility of any society will always be how it respects the minority in its midst. If this balance can be found, then security and stability will result. In such a context, religion will contribute to the development of society as people of faith practice the best of their values by serving their community.

As Gerard Powers once said: "The best way to counter religious extremism or manipulation of religion is with strengthened, more authentic religion, not weakened religion. The challenge for religious leaders ... is to show that religion can be a counter to extreme nationalism and a source of peace because of, not in spite of, its close link with culture and national identity." ♦