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Keeping the Faith: Religion, Freedom, and International Affairs

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Dr. Marshall is the author of 300 scholarly and popular articles and such books as *Just Politics* and *Heaven Is Not My Home* (just released this January). His best-selling and award-winning 1997 survey of religious persecution, *Their Blood Cries Out* (with Lela Gilbert), was described in the U.S. Senate as "a powerful and persuasive analysis [that] simply cannot be ignored." ▲

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Paul Marshall reports that not only does religious persecution continue worldwide but that it is also more brutal and more widespread than we have been led to believe by the Western media. He urges us to make religious rights prominent among human rights. If we do so, we should understand and react to world politics more clearly and more consistently.

Dr. Marshall's remarks were delivered at Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar, "Faith and Freedom Around the World," sponsored in part by the Sage Foundation, on campus last fall.

At the end of 1997, former *New York Times* executive editor A.M. Rosenthal confessed, "I realized that in decades of reporting, writing, or assigning stories on human rights, I rarely touched on one of the most important. Political human rights, legal, civil, and press rights, emphatically often; but the right to worship where and how God or conscience leads, almost never."

The habit of ignoring religious persecution is all too common in the West. On August 22, 1998, for example, seven leaders of underground churches in China released an unprecedented joint statement calling for dialogue with the communist government. The U.S. media virtually ignored the statement, despite the fact that these leaders represent the *only* nationwide group in China not under government control. Their membership of 15 million is several times larger than the population of Tibet and hundreds of times larger than the number of China's democracy and human rights activists. But the press just isn't interested.

Nor is it interested in religious persecution in Sudan, the largest country in Africa, which still practices crucifixion. After enduring more than forty years of civil war, the predominantly Christian population in southern Sudan is subject to torture, rape, and starvation for its refusal to convert to Islam. Christian children are routinely sold into slavery. Muslims who dare to convert to Christianity are faced with the death penalty.

In the last fifteen years, Sudan's death toll of more than 1.9 million is far greater than Rwanda's (800,000), Bosnia's (300,000), and Kosovo's (1,000) combined. The United Nations' special rapporteur on Sudan, Gaspar Biro, produced five official reports documenting the carnage, declaring "abuses are past proving . . . these are the facts." He resigned when his reports were consistently ignored.

Not a week goes by that Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom does not learn of major stories of religious persecution abroad. Christians are usually the victims, but so are many others, such as Buddhists in Vietnam, Baha'is in Iran, and Shiite Muslims in Afghanistan. These stories rarely make headlines or penetrate the consciousness of journalists and foreign policy professionals.

Secular Myopia

One main cause for this ignorance is what I call "secular myopia," that is, "an introverted, parochial inability even to see, much less understand, the role of religion in human life." It is a condition that mainly afflicts the "chattering classes," which include diplomats, journalists, political commentators, and policy analysts. As strategic theorist Edward Luttwak has observed, the chattering classes are eager to examine economic causes, social differentiations, and political affiliations, but they generally disregard the impact of faith upon the lives of individuals and the lives of nations.

Secular myopia can have painful consequences. Remember how little the U.S. knew about the Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers in Iran during the late 1970s? Luttwak notes that there was only one proposal for the CIA to examine "the attitude and activities of the more prominent religious leaders" and that this proposal was vetoed as

an irrelevant exercise in sociology.

As the Shah's regime was collapsing, U.S. political analysts kept insisting that everything was fine. True to their training, they focused on economic variables, class structure, and the military, and they concluded that, since businessmen, the upper classes, and the military supported the Shah, he was safe. There were, of course, many *mul-lahs* (religious teachers and leaders) arousing Islamic sentiment, but the analysts believed that religious movements drew only on folk memories, were destined to disappear with "modernization," and were irrelevant to the real forces and institutions of political power.

Consequently, the U.S. did not clear its embassy of important documents or staff. When Khomeini seized power, his followers captured both. They used the former to attack American personnel throughout the Middle East and the latter to precipitate a hostage crisis that paralyzed our nation for two years.

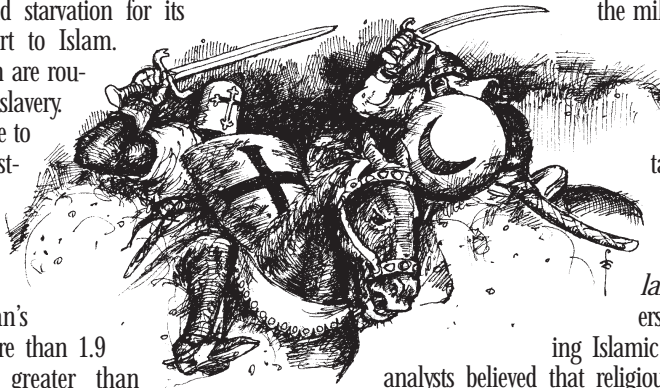
According to Luttwak, during the Vietnam War, "every demographic, economic, ethnic, social, and, of course, military aspect of the conflict was subject to detailed scrutiny, but the deep religious cleavages that afflicted South Vietnam were hardly noticed." He added that the "tensions between the dominant Catholic minority [and] a resentful Buddhist majority . . . were largely ignored until Buddhist monks finally had to resort to flaming self-immolations in public squares, precisely to attract the attention of Americans so greatly attentive to everything else in Vietnam that was impeccably secular."

Similar tales can be told of our myopic view of conflicts in Bosnia, Nicaragua, Israel, Lebanon, India, the Philippines, and Indonesia.

Misunderstanding Religion

Religion as Ethnicity

In 1997, when Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed railed against speculators with the outrageous claim, "We are Muslims, and the Jews are not happy to see the Muslims progress," the *Los Angeles Times* described him as "race-obsessed." Perhaps the *Times* took its cue from media descriptions of former Yugoslavia. In



this tortured land, the war raging between the Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims is always referred to as “ethnic” and attacks on Bosnian Muslims are always referred to as “ethnic cleansing.”

There are many such examples of media misunderstanding. The *Economist* headlined a 1997 story about attacks on 25 churches and a temple in eastern Java that were prompted by a Muslim heresy trial as “Race Riots.” A 1998 *New York Times* editorial on rampant violence in Indonesia cited “tensions between Indonesia’s Muslim majority and Chinese minority” as if there were no Chinese Muslims and no non-Muslims except for the Chinese.

Religion as Irrationality

Western opinionmakers and policymakers consider themselves the heirs of the “Enlightenment,” an 18th-century intellectual movement that stressed rationalism and science over faith and other forms of “superstition.” To them, all contemporary peoples, events, and issues fall into Enlightenment categories, which are most often political or ideological.

Muslims are identified as “right-wing,” even when they advocate leftist economic controls. Hindus who propose to build a temple on the site of the Babri mosque in India and Jews who propose to build a Third Temple on the site of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem are also labeled “left-wing” or “right-wing” without any regard to religious context.

When the vocabulary of “left” and “right” has run its tired course, we are left with that old standby, “fundamentalist”—a word dredged up from the American past, despite dubious provenance. What “fundamentalist” means when applied to Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims is hard to understand. Using the term is a sign of intellectual laziness. If what believers believe does not easily fall into an Enlightenment category, then it is assumed that they must be “irrational.” Thus, “fundamentalist” is now merely shorthand for “religious fanatic”—for someone who is to be categorized rather than heard, observed rather than comprehended, dismissed rather than respected.

Religion as Sublimated Anxiety

When ethnicity and psychology fail to subsume religion, the alternative is to treat it, in quasi-Marxist fashion, as the sublimation of drives that supposedly can be explained by poverty, economic changes, or the stresses of modernity. Of course, these factors do play a role, but, all too often, what we encounter is an a priori methodological commitment to treating religion as secondary—as a mildly interesting phenomenon that can be explained, but that is never an explanation in and of itself.

So great is this bias that when the *Journal of International Affairs* devoted its 1996 edition to studies of religious influences, it apologized in part for even mentioning faith with the admission, “Religion may seem an unusual topic for an international affairs journal.” The editors added that “it is hardly surprising that scholars . . . have, for the most part, ignored [religion].”

Taking Religion Seriously

Religion and War

If we *do* start to take religion seriously in international affairs, then we will learn a great deal about war, about democracy, and about freedom of all kinds.

It was pointed out by religion scholars long before political scientist Samuel Huntington’s recent book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, that chronic armed conflict is concentrated on the margins of the traditional religions, especially along the boundaries of the Islamic world. The Middle East, the southern Sahara, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Southern Asia are where Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism intersect. It is also where most wars have broken out in the last 50 years.

These are not explicitly religious wars. But since religion shapes cultures, people in these regions have different histories and different views of human life. Regardless of the triggers for conflict, they are living in unstable areas where conflict is likely to occur—in religious fault zones that are also prone to political earthquakes.

Religion and Democracy

Religion also shapes governments. In Eastern Europe, authoritarian governments are finding it easier to hold on in areas where the Orthodox church, with its long history of association with the state, has had special influence. The new boundaries of Eastern and Western Europe are tending to fall along the old divide between Orthodox and Catholic/Protestant.

Huntington makes a strong case that, in the 1970s-80s, a “third wave of democracy” swept over Portugal, Spain, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Philippines, in part because of important changes in the dominant nongovernment institution—the Catholic church. (He concludes that changes made after the Second Vatican Council

inspired a major movement toward democracy and human rights.)

The role of the church in the fall of communism may not be clear to Western observers afflicted with secular myopia, but it is all too clear to Chinese government officials. As brutal practitioners of communism, they are perversely aware of the power of human spirituality, and so they regard religion with deadly seriousness. In 1992, the Chinese press noted that “the church played an important role in the change” in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and warned, “If China does not want such a scene to be repeated in its land, it must strangle the baby while it is still in the manger.”

Underground church or “house church” leaders consistently report that the current government crackdown is due to fears prompted by religious events in the former Soviet bloc. Even Chinese government documents actually implementing the crackdown state that one of their purposes is to prevent “the changes that occurred in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.”

Each year, Freedom House conducts a comparative survey of political rights and civil liberties around the world. The 1998-99 survey finds that, of the 88 countries rated as “free,” 79 “are majority Christian by tradition or belief.” Clearly, correlations are not causalities, so this does not imply any direct link between Christianity and democracy (the survey also finds a connection between Hinduism and democracy). However, the existence of such a relationship is significant, not least because it is far greater than material factors such as economic growth, on which theorists and analysts lavish attention.

Politics and the Nature of the Church

One reason for the modern correlation between Christianity and political freedom lies in the nature of the church. From the beginning Christians, while usually loyal citizens, necessarily have an attachment to “another king” and a loyalty to a divine order that is apart from and beyond the political order.

In the Latin churches of the West, the two realms of *sacerdotium* (church) and *regnum* (state) emerged. Henceforth, there were two centers of authority in society. As political philosopher George Sabine reminds us, the Christian church became a distinct institution, independent of the state, entitled to shape the spiritual concerns of mankind. This, he adds, “may not unreasonably be described as the most revolutionary event in the history of Western Europe, in respect both to politics and to political thought.”

It is not that the church or the state directly

advocated religious freedom or any other freedom—they did not, and often inquisitions were defended. But people in both realms always believed that there *should be* boundaries, and they struggled over centuries to define them. This meant that the church, whatever its lust for civil control, had always to acknowledge that there were forms of political power which it could and should not exercise. And the state, whatever its drive to dominate, had to acknowledge that there were areas of human life that were beyond its reach.

The very existence of the modern church denies that the state is the all-encompassing or ultimate arbiter of human life. Regardless of how the relationship between God and Caesar has been confused, it now at least means that, contra the Romans and modern totalitarians, *Caesar is not God*. This confession, however mute, sticks in the craw of every authoritarian regime and draws an angry and bloody response.

Faith and Freedom

This confession also suggests that people interested in democracy should heed religion. For example, attention to China’s courageous pro-democracy activists is certainly deserved, but it must be remembered that their following is quite small.

Therefore, more attention should be paid to China’s dissident churches, which, at a conservative estimate, number some 25 million members (apart from 15 million members in official churches) and which are growing at a rate of 10-15 percent a year.

In a 1997 cover story, “God Is Back,” the *Far East Economic Review* quoted the words of one Beijing official: “If God had the face of a seventy-year-old man, we wouldn’t care if he was back. But he has the face of millions of 20-year-olds, so we are worried.”

Clearly, the rapid growth of the only nationwide movement in China not under government control merits *political* attention.

Religion and International Relations

Apart from some of the horrific situations already described in Sudan, the Balkans, and elsewhere, the following religious trends also merit political reflection:

- The rise of large, militant religious parties such as the Welfare Party in Turkey and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India and the growth of radical Islam all over the world.

- The rapid growth of charismatic Protestantism and Catholicism in Latin America. As Cambridge sociologist David Martin has shown, these indigenous developments represent one of the largest religious changes of the century. They also produce personal reform and provide a major impetus toward entrepreneurial activity.

- The pattern of violence and warfare along the sub-Saharan boundary from Nigeria to Ethiopia. This constitutes a huge Christian/Muslim breach that must be addressed before peace is possible.

- Massive rates of Christian conversions in Korea (now 25 percent of the population), China (a minimum of 40 million, up from one million in 1980), Taiwan, and Indonesia.

- Increasing religious tensions in trouble spots such as Nigeria and Indonesia. There is widespread religious violence in the northern and central regions of Nigeria, with thousands dead in recent years. There could be all-out religious war. In Indonesia, escalating religious strife precedes and has some separate dynamics from recent anti-Chinese violence: 200 churches were destroyed in Java alone in a recent 15-month period, and most of them were not attended by ethnic Chinese. Such

incidents threaten to undermine what has been one of the world's best examples of interreligious toleration and cooperation.

In both of these regions, there is the possibility that instability and violence will spread far beyond the religious communities themselves.

- The exodus of Christians from the Middle East—some two million in the last five years. Currently some 3 percent of Palestinians are Christians, compared to an estimated 25 percent 50 years ago. Similar mass flight from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq has occurred.

- The emergence of the Orthodox church as a unifying symbol in Russia, the Balkans, and other parts of the former Soviet Union.

- The increasing prominence of religion in the conflicts between India and Pakistan, which now possess nuclear weapons.

I am not making the absurd suggestion that religion—apart from other cultural, ethnic, economic, political, or strategic elements—is the only or the key factor in international affairs. Societies are complex. But I am saying that it is absurd to examine any political order *without*

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attending to the role of religion. We consistently need to deal with religion as an important independent factor. Analyses that ignore religion should be inherently suspect.

The Centrality of Religious Freedom

In the West there are now hopeful signs of a new awareness of the importance of religion and religious freedom. On October 9, 1998, the U.S. Senate passed the landmark International Religious Freedom Act. The following day, the House did the same. On October 27, President Clinton—a strong opponent—cut his losses and signed the act, which establishes a commission appointed by Congress and the White House to monitor global religious persecution and recommend responses. This is a small step, but it *is* a step, and in a vital area where few have trod. It is vital that *we* take similar steps—as concerned citizens.

We must support policies, programs, and organizations that promote and defend religious freedom.

We must support people such as Pope John Paul II, a man with no military or economic resources who is nonetheless daily aware of the spiritual dynamics of the world and who, for this reason, is perhaps its most important statesman.

We must make religious freedom a core element of “human rights.” This is not a parochial matter. Historically, it is the first freedom in the growth of human rights, and it is the first freedom in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

While all human rights pressures make “geopolitical realists” nervous, religion carries the additional burdens of touching on deeply felt commitments, of facing confused domestic claims about “separation of church and state,” and fears that the U.S. is an imperial Christian power. But for anyone concerned with freedom and democracy this is no reason to hesitate. Religious rights must be at the forefront of any sound human rights policy. And unless we understand this, our ability to fight for any freedom at all is compromised. ▲

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