

Thinking about Religion & Stability: Social Disharmony or Social Stability?

CHRIS SEIPLE*

ABSTRACT: The paper focuses on the interrelationship of religion and society. It raises the policy question for the state: How does government provide security and order for its citizens when some of its citizens hold an allegiance to something other than the state? The author then analyzes two approaches to this policy dilemma: repressing religion, or facilitat faith. What he wants to emphasizes here is we should recognize religion as part of the problem and therefore as part of the solution.

This paper makes two fundamental assumptions before discussing how governments can hurt or help themselves as they address religion. My first assumption is that religious groups contribute to society's development. It is well known, and highly documented, that where responsible faith-based groups - from churches to relief and development NGOs, from the indigenous to the international - practice their faith freely, the community becomes materially and morally better.

Because these groups take their faith seriously, they serve the community around them through various programs. As a result, the poor, the orphans, the widows, etc., all have better lives. Of interest to the government is that these faith-based groups are providing services for which the state does not have to pay. Meanwhile - because of their resulting work ethic and morality - these faith-based groups help build the economy while serving as stalwarts against corruption.

*. **Chris Seiple** is the President of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE). Before coming to the IGE, Seiple was an Earhart Fellow at the Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy at Tufts University, where he remains a Ph.D. Candidate. Mr. Seiple served as an infantry officer in the Marine Corps from 1990 to 1999. He received his M.A. in National Security Affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, concentrating in Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict. He is a 1990 graduate of Stanford University where he majored in International Relations. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute (Philadelphia), a member at the Council on Foreign Relations (New York), a member of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (London), and is Founder of IGE's Council on Faith & International Affairs (CFIA). His book, *The US Military/NGO Relationship in Humanitarian Interventions*, is a seminal work in the field.

In short, responsible followers of faith know how to lead a good spiritual life and thus understand how to practically contribute to secular development in the community.¹

My second assumption, however, is that development does not take place without societal stability and security, which cannot realistically be achieved unless leaders undertake worst-case scenario planning. That is, if the government does not understand how easy it is to turn religion into an enemy of the state, then it might do just that. This dimension of the interrelationship of religion and society is not as well documented by scholars as it should be, and thus it is the focus of the author's comments here.

The fundamental disconnect between religion and the state is this: religious adherents worship something greater than themselves that is greater than governments.

Consequently, for the state, the policy question is simple: How does government provide security and order for its citizens - its primary function - when some of its citizens hold an allegiance to something other than the state?

There are two approaches to this policy dilemma: repress religion, or facilitate faith. Without a clear and concise understanding of these two options, to include the five steps to each approach, we put all of our individual hopes and various policies - at the global, national, and local levels - at risk.

Repressing Religion: Five Steps to Social Disharmony

When someone or something is different from what we understand, it is natural to question it, even fear it. This is true with governments and religions (and often between and among religions). When a government does not understand or represses religion, they usually do so along the lines of the following five steps. In taking these steps, even if unintentional, the government prevents social stability and therefore impedes development. Put differently, it is altogether too easy for governments, and their allies, to descend along a slippery slope from stability to anarchy. It begins with fear.

Step 1: Repress the unknown. Consider the example of Central and South Asia before September 11, 2001. During the Taliban period in Afghanistan, the world witnessed a religiously-motivated regime that did not tolerate other religions. The Taliban blew up ancient Buddhist statues, pinned yellow stars on Hindus, and provided sanctuary to other Islamist extremist groups. Eventually these terrorists / separatists began stirring up Central Asia (to the north of Afghanistan), using rhetoric and violence to forcefully overthrow the governments.

As the world did nothing, the new states of Central Asia, especially Uzbekistan, took action. Foremost fearing a civil war - as had happened in Tajikistan from 1992-1997,

where Islamist forces fought the government to a standstill - these states began to repress the rights of their citizens to worship and freely practice their faith. In the case of Uzbekistan, while all faiths were harassed, fundamentalist Muslims were particularly persecuted. Certainly, terrorists were captured. Yet many innocent people who happened to be devoutly pious - but were mistaken for terrorists because of their religious habits (e.g., keeping all five of Islam's pillars) - were also arrested and tortured. These events created great resentment in the general public, among religious believers and ordinary, non-believing people. Moreover, the public began to have more sympathy for the actual terrorists, because the terrorists, seemingly, were the only ones standing up to a repressive government.²

A real threat exacerbated by the wrong kind of government reaction is the worst of all worlds. Repression creates the very context that terrorists/separatists need to survive. In an environment without free press and speech, terrorists/separatists can manipulate information and theology, controlling the ill-informed, and otherwise law-abiding, faith-group as a result.

Step 2: Drive "them" underground. With harassment and repression, the most natural and immediate reaction of religious groups is to move toward an increasingly clandestine existence where they can worship and practice their faith in secret. Previously above-ground, these otherwise law-abiding citizens go underground to practice their legitimate beliefs. As they become more intentionally evasive, they cause state security forces to work harder to find them. Had they not been originally harassed or persecuted, these law-abiding groups could have fostered a transparent relationship with the state, leaving security forces free to focus on those groups that constitute a real threat.

Step 3: Force an organized and redundant network. Over time, as a faith community practices in secret and its members continue to be persecuted, an opaque, rumor-filled atmosphere emerges. When citizens cannot rely on their state for accurate information - let alone expect the state to protect them - they learn their own survival techniques, deepening and diversifying their organizational networks through secret relationships. Once in place, these networks provide twofold opportunity. Some pious but impatient believers might agitate for violence against the government. Or, outside political entrepreneurs might exploit the faith's religion and turn it into a mobilizing ideology that targets the state.

Step 4: Create an expanding ideology. As states attempt to pursue and eliminate clandestine religious organizations, these movements often grow and become more widespread as loyalties deepen. Why? Religion explains and validates suffering. Because "people value most that for which they suffer most,"³ religious people will suffer for what they believe in, to the point of death. And, as Philip Jenkins also notes, if a repressed community comes to see themselves as a martyr community, the likelihood of

faith-based violence becomes much greater.⁴ For instance, the ideology of martyrdom and immediate ascension to Paradise has provided a religious framework to justify the modern violent tactic of suicide-bombing.

In this ideological climate, religious extremists take on leadership roles and often exploit the repression of a group to incite them to conflict. Minority communities become willing to use violent tactics to draw attention to their cause and intentionally destabilize the state. They then use the government repression as “proof” that their cause is just and that violence is the only available means for real change. The more the state seeks to repress religious traditions, the more the believers interpret their experience through the language of victimization and martyrdom - which in turn leads to even greater allegiance to the extremist leaders.

What begins as an ideological coping mechanism to help a persecuted minority make sense of their suffering, can develop into active resistance and a determination to destabilize the state from within.

Step 5: Accelerate a movement. Once people are willing to kill for their religion and die for their faith, it is almost impossible to change this community’s attitude (not to mention their increasing desire to pass on these values to their children). And it doesn’t stop at children. Once people believe their cause just - validated by the increased repression - the cause will attract others who feel alienated, particularly those who are searching for meaning amidst the spiritual dislocation of globalization.

The response of persecuted religious groups can easily create a series of steps that get progressively larger in concentric circles. First, repression causes disunity within the state and invites difficulties with security forces as they try to track increasingly clandestine religious groups. Over time the oppressed cultivate religious ideologies that can validate violence as a legitimate response to their suffering. Meanwhile, given the mobile and global nature of many belief systems, regional and global allies can rally to the cause. Repression breeds ideas and structures that foster resistance and violence, and resistance and violence lead to increased repression.

Facilitating Faith: Five Steps to Social Harmony

The above cycle of steps does not have to happen. A state might choose a different set of options to address religion in a practical manner. These governments seek to facilitate faith by including its responsible exercise in the public domain. Below are five steps, along with practical policy implications, for a government to consider when addressing religion.

Step 1: Recognize religion as part of the problem and therefore as part of the solution. This step is the most difficult, especially for secular societies, including those in

the West. 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. With no understanding of religion's role in the world, it is very easy for Western democracies to repress religion through ignorance and by granting it mere "tolerance" (that is, by not showing it respect).

If governments cannot meaningfully speak with and religion, then Sam Huntington was right - stereotypes 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 and will play a positive role in preventing and resolving conflicts, then they are much closer to protecting national security through a dialogue of civilizations. In many ways, however, the secular governments of the West are still collectively unequipped to engage a religious-based worldview - such that we can work with and promote its best in order to help it defeat its worst.⁵

Practical policy point: It is important for governments to consider all of the relevant models of religion-state relations in order to choose the system that best serves its citizens while providing for security.

Step 2: Give religion its legitimate seat at the international relations table. Because it is so difficult to grasp religion's global role from a governmental perspective, analytic thinking suffers. Too many international relations experts worship at the wailing wall of "church-state separation" - often ignoring religion altogether - to their own detriment and the policymakers they advise. A kind of secular "fundamentalism" is the result, providing no place for, at least, religion as a legitimate component of realpolitik.

Practical policy point: If they seek sustainable stability, then secular governments absolutely need people and organizations who know how to operate at the intersection of religion and realpolitik. These "bilingual" ambassadors exist; and the world needs them more than ever before.

Step 3: Recognize that only good theology overcomes bad theology. Continuing with the American example, let's look at the 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. Natural 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 about us. We have made no sustained effort to understand “them.” And if we cannot begin to grasp the general 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 “theology.” (This is a Christian term, but I use it to communicate the simple idea that Muslims think about and study God as much as Christians.) Unfortunately, this approach has been under-utilized.

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 naming 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.

Or consider the use of 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 TV and government officials validate the terrorists’ perception of themselves as religious even as we insult pious Muslims.

This example illustrates a simple point: 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 make the situation worse. 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 faith. If the government can do this on a regular basis, stability is much closer.

Practical policy points: First, the government needs to work with existing authentic voices from within the faith community to speak to and about the very best of their faith, to the community.

Second, the government needs to encourage emerging authentic voices through theological training. The more trained religious leaders there are - that is, the more clerics who understand the very best of their faith - the less likely it is that the faith will be manipulated by political entrepreneurs. Writing about the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, noted author, Scott Appleby concludes: “Religious illiteracy, then, weakens religion, but so do informed interpreters who privilege, exalt, and reify its capacity for violence.”⁶ It is imperative to the stability and development of societies worldwide that governments encourage and facilitate religious leaders literate in their faith. Seminary is security.

Step 4: Learn the universal value of common principles. 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 takes on particular form with the West's promotion of "universal values." While their premise and articulation make perfect sense to Westerners, their promulgation is often viewed as "cultural imperialism" by non-Westerners. Fair enough; methodology is usually more important than message when engaging a culture other than your own.

That said, there are common principles that every culture has, because every culture has something in common: humanity. And, at the end of the day, it is my overwhelming conviction that humans want to be loved and respected. Happiness results if the love and respect are genuine. As Ho Chi Minh said in 1949:

The teaching of Confucius has a strong point; i.e., self-improvement of personal virtue. Jesus' Bible has a strong point; i.e., noble altruism. Marxism has a strong point; i.e., a dialectical working method. Ton Dat Tun's doctrine has a strong point; i.e., their policies are suited to conditions in our country. Does Confucianism, Jesus, Marx and Ton Dat Tun share common points? Yes. They all pursued a way to bring happiness to human beings and benefit to society. If they were still alive today, and if they were grouped together, I believe they would live in harmony, like close friends. I try to become their pupil.

As a result, it is imperative for each of us to seek the tie that binds, to find ways to love and respect each other in a language and logic that the other understands.

Practical policy point: Governments need to encourage and enable faith-leaders, and their institutions, to regularly participate in diplomacy (state-to-state); public diplomacy (state-to-society) and people-to-people diplomacy (society-to-society).⁷

Step 5: Treat religious freedom as a counterterrorism tool, not just as a human right. Too much tolerance can lead to terrorism. Consider Aum Shinryko in Japan, where, because of its religious cult status, it was constitutionally protected from investigation before its March 20, 1995, sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subways. We saw the same thing with last year's "7/7" bombers in London, among whom was a former disciple of the non-violent extremist group, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT). HT is banned in Germany, where they have historic experience with hate speech, but not banned in the UK. There is a fine line between tolerance and terrorism. Still, this is not the real issue.

Tolerance is not good enough - we need *respect*. Every culture has a mechanism by which people are hospitable and demonstrate respect for guests and minorities. If the government encourages these cultural mechanisms - through the rule of law - it will enjoy the approval of its people, especially when it must act against true terrorists or separatists.

“The government’s stance in following the rule of law and not overreacting to terrorist provocations demonstrates its subscription to moral values.”⁸ Or, as Gerard Powers, explains it: “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 its close link with culture and national identity.”⁹

Practical policy point: Implemented properly - through cultural norms and the rule of law- religious freedom is an effective and preemptive tool for maintaining social stability.

Conclusion

Civil Society is the 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.

REFERENCES

-
- ¹ As brief reference points, please consider: Max Weber. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge, 1997; originally published in German in 1905, in English in 1926); Sydney Verba. et al., *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995; John Wilson and Thomas Janoski. "The Contribution of Religion to Volunteer Work". *Sociology of Religion* 56 (1995): 137-152; Robert Putnam. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000; Roland Hoksbergen and Lowell M. Ewert, eds. *Local Ownership Global Change: Will Civil Society Save the World?* World Vision International, 2002; Corwin Smidt. *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003; Scott Thomas. "Building Communities of Character: Foreign Aid Policy and Faith-Based Organizations". *SAIS Review* - Volume 24, Number 2, Summer-Fall 2004: 133-148; Robert D. Woodberry. "Researching Spiritual Capital: Promises and Pitfalls," written for The Spiritual Capital Research Program, The Metanexus Institute (October 2003), available at: http://www.metanexus.net/spiritual_capital/research_articles.asp; Peter L. Berger and Robert W. Hefner, "Spiritual Capital in Comparative Perspective," written for The Spiritual Capital Research Program, The Metanexus Institute (October 2003), available at: http://www.metanexus.net/spiritual_capital/research_articles.asp; Robert Wuthnow. *Saving America? Faith-Based Services and the Future of Civil Society* (Princeton University Press, 2004); and Daniel John Stevens. "Conceptual Travels Along the Silk Road: On Civil Society Aid in

Uzbekistan". Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2004.

² See, for example, Chris Seiple. "Implications of Terrorism in Uzbekistan," 12 April 2004, available at: <http://www.fpri.org/enotes/20040412.americawar.seiple.terroruzbekistan.html>.

³ Philip Jenkins. *Religion & Security: The New Nexus in International Relations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004, 27.

⁴ Ibid, 28-9.

⁵ See, for example, Chris Seiple. "Religion and the New Global Counterinsurgency," 2 September 2003, available at: <http://www.globalengagement.org/issues/2003/09/religion.htm>

⁶ R. Scott Appleby. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 77.

⁷ Also see Scott Appleby. "Building Sustainable Peace: The Roles of Local and Transnational Religious Actors." The New Religious Pluralism and Democracy Conference, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 21 April 2005; and Scott Appleby and David Little. "A Moment of Opportunity? The Promise of Religious Peacebuilding in an Era of Religious and Ethnic Conflict," Eds. Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith. *Religion and Peacebuilding*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, 1-23.

⁸ Mark Juergensmeyer. *The Mind of God*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 244.

⁹ R. Scott Appleby. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 76.