

The Globalization of Religious Advocacy in America

Written by Allen D. Hertzke

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ALLEN D. HERTZKE, FEB 28 2010

National religious lobbies and advocacy organizations represent a growing phenomenon of political life in America. One of the striking recent developments is the globalization of the focus, constituencies, and vision of this religious political advocacy.

From the beginning of the republic, national religious interest groups have focused periodically on international relations. Mainline Protestant groups, for example, were pivotal in pressing for the UN's Universal Declaration for Human Rights of 1948,^[i] and most groups since then have been drawn into contentious foreign policy issues—from the Vietnam War, to Central American clashes, to the Iraq war and terrorism. However, globalization—the process by which people around the world are increasingly interlinked through commerce, travel, and communication—has heightened international awareness and increased international engagement by religious interest groups.

We see this for specific groups. Jews lobby for Israel, Muslims for Palestinian rights, Buddhists on behalf of their beleaguered counterparts in Tibet, Bahais for Iranian counterparts, Falun Gong practitioners and Muslim Uyghurs for religious freedom in China, and Ahmadis for their persecuted brethren in Pakistan.

But advocacy is more than just defense of fellow religionists. Falun Gong members have become adept at breaking computer firewalls that Chinese authorities erect against dissent, enabling other groups to piggy back to get their messages through. Global connections also facilitate the work of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, founded by Radwan Masmoudi, a Tunisian immigrant, who conducts workshops on democratic theory in Muslim nations. Concerned that President Obama might distance himself from the Bush Administration by backtracking on democracy promotion in the Middle East, Masmoudi worked with allies to present an open letter to the new president calling upon him to make human rights and democracy central to engagement with the Islamic world. Because this initiative solicited signatories from hundreds of group leaders and activists around the world, Masmoudi in a sense helped orchestrate a global lobbying campaign to the new Administration.^[ii]

We also see globalization in advocacy specific to the mission of particular groups. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints maintains a Washington staff but does little congressional advocacy. Instead it maintains relationships with embassies of foreign governments to facilitate access for its thousands of missionaries. Similarly, the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic Jewish movement, Chabad-Lubavitch, which has a missionary impulse, opened up a Washington office to help its members navigate complex laws of foreign countries.

In some cases American religious groups actually lobby before agencies of the United Nations and other international bodies. Advocates for global religious freedom and human rights, in particular, realize that the U.S. government can only do so much; they must make their case before international tribunals. Thus organizations like the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and the Institute on Religion and Public Policy frequently testify before the UN Human Rights Council or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

In other cases groups have come to the conclusion that they need to lobby on the international level to defend their values at home. Cultural issues, in fact, have migrated globally as the United Nations and other international bodies debate issues of women's rights, population control, or secularism. Thus conservative religious groups that often criticize the UN have found themselves drawn into its orbit, sometimes lobbying against the positions of the U.S.

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government. Leaders of Concerned Women for America (CWA), for example, have gained official observer status at the UN and often find themselves allying with delegates from developing nations with more traditional views on marriage or abortion. In one instance Germany introduced a resolution that would have promoted the practice of therapeutic cloning. Representatives of CWA worked with delegates of developing nations concerned that poor women would be exploited for their eggs to get the UN instead to pass a resolution in 2005 recommending a ban on all cloning.^[iii]

In a still different vein is the work of Advocates International, founded by Sam Ericsson. It is a global network of Christian evangelical lawyers who pledge to defend the vulnerable and advance religious freedom by representing litigants in court, training lawyers and judges, and pressing for changes in laws. One indication of how the culture wars have gone global is that Ericsson defended Swedish pastor sentenced to prison in 2004 for violating a hate crimes law by preaching a sermon on homosexuality. The case of Ake Green gained international attention, and Ericsson successfully made the case on appeals that if Green were imprisoned Sweden would have no credibility to criticize other nations who imprison pastors.

No where has this global engagement manifested itself so vigorously as on campaigns for religious freedom and human rights abroad. Beginning in the mid 1990s, a movement of unlikely religious allies burst unexpectedly onto the international scene—a faith-based quest to advance human rights through the machinery of American foreign policy. Though a series of congressional laws this movement build a new human rights architecture in American government.^[iv]

Initially activated by concern for religious persecution abroad, religious groups across the theological spectrum fought for passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. This legislation established a permanent office in the state department to report on the status of religious freedom in every country on earth, and required that actions be taken by the U.S. government against those countries that egregiously persecute religious believers (see Box).

Galvanized by legislative success on religious freedom, coalition leaders mounted campaigns for peace in Sudan. From the early 1990s onward such groups as Christian Solidarity International, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Voice of the Martyrs, and Samaritan's Purse publicized the massacres, slave raids, and ethnic cleansing committed by the government of Sudan against the African population of the south, made up of Christians and tribal religionists. They joined with African American religious leaders and the Congressional Black Caucus in gain passage of the Sudan Peace Act in 2002, which pressured the regime to negotiate a cessation of conflict. When conflict then erupted in the western province of Darfur, resulting in harsh ethnic cleansing, Jewish groups led religious coalition calling for tough international measures against the regime.

One of the most dramatic examples of faith-based international involvement concerns human trafficking. As many as a million women and children each year are trafficked across international boundaries into prostitution and other forms of forced labor, many bought and sold until they die of disease and abuse.^[v] Backed by pressure from an unlikely alliance, Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000^[vi] may turn out to be among the most consequential initiatives of America's human rights leadership.^[vii] The law provides harsh penalties for international traffickers, equips enforcement agencies with new tools to deal with organized crime syndicates that run the traffic, penalizes countries that fail to criminalize and appropriately punish trafficking, and provides protection for victims. It also established an anti-trafficking office at the State Department, which has become one of the most aggressive human rights centers in American government.

This campaign brought together Jewish groups, evangelical Christians, and feminists. In fact, evangelical leaders not only joined in coalition with feminist groups, but actively plotted strategy with them, indicating a willingness to work face to face with otherwise adversaries in the "culture wars." Even in a city known for odd bedfellows, this one was a sight to behold. At the pivotal last stage of the legislative campaign, members of Congress were receiving a letter from Gloria Steinem and other prominent feminist leaders at the very moment that they were being lobbied by such figures leaders as Charles Colson of Prison Fellowship, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Janice Crouse of Concerned Women for America, Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals, and John

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Busby of the Salvation Army.

The growing global religious agenda is illustrated by the sense of mission that animates the work of an emerging evangelical leader, Gary Haugen, founder and President of the Christian-based International Justice Mission (IJM). A former Justice Department lawyer and chief U.N. genocide investigator for Rwanda, Haugen felt called to reclaim the vocabulary of justice for the evangelical Christian community. As he wrote in a book for fellow believers, the “good news about injustice” is that “God is against it.”^[viii] To provide a tangible way for believers to redress injustice, his organization intervenes in egregious cases of child prostitution, bonded servitude, and exploitation. In 2003 the IJM helped shut down Cambodia’s most notorious brothels, freeing the captive children and placing them in the care of Christian aid workers. This dramatic event, followed by others around the world, prompted the head of the Trafficking Office to proclaim boldly that U.S. policy was now aimed at nothing less than abolishing “modern day slavery.”^[ix]

One driving force for this global agenda is the tectonic shift of the globe’s Christian population to the developing world, a momentous trend captured by the work of Phillip Jenkins (2002). While in 1900 80 percent of Christians lived in greater Europe and North America, by 2000 at least 60 percent of all Christians hailed from nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This shift will likely accelerate, nesting Christian congregations amidst vulnerable people afflicted by poverty, violence, exploitation, and persecution. Global communication, travel, and international mission and development networks channels awareness of these conditions to American churches and advocacy groups, which lobby for ameliorative U.S. policies. For the evangelical world, this means that the social networks built out of domestic social concerns are being put in service of human rights and justice concerns normally associated with progressive politics.

To illustrate how many American denominations are now smaller arms of larger global ministries, consider Seventh Day Adventist Church. Though born in the United States, today only one million of its 16 million members are Americans. The Adventist Relief and Development Agency, headquartered metro Washington DC, now operates with indigenous leadership in over a hundred countries. Thus when its leaders testify on global food security they draw upon research from their field offices on conditions around the world.

The growing international role of so called non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that promote economic development, peace, or human rights also drives international focus. Large relief and development agencies like World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, Lutheran World Relief, and Church World Service have moved from solely delivering of services to political advocacy. With networks on the ground in some of the most forbidding places on earth, these NGOs gain unique insight into U.S. military, trade, or aid policies, which they share in testimony before Congress or meeting with executive agencies. Because of the large footprint of the U.S. government on the global stage, NGO leaders have become aware of how small changes in U.S. policy can magnify their efforts. Moreover, As Monsma has show, the U.S. government contracts with NGOs to deliver famine relief, provide refugee services, or undertake development projects, which creates another powerful motivation for political advocacy.^[x]

NGOs can also raise issues previously invisible to the international community. World Vision, for example, saw how illegal diamond traffic in central Africa was fueling violent militias and exploiting child soldiers. In cooperation with other organizations and business it was able to achieve an international protocol on “conflict diamonds” (later popularized in the movie *Blood Diamonds*).

Poverty, disease prevention, and economic development increasingly receive attention of the religious advocacy community. In 2000, Pope John Paul II joined American religious groups, secular organizations, and celebrities like Bono in the “Year of Jubilee” campaign for global debt relief. The problem was that interest payments on debt accumulated by regimes long past represented a crushing burden on poor countries, which were unable to fund health, education, and economic development programs. Taking its inspiration from the “Year of Jubilee” in Hebrew scripture in which debts were forgiven, the movement sought debt write-offs by advanced nations and such agencies as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. In the United States, the effort focused on gaining a large congressional appropriation to leverage other international actions. This successful campaign was led by the lobbyist for the Episcopal church, Tom Hart, who heard from his Anglican counterparts in Africa and elsewhere of

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how debts incurred by former dictators sap development efforts.

Out of this initiative came a new global organization, ONE, created by religious and secular NGOs and with the prominent backing of Bono, to combat extreme poverty by fighting AIDS and Malaria, providing clean water and sanitation, supporting maternal health, and promoting agricultural development. By 2009 Tom Hart was leading its ambitious Washington lobby agenda.

The nexus of global religion, American churches, and U.S. foreign policy is vividly illustrated by the distinct role evangelicals played in the development the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). Evangelical development organizations such as World Vision could see the devastating impact of AIDS, especially in Africa, and had begun developing programs in the 1990s. In addition, many lay members learned about the crisis through the growing number of mission trips sponsored by American congregations. Employing the access they enjoyed with President George W. Bush, evangelical leaders joined others to lobby the president on AIDS, and he ultimately made it a signature issue. From the launch of the initiative in 2004 AIDS funding more than tripled. Though AIDS activists criticized its abstinence component, the program brought antiretroviral treatment to over 2 million Africans by 2008 (from just 50,000), saving many lives and contributing to economic development.

Global engagement also includes mediation initiatives by American religious NGOs with international networks. This so-called "track-two" diplomacy can supplement formal efforts by the U.S. State Department. The Institute on Religion and Democracy, for example, works to build better relations between religious communities in different countries as a means of promoting peace. The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), headed by Chris Seiple, strives to create conditions conducive to religious freedom by working simultaneously with leaders of governments to relax restrictions and with religious communities to practice freedom responsibly. Working parallel to efforts of the State Department, IGE contributed to the liberalization of religious laws in Vietnam, allowing a number of Christian and Buddhist communities to operate more openly.

To illustrate the intersection of global developments and religious advocacy, consider the case of Zainab Al-Suwaij. The granddaughter of the leading cleric in Basra, Iraq, she was one of the few women to join the armed Shiite uprising against Saddam Hussein in the wake of the first Gulf war in 1991, at one point joining a group that stormed a prison to free dissidents. When Hussein crushed the rebellion she was injured, went into hiding, fled to Jordan, then eventually made her way to the United States. She was teaching at Yale University in 2001, but the shock of seeing the attacks of 9-11 occur in the name of her religion led her to create the American Islamic Congress [<http://www.aicongress.org/>]. Headquartered in Washington DC and with offices in Boston, Cairo, and Basra, the organization promotes "responsible" moderate Muslim leadership, interfaith understanding, women's equality, and civil rights. Zainab runs women's empowerment programs in Iraq, sponsors an essay contest on civil rights for Muslim youth in the Middle East (and maintains a large data base of the thousands of entrants), and runs workshops on nonviolent reform for young Arab activists. Her organization widely distributes an Arabic language comic book on the Montgomery bus boycott led by Martin Luther King. A critic of some American Muslim groups she sees as too sympathetic to Islamist militants, she also runs a Capitol Hill lecture series on Islamic issues sponsored by the congressional caucuses on religious freedom and anti-terrorism. She vividly illustrates the globalization of American religious advocacy.

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text now in its fourth edition. His latest book is titled FREEING GOD'S CHILDREN: THE UNLIKELY ALLIANCE FOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS. He just completed a year as Visiting Senior Fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life to conduct a study of national religious advocacy and public policy.

[i] John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: Christian Churches and Human Rights* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005).

[ii] For the letter and signatories see [<https://www.csidonline.org/sign-open-letter>]

[iii] From an interview by Allen Hertzke with Wendy Wright, president of CWA, May 2009. See also <http://www.cwfa.org/articledisplay.asp?id=7659&department=CWA&categoryid=>

[iv] This is discussed by Allen D. Hertzke, in *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

[v] William Branigin, "A Different Kind of Trade War," *The Washington Post*, Saturday, March 20, 1999.

[vi] Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000, Public Law 106-386, October 28 2000.

[vii] Elisabeth Bumiller, "Evangelicals Sway White House on Human Rights Issues Abroad," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2003.

[viii] Gary A. Haugen, *Good News About Injustice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

[ix] John Miller, Speech delivered at Georgetown University, February 20, 2003.

[x] Stephen V. Monsma, "Faith-based NGOs and the Government Embrace," in *The Influence of Faith: Religious Groups & U.S. Foreign Policy*, ed. Elliott Abrams (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

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