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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND PEACEBUILDING: MAY I INTRODUCE YOU TWO?

By Daniel Philpott

Peacebuilding and religious freedom hardly seem to know each other. Few who engage in peacebuilding, whether as scholars, non-governmental practitioners, or US officials, have incorporated religious freedom into their work. Likewise, few devotees of religious freedom—again, scholars and practitioners, both inside and outside the government—have made a strong connection between religious freedom and the building of peace.

Religious freedom and peacebuilding, however, are a match waiting to be made. Religious freedom is a critical enabler of peace. Conversely, the lack of religious freedom is a demonstrable cause of violence. Religious freedom, then, ought to be incorporated into America's efforts to promote global democracy, the settlement of wars, the reduction of terrorism, and other goals related to peacebuilding. Non-governmental organizations and scholars engaged in peacebuilding ought to integrate religious freedom into their best practices and methodologies as well. Similarly, agencies of the US government charged with promoting religious freedom, such as the Office of International Religious Freedom at the US State Department and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, as well as non-governmental advocacy groups and scholars, ought to incorporate the link between religious freedom and the building of peace into their analysis and advocacy.

Not Yet Friends

By and large, religious freedom has little place in peacebuilding. By peacebuilding, I mean the array of activities aimed at transforming violence and massive injustices into a just peace. In part, peacebuilding involves short-term efforts to end active violence such as mediation and negotiation. An important development in the theory and practice of peace, though, has been an evolution from “conflict resolution” to “conflict transformation” and “peacebuilding,” the latter involving holistic efforts to build sustainable, positive peace in a society or relationship between societies (Lederach 1997, 2003; Philpott and Powers 2010). Despite this aspiration toward holism, though, few theorists of peacebuilding have incorporated religious freedom into their thinking.

The field has been a largely secular one. Journals like the *Journal of Peace Research* and the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* contain few articles on the religious dimension of war and peace, the few exceptions being on topics like Gandhi, which, while important, constitute only a portion of religion's importance for war and peace today. Even scholars who have innovated religious

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peacebuilding have done little to theorize religious freedom's place in it (Johnston and Sampson 1994; Cejka and Bamat 2003; Johnston 2003; Smock 2006; Schreiter, Appleby, and Powers 2010; Price and Bartoli 2013). To be sure, there are exceptional works on religious peacebuilding that consider religious freedom (Appleby 2000; Powers 2010). How religious freedom fits systematically into peacebuilding, though, remains little understood.

Insofar as American foreign policy promotes peacebuilding—in its strategies for promoting democracy, reducing terrorism, bringing war and America's own military presence to an end in Iraq and Afghanistan, fostering reconstruction in these same locales—it does little to incorporate religious freedom in these endeavors. Several analyses have noted the marginal place of religion altogether in American foreign policy (Albright 2006; Farr 2008). Among NGOs and other non-governmental practitioners of peacebuilding, there are some who have placed religion at the center of their methodology—for example, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy and the work of Rabbi Marc Gopin or Mohammed Abu-Nimer—but here, too, religious freedom is one of a wide array of components at best.

A reciprocal point applies to advocacy for religious freedom: It has failed to forge a tie with peacebuilding. By religious freedom, I mean what international law documents mean by the term: the right of every person and religious organization to seek out, embrace, practice, express, and assemble on behalf of a religious faith. Over the past couple of decades, religious freedom has benefitted from a resurgence of sympathetic scholarly attention (van der Vyver and Witte 1996; Witte and van der Vyver 1996; Novak 2004; Marshall 2007; Farr 2008; Novak 2009; Grim and Finke 2011; Bradley 2012). Most of these works defend religious freedom for its intrinsic justice while a few draw the connection between religious freedom and democracy and other social goods. Almost none shows how religious freedom promotes the building of peace. Rarely is the link to peacebuilding made by advocacy groups for religious freedom, either. In American foreign

policy, religious freedom is promoted, as mentioned above, by the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, both of which invaluable draw attention and opposition to violations of religious freedom around the world. Yet, as argued by Thomas F. Farr, a former Foreign Service officer and first Director of the Office of International Religious Freedom, and Dennis R. Hoover, executive editor of this journal, American foreign policy does little to link religious freedom with wider goals like democracy promotion or the reduction of terrorism (Farr and Hoover 2009).

Here, too, partial exceptions to the overall trend exist. No less than Pope Benedict XVI has exhorted that “religious freedom is an authentic weapon of peace” (Benedict 2011; see also Hertzke 2012). In Brian Grim and Roger Finke's excellent empirical analysis of religious freedom, they show how religious freedom is “bundled”—that is, statistically correlated—with other goods like civil liberties and income equality. One of these goods is “lower levels of armed conflict,” a negative correlation that suggests a link between religion and peace. Grim and Finke also make the case that a lack of religious freedom causes armed violence (Grim and Finke 2011, 70–87, 206). Still, the link between the absence of religious freedom and the presence of religious violence is only one dimension of the relationship between religious freedom and peacebuilding and leaves most of this relationship open to be explored.

To observe that few of the people or groups I have mentioned have served as matchmakers for religious freedom and peacebuilding should not be taken as a criticism of their work. Many of them are pioneers in these endeavors, ones in which making this match is only one of a whole array of potential concerns. The point is rather to draw attention to a compatibility that, if actualized, could benefit both endeavors greatly.

Evidence That the Two Would Get Along

Religious freedom contributes to building peace in two senses. First, it is a major component of what may be called institutional independence,

which, in turn, is a condition that favors peace, as I will argue.¹ Independence is

the degree of mutual autonomy between religious bodies and state institutions in their foundational legal authority, that is, the extent of each entity's authority over the other's basic prerogatives to hold offices, choose its officials, set its distinctive policies, carry out its activities, in short, to govern itself. (Philpott 2007, 507)

Because religious freedom embodies the state's (as well as other citizens' and groups') respect for the autonomy of religious actors, it is very close in meaning to independence. There is one other major factor affecting institutional independence, drawn from the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which is "establishment," a state's direct support for a religious body—legal, financial, and through the prestige conferred through a grant of official status. It is *possible* for a state both to protect religious freedom and to establish a particular religious body as the official religion of the state. England and Denmark are examples. However, independence is highest when religious freedom is strong and establishment is weak, and is lowest when the opposite conditions obtain. Of these two components of independence, though, religious freedom proves the most important condition that enables peace.

A second way in which religious freedom enables peace is through being embodied in the doctrines of religious and political actors whose behavior influences peace or violence. These doctrines may be called political theology (Philpott 2007, 507–508). Simply put, the more strongly that religious and political leaders or organizations hold a political theology of religious freedom, the more they are likely to further peace.

The importance of these two modes of influence—institutional independence and political theology—can be seen in four spheres in which religious freedom bears upon the promotion of peace: non-violent democratic movements; the mediation of peace agreements by religious actors; the shaping of transitional

justice by religious actors; and religious violence as a result of the denial of religious freedom.

Over the past generation, a remarkable wave of democratization has taken place all over the globe. Freedom House data reveal that "Free" countries rose from 44 in 1972 to 89 in 2009 and that the number of "Not Free" countries fell from 69 to 47 during the same years. Today, 60 percent of the 194 countries in the world are electoral democracies, while only 46 percent were in 1990 (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 85). The revolutions of the Arab Spring, beginning in 2011, have re-energized the wave, although their outcome remains uncertain.

This wave of democratization is also a wave of peacebuilding. Democracy itself embodies non-violent solutions to conflict, regulated by law. A robust peace, characterized by justice, itself includes democratic governance. Further still, one of the signature features of the democratic wave has been the non-violent character of a large portion of the movements that have propelled it. A study conducted by Adrian Karatnacky and Peter Ackerman for Freedom House found that non-violent popular movements brought about 50 of 67 transitions studied, and that democracies born from non-violent protest were more likely to be sustainable (Karatnacky and Ackerman 2005, 5–8).

A close look at these democratic movements for peace reveals the strong role of religion. Forty-eight out of 78 democratic movements surveyed in *God's Century* involved religious leaders and organizations exercising important influence. In 30 of them religious actors played a leading role, while in 18 of them religious actors played a supporting role (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 92, 96). Conveying the story behind these numbers are memorable images of Pope John Paul II conducting open-air pilgrimages to Communist Poland, Filipino nuns staring down the tanks of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Protestants conducting candlelight services in East Germany's Nikolaikirche, and Muslim popular democratic movements that brought down the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia. At the same time, not every case of democratization involved religious influence, and not every religious actor stood up for democracy. In places

like Argentina, Hungary, and Romania, religious bodies were impotent, inactive, or even obstructionist (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 113–114).

What explains the difference between religious actors in their democratizing force? In large part, religious freedom. Those religious leaders and groups that had adopted religious freedom into their political theology were generally the ones to fight hardest for democracy. When the Second Vatican Council declared religious freedom a teaching of the Catholic Church in 1965, it led national Catholic churches around the world to defy dictators, including in Poland, Lithuania, Chile, the Philippines, South Africa, and many other countries. Indeed, 36 of the 48 religious actors that exerted sway in the contemporary wave of democratization were Catholic Churches.

The most effective democratizers among religious actors were also those who, through struggle and resistance, had secured a degree of institutional independence from the dictators who wanted to suppress them. This *de facto* religious freedom served as a sphere of “moral extraterritoriality,” to use the phrase of George Weigel, from which religious actors could conduct opposition to dictatorships with the aim of securing or increasing actual, *de jure* religious freedom (Weigel 1992, 151). Examples are the Islamic democracy movement in Indonesia, the Catholic Church in Poland, and the Protestant churches in Brazil. By contrast, religious actors who did not exert influence for democracy generally did not hold a political theology of religious freedom and were closely tied to dictators. The Catholic Church in Argentina, for instance—at least the large majority of bishops—was closely linked in both its ideals and its personal ties with the dictatorship that carried out the “Dirty Wars” of 1976–1983 (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 113).

A second, more straightforward arena in which religious freedom enables peace is the mediation of peace agreements on the part of religious actors. *God’s Century* surveys 26 cases of religious actors mediating (or failing to mediate) peace agreements to civil wars, 25 of which took place between 1989 and 2005 (Toft, Philpott,

and Shah 2011, 190–191). For instance, the Community of Sant’Egidio, a Catholic lay movement, mediated peace agreements (though not always with ultimate success) in Mozambique, Guatemala, Kosovo, Algeria, Liberia, and Uganda. In 11 cases where religious mediation efforts were strong, they were conducted by religious actors who enjoyed religious freedom—a position of independence from the state that allowed them to earn the trust of both sides of the negotiation. The same religious mediators typically included religious freedom in their political theology—the set of doctrines that motivated them to serve as mediator.

Similarities can be found in a third context: religious actors’ influence on transitional justice, the efforts that states make to address past injustices in the aftermath of a dictatorship or civil war. A survey of 19 cases of political transitions over the past 30 years shows that in at least eight of these cases, religious leaders and bodies exercised a strong influence on their country’s approach to dealing with the past (Toft, Philpott, and Shah, 2011, 198–205). In most of these cases, religious actors advocated and supported truth commissions, although they sometimes called for trials, while they also promoted reparations, apologies, forgiveness, and civil society initiatives for reconciliation. The most famous instance of religious involvement in transitional justice is South Africa, where images of Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu leading that country’s truth commission, wearing his purple robes and pectoral cross, shaped public perceptions of truth commission elsewhere. Less famous but equally as significant was the experience of Guatemala, where Catholic Archbishop Juan Gerardi led the Church in forming and conducting a national truth commission, one that was notable for its spiritual and psychological support for victims.

Religious freedom is not (yet) a major component of the political theology that leads religious actors to shape transitional justice; these actors are more distinctively guided by notions like reconciliation. The religious freedom embodied in institutional independence, however, has proven a critical condition for religious influence on transitional justice. Each of

the religious actors who exercised a strong influence in this sphere—besides South Africa and Guatemala, they can be found in Peru, Chile, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Germany, and Brazil—enjoyed this space to operate. As with the mediation of wars, religious freedom enables religious actors to conduct their distinctive peacebuilding work.

A more negative form of evidence for religious freedom’s importance for peace is the association of the lack of religious freedom with violence. The past 30 years have seen the rise of religiously motivated terrorism. While in 1968 none of the world’s terrorist groups were religious, two of the world’s 64 terrorist groups were religious by 1980, while by 1995, 26 out of 56, or 46 percent, were religious (Hoffman 1998, 90–94). The number has remained high into the 2000s.

The denial of religious freedom shapes these groups in a couple of ways. First, most espouse a political theology that calls for a regime that involves little institutional independence between religion and state and that denies religious freedom to faiths other than their own. My own analysis of the Terrorism Knowledge Base (an online portal of information on terrorism that operated from September 2004 to March 2008 and on which I conducted my own analysis in July 2005) revealed that 93 percent of religious terrorist groups hold such a political theology. Ninety-one percent of them are what may be called Radical Islam Revivalist, calling for regimes that promote a particularly intolerant form of Islam—especially against fellow Muslims not of their Puritanical strain—through strong intervention (Philpott 2007, 520). Second, a large number of religious terrorist groups are energized by political settings where their members are denied religious freedom. Lacking the space to practice, express, peacefully promote, and participate in politics, they turn to violence. Combining the data of the Terrorism Knowledge Base and Freedom House, I found that of 95 religious terrorist groups in 2005,

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only 31 of them (32 percent) operate in “Free” countries, while most of the rest operate in “Partly Free” or “Not Free” countries (Philpott 2007, 521).

Like religious terrorism, religious civil wars have been on the rise. The research of Monica Toft has shown that between 1940 and 2010, there occurred 44 religious civil wars, meaning that at least one combatant was defined by religious identities and/or motivated by religious ends (of these 44, 27 of them involved religion as a central bone of contention while in 17 religion was a peripheral one). While in the 1940s, 19 percent of civil wars were religious, between 2000 and 2010, the figure was 50 percent (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 153).

Here, religious freedom plays a role similar to what it plays in religious terrorism. It is common for one combatant community to seek a regime that denies institutional independence and religious freedom. My own analysis of 25 conflicts (drawn from Toft’s data) fought over religious ends showed that 18, or 72 percent, involved at least one combatant with this type of goal (Philpott 2007, 519). It is also common for religious civil war to begin in states whose regimes deny a minority community their religious freedom. The government may be guided by a religion, as in Sri Lanka’s Buddhist government or Sudan’s Islamic government, or may be a repressive secular regime, as in Afghanistan shortly after the Soviet invasion of 1979 or post-colonial Algeria. In civil wars, as in religious terrorism, it is through both political theology and institutional independence that the denial of religious freedom leads to violence.

Implications for Policy

Religious freedom and peacebuilding would make a great match. Note a feature of the analysis above: It is religious actors—religious leaders and religious communities—who perform the work of peacebuilding. Religious freedom—*de facto* and *de jure*—is what protects their space to do so.

Grasping the compatibility of religious freedom and peacebuilding could open up

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potential for further scholarship on this relationship, could enhance the work of non-governmental actors working to promote both religious freedom and peacebuilding, and could benefit US foreign policy. How might this latter fruit be realized? To many advocates of religious freedom, it ought to be promoted because it is intrinsically just. But there is also an argument articulable in terms of realism, the language that speaks loudest among American foreign policy officials. The upshot of the evidence presented above is that religious freedom can be a “force multiplier,” as my coauthors and I put it in *God’s Century*, in pursuing essential foreign policy goals like reducing terrorism, bringing destabilizing conflicts to an end, and promoting democracy, recalling that democracies are more peaceful and more likely to serve as allies of the United States (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 216–219; see also Saunders 2004 and Seiple 2009).

Realizing this potential, though, requires that American foreign policy officials not only get past

the secularization thesis, which holds that religion is either irrelevant or else inherently violent and divisive, but also that they understand the power of religious actors to contribute to peace and stability in the many ways that they do. It also requires incorporating religious freedom into the high policy of security and diplomacy. In his 2008 book, *World of Faith and Freedom*, Thomas Farr calls for expanding religious freedom from a human rights policy aimed at exposing violations and ending specific instances of them to a broader policy of encouraging regimes that protect religious freedom. His advice might be extended to incorporating the advocacy of religious freedom into the US government’s democracy promotion strategy, its efforts to mediate and reduce wars, its interest in sustainable peace, and its policies aimed at reducing terrorism (see also Farr and Hoover 2009). It is these very interests, not romantic ideals, that give foreign policy-makers good reason to serve as matchmakers, introducing religious freedom to the practice of building peace. ❖

1. In this section I borrow heavily from Philpott (2007) and Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011).

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