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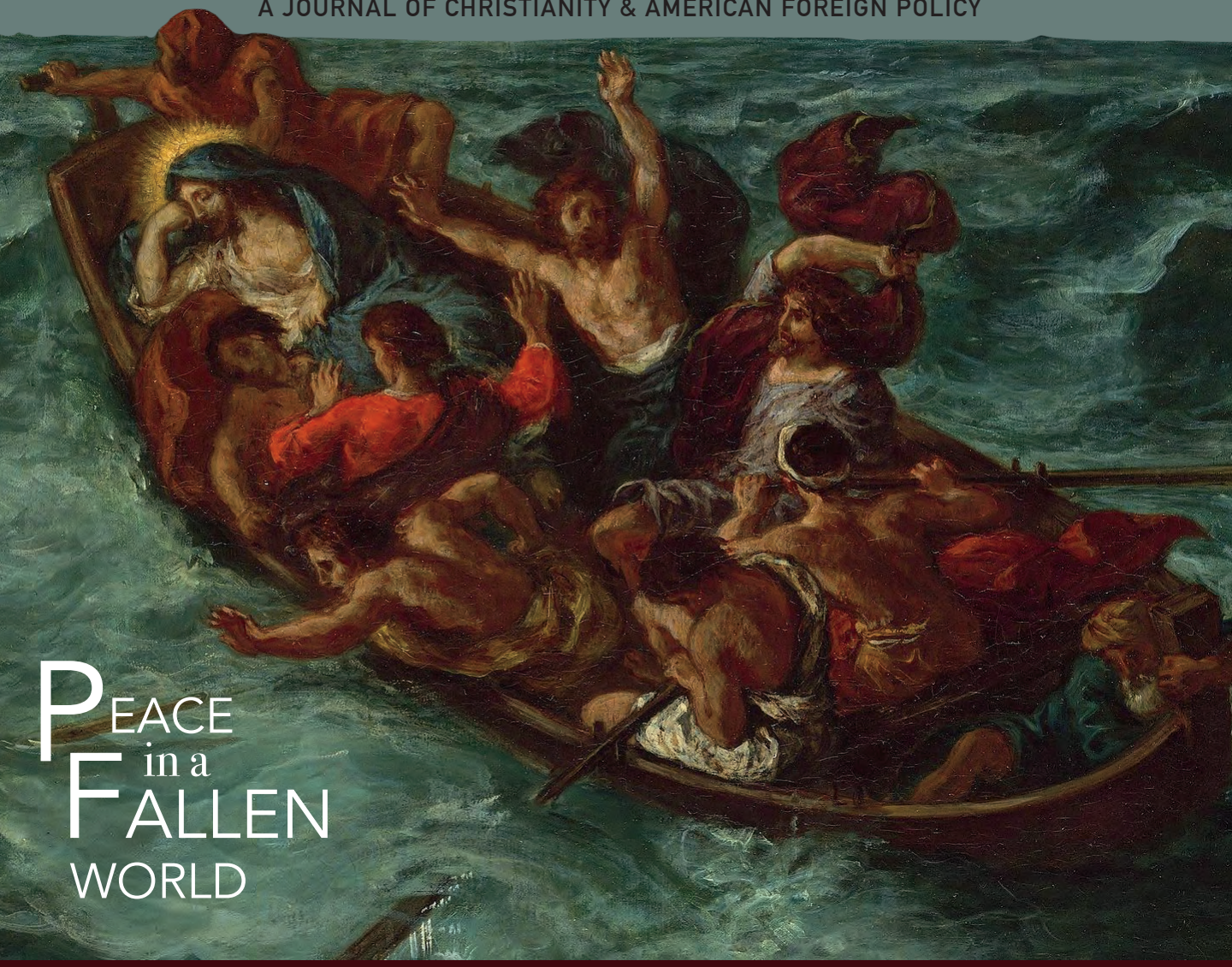

PEACE in a FALLEN WORLD

The Four Doctors of the Western Church, Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430), *by Gerard Segh, between 1600–50. Kingston Lacy Estate. Source: National Trust Collections.*

Why Should Christians Support International Religious Freedom?

Thomas F. Farr

Adapted from Remarks to Providence's National Security Conference, November 2, 2018.

I believe the most profound and powerful reasons for religious freedom are Christian reasons, and they extend not only to Christians but to all people. In my view this means that there is also a deep theological warrant for international religious freedom.

In 2017 we commemorated the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, so it's appropriate to recall the theology of religious freedom as it emerged from reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin.

I wish to emphasize religious freedom's pre-Reformation roots and how they converged with the ideas of the Protestant reformers in the American founding. In short, religious freedom as it emerged in America has its roots in the scriptures, the early church fathers, and the Middle Ages.

This essay is a reflection on the importance of Christian theology to American foreign policy. I spent 21 years as an American diplomat, which I can attest is a highly secular profession. Madeleine Albright once wrote that the State Department trained diplomats of her era to avoid religion. While that religion-avoidance syndrome has diminished in recent years, the underlying skepticism about religion has unfortunately not disappeared from Foggy Bottom.

I am not suggesting our foreign policy should be Christian. I am suggesting that aggressive secularism at the State Department has handicapped our 20-year-old efforts to advance international religious freedom in our foreign policy. This culture has clearly encouraged the hesitancy at State and USAID to channel US assistance to religious minorities such as Iraqi Christians and Yazidis—a hesitancy that is grotesque in

light of the United States declaring that the Islamic State committed genocide against those two groups, and in light of Iraq's critical need for pluralism. Quite properly, we sent aid quickly to the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. Why not Christians in Iraq?

One answer is that our foreign policy elites no longer understand religious freedom's true meaning and value—to America or other nations. Their decisions are tactical and, in my view, deeply mistaken. In a few cases they are simply anti-Christian.

The remedy is not to assert Christianity's superiority but to remind the elites, and ourselves, of the Christian roots of this precious right of religious freedom.

THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Christian theology of international religious freedom is a big subject that entails a wide spectrum of issues, including the theological arguments undergirding religious freedom for non-Christians. Does the freedom include the right to convert? What is the proper role of government? Of religious authorities?

I wish to address some of these questions, painting with a very broad and no doubt inadequate brush.

One caveat: in the twenty-first century, much of the academy, media, entertainment industry, corporate world, and other progressive political movements generally view Christianity as irrational, illiberal, and intolerant. This view helps fuel opposition to religious freedom in the West and helps confound our ability to sell it to skeptics overseas.

Of course, there *are* historical examples of Christian intolerance and coercion. In the fifth century, Augustine used scriptures (Luke 14:23) to justify coercion of the heretical Donatists. And of course, the state and church sponsored the Inquisitions to deter heresy and save souls by burning heretics. Contemporary critics of Christianity certainly cite such examples. But in today's society, opposition to Christian teachings mainly derives from the church's resistance to the modern, secular definition of freedom, which embraces radical individualism and human autonomy, especially in matters of sex and sexuality, such as abortion, same-sex "marriage," and the right to construct one's chosen gender identity. Under these circumstances, skeptics unsurprisingly tend to ignore the rich tapestry of church teachings on human freedom, including religious freedom. But those teachings are critical to understanding how modern ideas of freedom and self-government emerged.

The origins of the Christian understanding of human freedom reside in the scriptures. The book of Genesis declares that each of us is created in the image and likeness of God. Consider the implications of this idea. First, if each of us bears God's image, we are in a profound sense equal to each other. Second, in imaging God, each of us possesses intellect and will, the wellsprings of free choice. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection emphasized these ideas of equality and freedom by freeing each of us from the bondage of sin. As Paul puts it, "For freedom Christ has set us free."

This is, of course, not the idea of human autonomy that we have today. The Christian logic of religious liberty is this: true liberty is the freedom to choose God, in this life and therefore in the next. But, notwithstanding his desire that we do so, God does not coerce us to choose him. Jesus did not coerce obedience or belief. To do so would have eliminated the way we image God with our intellect and will, and the source of our dignity and our human agency. Each of us is *truly* free because we are capable of choosing, and free to choose, the true and the good.

Christianity in its first three centuries was a tiny but growing minority religion, often under severe persecution. This experience produced theological reflection on the end-times and the meaning of persecution and suffering, such as we see in Peter's letters and in Revelation.

But the experience of persecution, combined with reflection on the scriptures then being placed into the canon, also yielded remarkably rich, forward-looking, and optimistic reflections on religious freedom. The works of early church fathers such as Tertullian and Lactantius posit a revolutionary idea: the very *nature* of religion requires free choice. Accordingly, justice requires freedom for all in matters of religion.

Tertullian argues that religious freedom was a natural right, a capacity inherent in nature that "every man should worship according to his own convictions."

Lactantius moved this idea to the level of policy, arguing in his *Divine Institutes* that a just governor would protect religious freedom. This idea found its way into the so-called "Edict of Milan," issued in 313 by Emperor Constantine. The Edict declared religious freedom for all throughout the Roman Empire. This was history's fir t declaration of universal religious freedom.

Unfortunately, this policy did not last. Constantine's successors abandoned universal religious freedom, in part because the early Middle Ages saw struggles over core questions of Christian orthodoxy. What is the true nature of Christ? Is he human, divine, both? Who is Mary, the Mother of Jesus? Is she also the Mother of God? Constantine's successors, including the early kings and emperors, used coercion to punish heretics and schismatics. True religious freedom, in which even heretics warrant an immunity from coercion by the state or any other human agent, would not emerge until the modern era.

THE AMERICAN UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

In order to appreciate the American understanding of religious freedom, we have to examine it as it was present at our founding. Few of the American founders were Catholics. Most of them had some debt to Reformed theology; some had quite significant debts.

But the American constitutional settlement was grounded on a belief in the value of religion for individuals and society, and the consequent necessity to protect the free exercise of religion in law. There are echoes here both of the Reformation and of ancient and medieval Christian ideas.

Here are some examples:

First, the founding generation venerated the role of the religious conscience in human nature and social flourishing. James Madison defines religion as "the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it." He understood conscience as a primary means by which people discerned and carried out that duty. The duty of following one's religious conscience, that is to say the duty of religion, is so important that, as Madison puts it, it is "precedent, both in order of time and degree of obligation to the claims of Civil Society."

Second, the core American democratic principle of limited government was partially derived from a core Christian concept: the sinfulness of man, which is the root cause of the corruption that inevitably accompanies concentrations of power. The founders believed that no group should be invested with too much power for too long. Religious citizens' commitment to an authority beyond the state and religious communities' role in civil society also supported the idea of limited government. Overall, the founders were convinced that religion constitutes one of the most effec ive limits on governmental power and authority. Here we see reflections of the medieval idea of *libertas ecclesiae* ("freedom of the church").

Third, most Americans believed that the new republic would fail without a virtuous citizenry and that a central source of virtue was religion. They accepted that religion's contribution to the common good in law and public policy was not through establishments and religious monopolies but through the free and peaceful contention of citizens' moral arguments derived primarily from religion.

A fourth contribution of religion to the American constitutional settlement was equality. Recall Thomas Jefferson's radical religious truth claim in the Declaration of Independence: "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." Jefferson's truth claim established a secure moral and religious grounding for human equality in the new republic.

These and other colonial views about the value of religion led to the First Amendment's guarantee of the "free exercise of religion" for all individuals and all religious groups. Note that last point. When the Protestant founders considered wording for what became the First Amendment, one option was protecting "the rights of conscience." They chose instead to protect "the free exercise of religion."

First Amendment scholar Michael McConnell argues that they chose that phrase in order to protect the public rights involved in religious exercise, not just the private rights of conscience. Equally important, they were protecting the rights of religious communities, and not just the rights of individual citizens.

In sum, the American constitutional establishment valued religious expression, both in

private and in public, and for individuals and groups. The purpose of the First Amendment's ban on establishment of religion, therefore, was certainly not to keep religion out of American politics. Precisely the opposite is true: the ban on establishment was designed to protect religion from government, thereby limiting the power and reach of government, and to ensure the moral vibrancy of the American people. Note that, while these ideas had deep roots in Catholic and Protestant Christian thought, they protected all religions, not just Christianity.

THE VALUE OF CHRISTIAN-DERIVED AMERICAN RELIGIOUS FREEDOM TO INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM POLICY

How does all this relate to US foreign policy? In my view, the essence of the American understanding of religious freedom is what we should advance in our foreign policy, that is, equal protection in law and culture for the free exercise of religion. We should therefore argue—through history, modern research, and common sense—that without religious freedom no human being or society will flourish. But with religious freedom, good things can result, including the recognition of human dignity of all, the stabilizing of democracy over the long-term, economic growth, greater rates of literacy, and the undermining of violent religious extremism.

Since 1998 the United States has had a statutory requirement to advance religious freedom in American foreign policy, led by an ambassador at large who heads the Offic of International Religious Freedom at the State Department. The policy has been in place for 20 years, under four administrations from both parties. Many remarkable people have served in that office and some important steps have been taken. The current ambassador, Sam Brownback, seems already to have had a major impact.

Unfortunately, it cannot be said that international religious freedom has increased, or that international religious persecution has decreased, during those 20 years—at least not yet. Indeed, the opposite is true. According to the Pew Research Center's annual reports, restrictions on religion have been high for at least the past decade, and religion-related terrorism is growing. Some four-fifths of the world's population lives in nations with high restrictions on religion. This, it seems to me, constitutes a global crisis in religious freedom.

There are many reasons for this crisis, some of them beyond the control of the United States. But we could have done better in the past, and we can do better in the future. Our international religious freedom (IRF) policy has not been seen as part of mainstream American diplomacy. Rather, it has been treated within the State Department as a narrow human rights issue, with policy tools that are highly rhetorical and largely ineffective in changing things on the ground. We should view IRF policy not only as a human rights issue but also as a counter-terrorism and stabilization strategy: there is ample evidence that religious freedom can undermine religion-related terrorism.

What is the fundamental problem with our IRF policy? As a general rule, many members of the American foreign policy establishment, like many of our political and cultural elites today, no longer believe in religious freedom as the "First Freedom" of the American Constitution and of the human soul. They no longer believe that it is necessary for the health of American society, let alone for other societies abroad. And, alas, this ignorance and indifference seem attached to our Christian as well as our secular leaders.

But those of us who are Christians have good reasons for supporting a vigorous American IRF policy: we are American citizens who want to further our nation's interests. Most of us believe in the Christian argument that all should have religious freedom. We observe that Christians are being targeted more than any other religious minority in the world. The results are catastrophic, not only for Christians and Christianity but also for the societies in which they live and to which they contribute so much.

Let me end by suggesting five ways that Christians can act to advance international religious freedom.

First, those of us who are not subject to violent persecution have a Christian responsibility to defend those who are. We must do this with love rather than hatred, to be sure. But love of Christ surely means love of those who suffer in his name. To avert our eyes, conclude that we are powerless, or pretend that we cannot have an impact is unacceptable. Ignorance and indif-

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ference are sins against Christian love. They are sins against our Lord.

Second, as Christians we must pray. We must pray constantly. Every church in our great nation should be storming heaven with the prayers of the faithful. God has promised to hear us, and we should believe him. At Gethsemane, Christ asked Peter, James, and John to pray. They failed him then. Let us not fail him now.

Third, we must act as citizens who have both the right and responsibility to influence our own government. As Americans we must insist that our government do better at defending religious freedom abroad for everyone. We must support Ambassador Brownback.

Fourth, we Americans have a particular responsibility to retrieve the traditional American meaning of religious freedom as the first freedom. As we have seen, that understanding derived from a Christian worldview. For that reason, it encompasses religious freedom for everyone.

Tragically, we are in imminent danger of losing that understanding. Today in America the phrase religious freedom appears with scare quotes in the mainstream press. In 2016 the chairman of the US Civil Rights Commission—an organization charged with protecting the civil rights of all Americans—said that religious freedom stands for "intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, and Christian supremacy."

We must fight this destructive attitude with the same determination, and the same Christian love, with which we fight violent persecution outside America. If we in America lose the idea of religious freedom as the fi st freedom, where can it be retrieved? What happens to religious freedom in America will have a great impact on its fate outside America.

Fifth and finally, we must do more than defend religious freedom. We must exercise religious freedom. Those of us who are Christians must live openly and without apology as Christians in our increasingly secular and hostile societies.

We are indeed threatened by secularist hostility. But a greater danger is our own indifference or fear. If we don't live our faith publicly, defending our Lord's teachings on the sanctity of life for the unborn and the defenseless among us, and on marriage and sexual morality, where will we find the passion or discipline to defend our brothers and sisters in Christ whose very lives are threatened because of their beliefs?

And why should we even merit the name "Christian" if we hide our beliefs under a basket?

Let's not sleep like Peter, James, and John at Gethsemane when our Lord asks us to stay awake.

Let's not avert our eyes from the suffering church or from any other group suffering persecution because of its religious beliefs.

Let us act publicly as Christians and as American citizens, with love for our Lord and for our country, to better defend our Christian brothers and sisters, and all others, suffering religious persecution abroad by protecting the precious right of religious freedom. ■

Thomas Farr is president of the Religious Freedom Institute. Farr served in the US Army and US Foreign Service for 28 years. He has spent the last two decades advocating for religious liberty, including as founding director of the State Department's Offic of International Religious Freedom and from 2008–18 as an associate professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, and also as director of Georgetown's Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center. Farr is a senior fellow at Baylor University's Institute for Studies of Religion and a consultant to the US Catholic Bishops Committee on International Justice and Peace. Arguments from his 2008 book *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Freedom is Vital to American National Security* (Oxford University Press) have shaped US religious freedom legislation and foreign policy. He is also a contributing editor of *Providence*.