Towards a Culture of Human Rights:
World Religions and National Accountability

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Abstract

The recent creation of the Human Rights Council at the United Nations constituted another opportunity for the United States to take positive leadership towards a greater level of human rights implementation. This opportunity for significant and timely paradigm shift has passed with too little fanfare. The US refusal to run for election to the HRC, while not a crippling blow, does deprive it of the influence of the most powerful nation in the world. The US' ability and willingness to evade scrutiny of its human rights record is an important symbolic setback for human rights progress. This most recent disappointing performance leaves a leadership vacuum which other less powerful nation-states are unlikely to fill.

Are nation-states willing to or capable of generating a shift towards more complete fulfillment of global human rights? If not, what other actors might take a "prime mover" role?

Market forces are hugely important and dynamic actors, both globally and locally. Businesses considered as a whole are immensely powerful in the lives of ordinary people and in global scope and influence. However they don't consistently act for the benefit of human rights at a global level because of their great heterogeneity, their motives, and their origins. Economic institutions that interact directly with global markets are primarily concerned with nation-states development and trade policies. These bodies pressure some nation-states to improve their human rights records. However, the current major bodies depend on nation-states to enforce their rulings or provide their funding. Furthermore their influence is reduced vis-à-vis more powerful nation-states, and their

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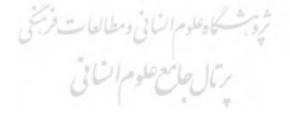
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direct interaction with local communities is limited. The help and participation of the international business community is vital, but cannot be relied upon as the catalyst for a paradigm shift in human rights implementation.

Religious institutions are uniquely situated to influence human rights implementation because of the function they perform – describing right and wrong conduct, the way things are and the way they should be. The sheer numbers of people in the major world religions gives them potential to influence global human rights. Religions engage in intensely localized action which is crucial for tangible human rights work. They also possess a guiding structure which is necessary to achieve more equitable distribution of rights for all. People are capable of influencing their surroundings, and religious belief structures can help to synchronize their efforts for change in a positive way.

It is therefore necessary to describe and analyze how effective religious institutions might be in achieving increased human rights implementation. Significant hurdles include at least current and past violent conflicts between people of different faiths, clashing belief structures, intolerance and extremism within religious groups, and the problem of influencing a diverse group of believers to perform any distinct action as a whole. Unfortunately, religions have historically generated a great deal of human suffering, as well as advances in human rights.

One way for religious institutions to influence a shift to greater human rights implementation is in acting as an organized moral restraint for governments. This paper will attempt to identify areas in which the major religions have commonalities which are promising for joint human rights actions. Additionally, it will include a focus on methods which religious groups have used to influence their governments for the purpose of bringing about positive change.

Keywords: Culture; Human Rights; Religion; National Accountability.

The United States is the most powerful entity in global politics, from a realist state-centric point of view. The path it has taken to its current position atop the hierarchy of nation-states contains moments and periods of tremendous progress for human rights, internally and externally. The Bush Administration, however, has done much to tarnish the human rights record of the US. The US faces a major credibility deficit of its own making which limits its capacity to provide leadership to the human rights community. Furthermore, the nation has not displayed the will to act as a leader in this arena.

If the US would take a leading role in the pursuit of global human rights development, that cause would be greatly furthered. The human rights community must consider available methods for effecting deep and lasting change in the US.

In seeking to understand the roots of the problem, it is worthwhile to revisit the separation of the government and the people of the US. The US system of government is representative, rather than direct democracy. Voters usually have the choice between two major candidates for any given elected office. The voter has to pick one politician's platform over another, and this often means compromise on one or many issues. This means that a voter's choice for one candidate or another does not necessarily mean that they support the entire platform. Furthermore, the two major parties are often in agreement on fundamental goals and practices, offering little or no choice on significant issues. For example, in the run-up to the 2004 Presidential election, the war in Iraq was a major issue. The question up for discussion was how best to conduct the war. The more fundamental question of whether the war should be continued was not up for discussion. Indeed, neither candidate was even talking about de-escalation. This was in spite of the fact that a growing majority of voters believed that going to war in Iraq was the wrong decision, and that US troop presence in Iraq was provoking more conflict than it was preventing.[1]

Merely waiting for a new administration in hopes that it will do better nullifies one source of hope for people suffering from egregious human rights violations. And further, even a completely new executive branch does not guarantee any great changes in the government's posture towards human rights. The credibility deficit that mars the leadership capacity of the US has deeper roots than one administration's actions.

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1. Program on International Policy Attitudes, Americans and Iraq on the Eve of the US Election, 12-18 Oct 2004 http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/IraqPresElect_Oct04/IraqPresElect_Oct04_quaire.pdf 4-5, (19 Jan 2007).

The recent scandals over US use of illegal renditions and torture tactics during interrogations are extremely damaging to its credibility as a human rights leader. These are on top of the Abu Ghraib incidents and the prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay internment camp. These incidents are each very serious, but they take their place in an honest history of the US, which includes numerous instances of human degradation. The new paradigm for US international relations proclaimed by Bush in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks; the "war on terror," has been the impetus for these and other criminal acts. The prime example here is the current war in Iraq. The issue is considerably murkier now than it was before the invasion. By illegally invading Iraq and decimating its infrastructure and government, the US incurred a responsibility to replace what has been destroyed. Now that the act has been committed, it has become dangerous to withdraw troops, as the former oppressive regime has been replaced with a chaotic scene of sectarian allegiance and violence. A positive resolution seems far away, and the fallout will mark US international relations for years to come.

Aside from this debacle, the US record is marked by years of economic policy and heavy-handed international politics that have degraded humans worldwide. The US has funded, especially with military aid, the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. Ironically, the US backed Saddam Hussein's consolidation of power in Iraq, which included some of the crimes for which he was recently tried and hung. A full list of the human rights violations committed by the US government would be a massive undertaking, to say nothing of the acts committed with its approval or allowed by its indifference.

International pressure could perhaps bring about changes in some of the more damaging policies the US is pursuing. Strong declarations have been made by many countries and groups condemning the use of torture in its "war on terror". Bad press seems hardly enough to force the US to alter its tactics, however. And, when it comes to force, the US is a powerful entity. Trying to coerce the US into an action or a role runs the risk of entering into a massive power struggle with uncertain outcomes, except the certainty of diverting resources that are needed to pursue global human rights development. Attempting to force the superpower to respect international norms bypasses the possibility of US leadership on behalf of those norms. The International Criminal Court is an excellent example – the US has attempted to undercut the court's authority ever since it became obvious that the court might hold the US accountable for its criminal acts. The political maneuvering and power struggles

that have followed have not ruined the effectiveness of the ICC, but they have meant that the US doesn't lend its influence to the court. The legitimacy of the ICC is undermined if it cannot curtail the superpower. International bodies and nations should not desist from pressuring the US to respect human rights norms, but there are limits to the effectiveness of external pressure.

Domestic pressure is the tool most likely to create lasting change in the stance of the US government on human rights. The rhetoric of the Bush administration itself makes this avenue especially appealing. When any leader claims to champion democracy in the world community, the most effective method to challenge them becomes clear. The people of the US are divided fairly evenly along electoral lines, Republican and Democrat. Electoral shake-up is a desirable step towards more responsible conduct on international and domestic human rights. At the same time, it won't guarantee increased human rights observance. What is needed is a change in the attitudes of US citizens about human rights, and especially a way to augment the mechanisms by which these citizens influence their government representatives.

Religion is an important part of the history and collective reality of the US. A totally secular movement for change in US human rights policy, bypassing religious institutions, would be a difficult, if not impossible task. A movement with significant religious contribution or leadership would have magnified potency in the US context.

The potential for religious groups to affect public policy is immense, simply because of what they are. The sheer weight of numbers represented by any of the larger world religions is enough to generate massive social movements. Further, religions are based around a set of beliefs or rules that define acceptable and unacceptable conduct. Co-religionists have a common ethical starting point, making them potentially more apt to coordinated action. People in power sometimes justify their actions in religious terms because they recognize the force of legitimacy granted by god(s). Religious institutions are powerful tools for influencing human behavior, and so the human rights community would do well to actively seek greater official religious involvement in pursuing its aims.

In the US context, religious groups are uniquely situated to affect government policy. Christianity is the dominant religion within the US and holds a central role in its history. It has been invoked by many politicians and leaders in justifying actions and haranguing the masses to garner their political support.

The history of the connection between the US and Christianity is many-layered.

Exploring this history briefly provides some understanding of the Church's role in the national mindset. Many of the original white settlers of the US were religious refugees from Europe seeking amnesty and a place to pursue their beliefs in peace. They saw themselves as a sort of "New Israel," a chosen people of God, who had been given a new land as a gift. The Church was instrumental in helping to expand the territory of the US by providing a rationale for destroying or dominating the heathen Native Americans. Missionaries spread throughout the continent evangelizing the indigenous people and attempting to assimilate them with US culture. The phrase Manifest Destiny was used before the US civil war to describe the young nation's perceived right to expand from ocean to ocean (disregarding the vast groups of Native Americans in between the young nation's territory and the Pacific Ocean). The destruction of the Native Americans can only be described as genocide.

God was invoked on both sides of the US civil war between the Federal North and the Confederate South. The Abolitionist movement in the North, composed almost exclusively of white Christians, lobbied extensively with the US government on behalf of the African-American slaves used in labor-intensive agriculture in the South. When Abraham Lincoln did free the slaves in the South by proclamation (a move that didn't affect most slaves until after the war's end) it granted the North a legitimacy that was invoked to help rally support to eventually win the war.

The Christian Temperance Union and other Christian groups were instrumental in bringing about Prohibition; a period from 1920 to 1933 when it was illegal to manufacture, sell, or possess alcohol in the US.

The Civil Rights Movement for the enfranchisement of African-Americans was able to use the Church as a major rallying point, in the face of oppression from state and local governments, mob violence, and the indifference of the federal government. The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., a Baptist minister from Atlanta Georgia, along with many other leaders, was able to mobilize the African-American community to massive civil disobedience campaigns modeled on Gandhi's work and teachings in India. The Civil Rights movement as a whole had many lasting successes, and some failures, but the perseverance of the African-American community would have been near impossible without the network and focal point of the Church.

Throughout the Cold War, the Communist enemies were described as "godless," referring to the official atheism of the state. Since the US opposed

these "evil" people, the train of thought went, it must itself be good. Following the idea to its logical conclusion, it even seemed that God was on the side of the US. This train of thought was certainly wearing quite thin in the latter years of the Cold War, as US soldiers died and the list of dictatorships and warlords that the US supported grew ever longer. Nonetheless, it was never entirely absent from the national mindset. When the Soviet Union ceased to exist and the Cold War ended, this view was in a way exonerated. However evil the tactics used by the US might have been, it had still defeated the godlessness of Communism. It was easy for Americans to see this as proof that in the end, God was on the side of capitalism, democracy, and the US, its' champion. US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been marked by a sense of ascendancy among the community of nations. This is perhaps due in part to a sense that God does indeed favor the US.

The current administration of the US, the Bush government, is something of a religious enigma. George W. Bush is a Christian, as is much of his cabinet. The rhetoric used by Bush in the months following the 9/11/01 terrorist attacks displayed a willingness to label Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as "evil" that played on Christian fears and sympathies.[1] Whether the "axis of evil" label Bush used came from deep personal conviction or not, it was politically expedient in domestic politics because it contributed to the climate of fear and anger in the US at the time. This climate of fear strongly reduced any political resistance to the forthcoming war in Iraq.

Bush has been able to stay in office due in part to the actions of segments of the Church. Conservative groups have generated a great deal of support for his cause by focusing on issues like abortion and homosexuality to win votes. These issues, while important for the US to address, are strictly domestic issues. The campaigns around these issues, particularly abortion, have diverted the attention of many US voters away from key international issues and other important domestic questions into narrow, single-issue politics. The idea is that whatever else Bush may do, at least he will work to legislate against abortion and/or gay marriage. The Church is very much complicit in this, if not through direct involvement then through willingness to allow some segments of the Church to pursue these issues without either calling on them to stop or providing a balancing voice in the political debate. Envisioning a situation in

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1. George W Bush, "State of the Union Address," delivered 29 January 2002, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html (20 Jan 2007).

which the Church exerts its influence towards the cause of human rights rather than these partisan tactics is a hopeful exercise.

The most exciting thing about the idea of religious institutions in the US exerting their influence on behalf of human rights issues is its relative novelty. In spite of all the political influence exerted by religious institutions, there have been few recent mass movements with coordinated mass religious involvement. At the same time, the historical and theoretical/conceptual potential for religious bodies to generate pressure on the US government is immense. There are large groups within the US that are intent on pressuring the government to radically alter or give up altogether its "war on terror" policies that abuse human rights worldwide. Many of the tactics involved in these movements for progressive change have evolved little since the roughly parallel anti-Vietnam War protests and the Civil Rights Movement. There are plenty of people who shout slogans and march around, and this does do some good. The massive protests prior to the invasion of Iraq did at least broadcast a message to the global community that not all Americans agreed with the policies of their government. The tactics which the government, the two major political parties, and associated corporations, particularly media corporations use to generate support have evolved, however.[1] Mass protest is no longer sufficient to sway the actions of the US government. Strange as this seems in a democratic nation, it must be adapted to rather than indignantly marveled at. The novel prospect of mass religious involvement on behalf of human rights brings with it the promise of new adaptive capacity.

Religious minorities in the US, particularly Islam, hold a somewhat tenuous position in US politics and society. None of the religious minorities in the US claim more than 2% of the total population. Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam have a few million believers each.[2] The numerical inferiority of these groups forces them to rely on the protection of their minority rights by the Christian majority. The voice of American Islam is particularly crucial now as many of the human rights abuses resulting from Bush's "war on terror" are perpetrated against Muslims. The burden of generating a push for greater human rights leadership, however, falls squarely on the shoulders of Christians in the US. The Church is a very heterogeneous body in the US context. It is from concerned

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1. See: Goodman & Goodman, 2004: 151-168.

2. The Pew Research Center and The Pew Forum, Americans Struggle With Religion's Role At Home And Abroad, 20 Mar 2002, http://pewforum.org/publications/reports/poll2002.pdf 49.
   Egon Mayer, Barry A. Kosmin, and Ariela Keysar, American Religious Identification Survey, 2001, http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/key_findings.html

groups of people across the various denominations and organizations that we must expect a push to increase the Church's engagement with the US government.

For the Church in the US, making the shift to more direct engagement with world human rights would be a crucial step towards remaining relevant to Christians who are disenchanted with elements of the Church who are concerned only with the saving of souls. Many in the US are disillusioned by Christians in popular media who merely amplify the destructive rhetoric and ideology of the Bush administration. It is crass to suggest that the Church ought to enter into this kind of advocacy in order to prove its worth to a skeptical public and so win great glory and numerous new converts. Further, there is no guarantee that pushing for greater human rights This is merely a suggestion that choosing such a course would provide counterbalance against the segments of US Christianity which are totally unconcerned with the rights of anyone but The concept of human rights is still a divisive issue in the world community, and no less so for religious institutions. The entities that are associated with human rights are predominantly secular. Human rights regimes are generally constructed with the aim of protecting people from or guaranteeing them access to their governments and markets. The perennial stance of the human rights community on religious institutions and practices is that they are something to be protected, so long as the group in question does not, as part of its religion, infringe upon the rights of other human beings. Most religious groups have been content to leave the construction of global human rights regimes to secular groups and concern themselves with different problems and questions. Many religious groups, for one reason or another, raise questions about the validity of rights defined by secular groups, or have structures that are aimed at aiding the group itself and not necessarily those outside the group. In the US context at least, the most effective way to get directly to religious activism is to address specific issues, focusing on for example US use of torture tactics in interrogations or the ongoing crisis in Sudan. This will help keep lengthy battles over epistemological concerns from dominating Christian response to human rights concerns. At the same time, piecemeal activism is not sufficient to reach the goal of convincing the US to act as a leader in global human rights development. There needs to be a concurrent drive to sustain and deepen US Christianity's commitment to human rights advocacy.

Selecting issues that are compelling to a broad group of US Christians is a delicate undertaking. Of the two examples above, ending the use of torture in the "war on terror" might gain support from US Christians because it is a

focused request with very specific goals. Lobbying for the US to lead a coalition of nations to help bring peace in Sudan is a much broader, less clear-cut goal, but it is also easier to address without combating the whole system of thought based on Bush's "war on terror". Both of these and many other potential issues eventually run into the "war on terror" ideology and/or the logistical problems created by the war in Iraq and the occupation of Afghanistan. Constructing a response to the "war on terror" ideology (and the resulting over-extension of US financial and military power) is a central problem faced by any movement to further US commitment to human rights development. The pre-existing ideology of the Church and of other major religions makes this process much simpler. The theological/philosophical work that must be done is to describe the "war on terror" ideology and show how it conflicts with the belief structure of Christianity or which ever religious group is performing the exercise.

A brief sketch of one possible Christian refutation of the "war on terror" follows. The central elements of the "war on terror" are;

1. The traumatic 9/11 terrorist attacks are framed as the advent of a new era in world politics in which the US leads the world to destroy this threat to its way of life.
2. "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists".[1] Anything less than direct support of the US reveals at the least sympathy for terrorists, if not outright enemy status. This principle has been mitigated somewhat by concerted international resistance to the Iraq war.
3. Terrorists are evil. It is allowable and sometimes laudable to use otherwise illegal or ethically unacceptable methods to combat terrorists because they are evil.

Christians disagree with this ideology at every point.

1. The new era in world politics was defined by Jesus of Nazareth. He confronted the empire of his day and sought to bring about a new social order in which the strong do not dominate the weak.[2] While the 9/11 attacks were terrible, they do not nullify the politics of Jesus. A Christian response to 9/11 would have include policing actions to help ensure that terrorist groups are not allowed to kill innocent people. The main focus of

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1. "Transcript of President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress on Thursday night, September 20, 2001," http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/
2. See: Kraybill, 2003: 235-237.

such a response would be to discover why the attacks happened, and then seek to change conditions and attitudes at home and abroad to help reduce or eliminate the motivation for further attacks. This process is likely to involve some changes to the glorified "way of life" in the US.

2. This divisive policy makes it likely that US Christians will be put in a posture of hostility towards Christians of other nations. Such a policy also makes the possibility of reconciliation and further interaction with people of other faiths much more remote.

3. The teachings of Jesus do not allow for torturing captives, invading countries, or killing other people. There are no special provisions for relaxing the commands of the Bible in the case of evil people. Christians are commanded to love their enemies, and to forgive people who do them wrong.[1] These are lofty goals for any secular state, to be sure, but Christians are called to pursue nothing less.

If enough US Christians can come to consensus on an argument such as this one, then a paradigm shift can be created away from the "war on terror". Christians who feel that their government should pursue greater human rights observance need not wait on an entirely new paradigm to begin to pressure their government. Paradigm shift and advocacy are important and mutually supportive processes, but progress in both need not follow equal prescribed timelines.

Church advocacy on behalf of human rights issues will to occur in two separate but interrelated arenas. First there should be an effort to put specific human rights issues on the ballot and to encourage Christians to choose their representatives with human rights in mind. Second, there must be a mechanism by which the elected government is monitored and called to accountability and moral restraint by the Church. Each arena is vitally important, and each supports the other and makes it more effective. The goal is not to become part of the state, but to maintain integrity by remaining separate from but engaged with the government. European history has provided enough evidence of the possible dangers of incorporating the Church too directly as a leader of the secular nation-state.

In the first arena, mobilizing voters on rights issues, there is much that can be learned from lobbyists working with parts of the Church on issues like abortion and gay marriage. Awareness campaigns can be used to inform Church members about specific issues related to human rights observance.

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1. See: Matt, 2005: 43-44.

Many pieces of social and institutional machinery already exist for mobilizing the Church on political issues, and the amount of work needed from concerned Christian communities to activate them is relatively small compared to what is needed for a similar secular campaign.

Practically all major Christian denominations in the US have some sort of group or organization that monitors governmental actions and lobbies on behalf of their constituency. Some of these groups are already doing the work of pushing the US government to take a more activist stance on human rights development by pushing specific human rights issues. Other groups are focused on different issues or play a monitoring and reporting role for their denomination, rather than a lobbying role. The crucial task for concerned Christian groups is to push for more human rights issues on the agendas of these bodies, or else to create new bodies with a more explicit orientation towards human rights. It is unclear whether any body that claims to speak for the Church as a whole could exist and have enough credibility to deeply influence the US government. A body that attempts to speak for a coalition of Protestant denominations is perhaps a more reachable immediate goal.

One item that remains clear in considering both arenas is the need for imaginative, adaptive thinking about how best to achieve the ultimate goal of restoring US leadership capacity and will to further global human rights development. The times, places, people, and issues involved in this task will inevitably change. The US will not always be the most powerful nation-state in the world. Christianity may not always be the majority religion in the US. Creative thinking will be required to meet all of these chances, just as it is required to meet today's challenges.

Christianity in the US possesses a tremendous opportunity to advance global human rights development. It can do so by pressuring the government of the US to overcome its current human rights credibility deficit and take on a leadership role in the human rights community. Questions remain to be answered about where new initiatives will lead the US and the Church to. The potential and the promise for US Christianity to affect the society around it positively is immense. How might a model for national accountability like this one work in other nation-states?

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