

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection Yong Pung How School Of Law

Yong Pung How School of Law

3-2013

Faith, freedom, and US foreign policy: Avoiding the proverbial clash of civilizations in East and Southeast Asia

Eugene K. B. TAN

Singapore Management University, eugene@smu.edu.sg

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Religion Law Commons](#)

Citation

TAN, Eugene K. B.. Faith, freedom, and US foreign policy: Avoiding the proverbial clash of civilizations in East and Southeast Asia. (2013). *Review of Faith and International Affairs*. 11, (1), 76-78.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/sol_research/2384

This Journal Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Yong Pung How School of Law at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection Yong Pung How School Of Law by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylds@smu.edu.sg.

FAITH, FREEDOM, AND US FOREIGN POLICY: AVOIDING THE PROVERBIAL CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS IN EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

By Eugene K.B. Tan

Is American foreign policy exceptional because it is religious or—put less contentiously—“faith-based?” This is a question that attracted much debate, but no consensus, during the recent presidential election cycle. What is much clearer is that the foundation of American society and political identity is very much grounded in the commitment to *religious freedom*.

There is no doubt that a prominent theme of American foreign policy is its singular commitment to monitoring and promoting religious freedom across the globe. This faith dimension is a unique strength of US foreign policy in the 21st century, whether one views it as a contemporary expression/variation of “manifest destiny” or of Woodrow Wilson’s world-saving prerogative. While its actual impact is hard to determine, promoting religious freedom and eradicating religious persecution are crucial to the larger effort of promoting a broader suite of fundamental liberties in emerging democracies and sustaining those liberties in established democracies.

As a result of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, the annual International Religious Freedom Report has become a

cornerstone of the US government’s efforts to promote religious freedom globally. The Report, which describes the state of religious freedom in every country, except the USA, provides a putative starting point for dialog between the United States and the various countries, often as a part of the overall promotion of human rights. In East and Southeast Asia, China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Myanmar remain countries of concern, and the American effort to curb religious persecution in these countries is commendable and crucial.

In promoting religious freedom overseas, American efforts invite a multi-stakeholder collaboration. Civil society is encouraged into overseas assistance and development initiatives. We see the increased mobilization of faith-based non-governmental organizations and their multi-faceted networks, working with USAID and other governmental agencies in on-the-ground activities delivering emergency, humanitarian,

Eugene K.B. Tan is an assistant professor of law at the Singapore Management University School of Law. He is also a Nominated Member of Parliament in Singapore’s legislature. He has been associated with and benefited from being involved in the Institute of Global Engagement’s various initiatives in East and Southeast Asia.

welfare, and socio-economic provisions and partaking in intellectual exchange and engagement. Herein lies another strength of American foreign policy vis-à-vis religious freedom: the ability to make a real difference in the lives of people through leadership by action and example, through the force of compelling ideas and principles, all relatively unhindered by *realpolitik*, strategic power plays, and geopolitical considerations.

The promotion and celebration of the unique value of religious freedom, which at its core requires the United States to showcase the commitment of American society and government to religious freedom both domestically and internationally, are crucial in generating a mindset shift on various fronts. One such shift is inculcating and nurturing the appreciation for religious freedom as the prerequisite to the development of stable and progressive states. In turn, this requires an impartial, plural yet tolerant civic culture. Often, the absence of religious freedom signals the absence of other core freedoms and rights such as the freedom of speech.

Another mindset shift coheres around the recognition of the indivisibility of national security and religious freedom. National security cannot be sustained when citizens feel that their religious freedom and identity are not secured. This is probably the most under-rated strength of American foreign policy. Indeed, in a post-9/11 world, it is a truism that religion and national security are now even more intimately intertwined. The scourge of religion-inspired terrorism has driven home the message that to manage such existential threats, the ethical approach is to ensure that citizens' religious identities remain secure. Looking at religion solely as a security threat is manifestly inadequate in keeping state and society safe.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the primary weakness of US foreign policy, particular in Southeast Asia which is home to the largest Muslim community in the world, was that it was driven by the Beltway's overwhelming concerns over archipelagic Southeast Asia as the "second front" in the "global war against terror." To be clear, a military or coercive response is needed where there is a clear and present danger.

However, the United States cannot lose sight of the end goal of terrorists, which is to inflict terror and division on a society, unraveling its resilience and cohesion such that it implodes. Military warfare and coercive legislation and enforcement are grossly inadequate in winning the hearts and minds of a community. A muscular and militaristic approach to counter-terrorism can very easily play into the terrorists' binary strategy of "us versus them." The American counter-terrorism efforts in Southeast Asia were too militaristic in intent and practice. For instance, US commando units were deployed in the Philippines, ostensibly to "train" the Philippines military to combat the Moro Islamic Liberation Front insurgency in Mindanao and especially to target Abu Sayyaf networks. The war on terror came to be seen as an all-out war against Islam. By framing the conflict as an existential battle against "evil," the Bush administration alienated hearts and minds and diminished popular support in the crucial "war of ideas" in Southeast Asia.

Promoting religious freedom globally is a work in progress. As the Pew Forum's September 2012 study, *Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion*, points out, 75 percent of the world's population has restricted ability to freely practice their faith. As a viable counterweight to political and secular ideologies, religion has been both a unifying and a divisive force throughout the course of human history. In today's interconnected world, the transnational dimension has brought with it heightened concerns that religion could undermine a government's ability to protect a state's security and sovereignty. Hence, religion is still regarded with ambivalence, if not suspicion, by many governments in East and Southeast Asia. Given the tendency to regard secular and religious loyalties as competing or even conflicting, many governments acutely feel the imperative and the need to maintain vigilance and to "keep God in place."

At the same time, religion continues to play a role, to varying degrees, in the construction, political legitimation, and integration of the many nations (or ethnic groups) found in each Asian state. In fact, since the late first millennium, itinerant traders, seafarers, pilgrims, and colonialists have brought with them

Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Christian precepts, ideals, and norms to much of East and Southeast Asia. Much less appreciated is the fact that religious values and ethos continue to endow valuable lessons on public leadership, public morality, learning and virtue, and the dignity of the individual. And because religion has the power to mobilize, motivate, and enforce behavior, norms, and values—especially among ethnic minority groups—it can be a powerful nation-building resource. Thus, religion-wise, Asia is not a *tabula rosa*. Many religions have long co-existed in Asia and they continue to nourish and sustain these heterogeneous communities. The virtues of religious freedom are not alien to Asia but need nurturing given the dominant imperatives of governance, control, and economic growth.

In exhorting the virtues of religious freedom, a holier-than-thou approach lacking in cultural and political sensitivity and one partial towards Christianity will not only have limited efficacy, but might undermine the larger effort of promoting religious freedom. The United States and its many non-governmental organizations need to be mindful of and attuned to local conditions and sensitivities. Even as it seeks to promote religious freedom, over-zealous missionary proselytization, especially in Muslim-majority countries, can potentially give rise to fears and a moral panic of the perceived subversion and colonization of indigenous values and beliefs within the host society and government.

The promotion of religious freedom is hard work. It requires a combination of calibrated approaches including government-to-

government engagement as well as people-to-people dealings, engaging a broad coalition of stakeholders. The imperative and ideal of religious freedom is not particularly suited to political pontification. It will instead benefit immensely from religious freedom being recognized not merely as the bundle of rights that undergird religious worship and propagation, but also requiring other rights fundamental to unleashing the full potential of any human society. Additionally, the empirically verifiable fact that religious freedom can provide protection against societal instability, religious extremism, and violence should be emphasized.

Ultimately, the people in a society must desire religious freedom, since the substance of religious freedom cannot be willed to life by force or legislative fiat. While seemingly tangential, as the US government seeks a broader shift away from the Middle East to making the Asia-Pacific region the strategic pivot, there is the need to ensure that the promotion of religious freedom as part of its foreign policy is not conflated with its defense objectives and priorities.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether American foreign policy is “faith-based” or not, the United States, through its domestic and foreign policy, can be the “city upon a hill”: a powerful beacon for the rest of the world. The perennial challenge is to ensure that the lived reality of America’s promotion of religious freedom reinforces the virtues and value of diversity, pluralism, respect, and tolerance, even on foreign soil. This, in and of itself, is soft and smart power at work where the USA is a shining exemplar for the world. ❖
