

The Role of Evangelicals in the New Human Rights Movement

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Almost exactly 7 years ago I began a little research about the budding concern among Christians for persecuted fellow believers around the world. I'd been reading about the issue in specialized religious publications and thought it might be worthy of an article or two. Then in January of 1998 I was asked to present a paper at a faith-based think tank in Washington DC, and fortuitously a number of the key figures in this cause were present. They encouraged me to follow events, opened their files to me, and invited me to strategy meetings. At the time I wasn't sure the movement had real legs.

Thus I had no idea what I was getting into, and found myself embarked on a six year journey striving to capture this dramatically evolving story. I had stumbled onto the most potent human rights movement of our time – a new faith-based quest devoted to advancing human rights through the machinery of American foreign policy.

This movement, which operates largely under the radar of the national press and mass media, has successfully pressed a series of landmark legislative initiatives, each of which faced fierce opposition. These include:

- **The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998**, the most sweeping human rights statute on the books, which has transformed the advocacy of religious freedom at the State Department and beyond.
- **The Trafficking Victims Protection Act** of 2000, which commits US leadership to end the brutal trafficking of persons into various forms of servitude and has resulted in real changes in practices across the globe.
- **The Sudan Peace Act 2002**, which pressured Sudan to end its 20 year war on its southern African population, the model of which advocates hope can be applied to the situation in Darfur.
- **And now the latest initiative: The North Korean Human Rights Act**, which passed the House unanimously and is right now the subject of religious mobilization and fierce behind the scenes Senate negotiations.

Any one of these initiatives deserves note, but collectively they represent a remarkable movement impact. Yet journalists have largely missed or misinterpreted this movement, and it remains one of the greatest untapped sources of news material today. Thus I'd like to challenge those in this room to help address this situation -- and I might even provide some leads in case you want to scoop the national media.

Why has the story been slighted or miscast? There are two reasons: **first**, many top journalists are ignorant or tone deaf when it comes to religion; **second**, a widespread bias colors the coverage of the evangelical world, which is central to this new faith-based human rights movement. Thus while my book catalogues the activism of a diverse array of religious actors, including Jews, Catholics, Episcopalians, Buddhists, and Bahais, my focus here is on the growing role of evangelicals in unlikely alliances for global human rights.

Heretofore associated with domestic skirmishes in the *culture wars*, evangelicals are now increasingly engaged in international humanitarian and human rights causes. And they provide the grassroots muscle for the

legislative campaigns I just listed. To capture this phenomenon we can imagine the following news headlines:

- Evangelicals and Jews team up for landmark religious freedom legislation
- Conservative churches and the Congressional Black Caucus campaign against Sudanese genocide
- Born-again leaders join feminists to curb global sex trafficking
- Korean American Christians challenge North Korean atrocities
- Evangelicals back initiatives on Third World debt relief, AIDS funding for Africa.

What accounts for this international activism by evangelicals?

The answer can be traced to two developments that were moving in parallel fashion, like tributaries of a river, until they finally converged.

The first development is the tectonic shift of the globe's Christian population to the developing world. At least 60%, and perhaps 70%, of all evangelical believers live in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Many pentestocal and evangelical congregations, therefore, are nested amidst poverty, violence, exploitation, and persecution.

Through global communications, travel, and international development networks, American evangelicals increasingly hear about, and identify with, these fellow Christians. Indeed, in evangelical circles one routinely hears of "the suffering church" abroad, of 200 million Christians persecuted for their faith. These suffering Christians, and especially their indigenous leaders, are viewed as role models of Christian fidelity. Not surprisingly, some 70% of evangelical elites say that combating religious persecution should be a priority of American foreign policy. Beyond fellow believers, however, American religionists are awakening *more generally* to the afflictions visited on the world's vulnerable, fostering sympathy for their plight. A recent national poll found lay evangelicals as a group more likely than the general public to say that the U.S. should do more to protect human rights abroad.

The second development enables evangelicals to act politically on these concerns. Animated by distress over the drift of American culture, evangelicals have built a booming network of alternative schools, colleges, national associations, publishing houses, direct-mail groups, para-church organizations, and broadcast ministries. As Robert Putnam observed, American evangelicals have built the “largest, best-organized grassroots” social networks of the last quarter century.

As these two developments connect, the social networks of the evangelical world, born initially of domestic conservative impulses, are increasingly put in service of human rights and justice concerns normally associated with progressive politics, which facilitates new alliances. During successive campaigns, indeed, I watched conservative evangelicals team up at various times with liberal Jewish groups, the Catholic Church, Tibetan Buddhists, feminists, and the Congressional Black Caucus.

The argument of my book is that this new faith-based movement is filling a void in human rights advocacy, raising issues previously slighted -- or insufficiently pressed -- by secular groups, the prestige press, and the foreign policy establishment.

What do I mean by this? A look at movement initiatives provides the answer. Prior to 1998 religious freedom was the step child of human rights. Human Rights groups slighted or sometimes even dismissed reports of persecution, especially against Christians. In addition, American diplomats were often ignorant of key religious communities in their countries. That has changed through the scaffolding built by the new law, which makes promotion of religious freedom a basic aim of American foreign policy. Because our foreign service must investigate and report on the status of religious freedom in every country, we now have better information about religious developments on the ground that involve opportunities or perils to policy makers.

Second, the interfaith movement plucked the tragedy of Sudan from the backwaters of international concern. Long before the tragedy in Darfur, Christian solidarity activists and their Jewish allies were warning about the nature of the Khartoum regime, whose racial and religious ideology led to a war on an African civilization, with 2 million dead and five million displaced over the past two decades. On Darfur, the Bush Administration has pressed aggressive efforts by USAID to get relief supplies to those displaced, issued the first genocide designation since the passage of the international genocide convention, and pressed the international community to act more vigorously to impel Sudan to reign in the janjaweed. Though belatedly and not enough, this effort nonetheless responded in part to the mobilization of evangelicals on Sudan, including a vigorous alliance in Bush's hometown of Midland, Texas.

Take another ignored issue. The trafficking of women and children into grotesque sexual exploitation and forced labor metastasized in the freewheeling globalization of the 1990s. Because of the new law, and its tough enforcement by the Trafficking in Persons Office at the State

Department, countries around the world are changing laws and practices, crime syndicates have been broken up, and emerging norms are taking shape. Women and children are literally being set free. Not content with mere symbolic victories and to maintain momentum, coalition activists have fought guerilla battles within the State Department bureaucracy to ensure a high profile and potent enforcement of the law. Faced with efforts to marginalize the Trafficking Office, the coalition responded by securing a re-authorization of the law this year that appropriated more money for the office and granted ambassador status for its director, John Miller.

Finally and most recently the faith-based alliance has focused attention on the North Korean regime of Kim Il Song, whose abysmal human rights record includes a vast system of brutal gulags, wide-scale arrests, torture, and killings, and engineered starvation in which the authorities literally decide who eats and who doesn't. Norbert Vollersten, a German doctor who spent eighteen months working in North Korea, saw children everywhere who looked like Nazi concentration camp victims while the party elite enjoyed sumptuous banquets, posh hotels, casinos, and luxury cars.

This record is why the religious alliance pressed for legislation that **expands** protection for North Korean refugees, **conditions** U.S. humanitarian aid on transparent improvements in access for people in need, and **calls** for the inclusion of human rights considerations in all negotiations the regime.

Because of North Korea's nuclear threat, Pyongyang has attempted to blackmail the west into ignoring its human rights record. Indeed, after Kim Il Song denounced North Korean Human Rights Act some senators got spooked and threatening to keep the bill from coming up for a vote. Which is why the issue has suddenly become a litmus indicator of U.S. resolve on human rights. This sounds like a story to me.

So how have major news outlets treated this exceptional interfaith movement?

First it was ignored or slighted. It took more than a year before news outlets picked up that something was brewing on religious persecution, and even then coverage of the campaign for religious freedom legislation was slight. Ironically, the one time the New York Times gave front page

coverage, above the fold, was when the headline proclaimed the legislation dead. That story appeared three months before the bill passed unanimously.

Second, coverage was often patronizing in was unimaginable with other constituencies. Evangelicals were depicted as parochial in their concern for vulnerable counterparts abroad, and persecution was merely “alleged” or safely placed in “quotation marks”. Time and again serious human rights issues were tainted by their association with evangelical Christians. The plight of brutalized Africans in southern Sudan, for example, was described as a “pet cause” of evangelicals in a New York Times story. Can you imagine the grey lady ever using such language to describe African American concern for Apartheid or Jewish solidarity with Soviet Jews? To be fair, the Times has also had some of the better coverage as well, by Nick Kristof and Elisabeth Bumiller, but not nearly enough to provide balance.

Finally, coverage simply does not match the news value. And by that I don’t just mean the policy significance, but the human drama. Consider the stories of the following...

Baroness Cox
Mindy Belz
Deborah Fikes
David Saperstein
Francis Bok.

Missing such stories, and so many others, produces a disconnect that damages credibility of journalism as a profession, because lay people *are* reading these accounts in religious outlets that, despite their obvious biases, often provide fuller accounts than in secular outlets.

My advice: This movement is news; avoid pack journalism; go for it.