

The Role of the Faith-based Constituency in Preventing Genocide

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First, let me convey how deeply privileged I feel to speak in this hallowed place.

For nearly four years I have been conducting book research into the fascinating emergence of a new faith-based movement for international human rights. Born of initial concern for persecuted Christians abroad, the effort has since blossomed into the signal grass roots effort of our time on human rights. Not only is the promotion of religious freedom now a basic aim of American foreign policy, but the cause of human dignity has been given a shot of adrenalin through the ongoing mobilization of American church networks. From legislation against international trafficking in women and children, to Third-World debt relief, to the campaign against genocide in Sudan, we see this manifest new energy.

I'd like to convey something of what the movement is and why it provides a vital resource for public engagement against genocide.

The movement is anchored by an aroused evangelical constituency, mobilized by an assortment of Christian solidarity organizations that have arisen to provide succor for besieged Christian minorities abroad. But this movement is a genuine coalition, encompassing such diverse groups as evangelicals, Catholics, Episcopalians, Tibetan Buddhists, and, on Sudan, African American churches. Nothing so demonstrates the true ecumenical spirit of the movement, however, as the prominence of Jewish leadership, which has been pivotal in channeling and even prodding evangelical activism. Something about the specter of persecution

abroad unites groups across the cultural divide.

Why, then, is this movement a vital resource against genocide?

First, because the community is large. More Americans belong to religious communities than any other organization, union, or association. Half of all volunteering is done through churches, and half of all social ties are generated through them. Mobilizing even a fraction of the faith-based community dwarfs the impact secular human rights organizations can achieve.

Second, the faith-based constituency is politically strategic: Both political parties rely on particular religious voters. For Democrats these include Jews, Catholics, some mainline Protestants, and African American church members. For Republicans the evangelical community is increasingly pivotal. White evangelicals, who backed Bush overwhelmingly in the past election, made up 40% of the president's entire electoral base, while the bulk of his remaining voters were comprised of the most religiously observant Catholics and mainline Protestants. He owes his election to fervent believers. When a portion of that constituency becomes mobilized, as it has on Sudan, people in the Bush administration pay attention.

Third, the faith-based community is socially connected. One of the challenges to mobilization in the modern era is that so many people are detached from social networks. As Robert Putnam has prodigiously documented, Americans are less socially attached to one another than they used to be. A major exception, as Putnam notes, are evangelicals, who have created "the largest, best organized grassroots social movement of the last quarter century." Through developments in broadcasting, publishing, private schooling, and organizational formation, evangelicals have become "enmeshed in webs of local congregations, channels of information, and networks of association" that make them readily available for mobilization.

The above factors would be irrelevant were it not for the fact that key segments of the evangelical world have become sensitized to issues of international persecution and engaged in pressing American foreign policy toward a defense of human rights and dignity. Evangelical leaders -- such as Charles Colson, Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Franklin Graham, and Richard Cizik of the National Association of Evangelicals – were major players in pressing for the International Religious Freedom Act, legislation against human trafficking, and action against genocide in Sudan. This commitment is the tip of the iceberg. A major recent survey of evangelical elites from around the country – prominent pastors, denominational heads, educators, and organizational leaders – found over 75% saying that “stopping religious persecution should be given top priority in American foreign policy.” This interest transcends concern for fellow religionists abroad, as illustrated less than two weeks ago when the National Association of Evangelicals issued its Second Statement of Conscience on world-wide persecution. In addition to speaking out on behalf of fellow Christians, the signatories vowed “never to commit the sin of silence whenever we learn of religious persecution visited against faith communities like those, in Bosnia, that do not share our witness of Christ”

The roots of this transformation are complex, but a central factor is the tectonic shift in the globe’s Christian population toward the developing and non-democratic world. Christianity is demographically now a predominately indigenous Third World faith, with at least 60% of all believers living in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Just half a century ago the figure was 25%. The growth of Christianity in authoritarian places has resulted in widespread persecution, or worse, as in North Korea and Sudan, genocidal campaigns against believers. This has fostered among numerous Christian leaders and lay activists a new sense of responsibility as citizens of

the globe's indispensable nation, along with a fierce desire to do what they can to ameliorate this suffering.

There is a deeper dimension here, which I admit is a bit speculative. But this consciousness of persecution and vulnerability has cultivated a kinship between Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities threatened with persecution or genocide. Perhaps this is one reason why a group of evangelical luminaries just issued a letter eloquently condemning the recrudescence of anti-Semitism and calling upon President Bush to publicly denounce it. This sense of kinship, I have found, extends to Vietnamese Buddhists, Iranian Bahai, Chinese Falun Gong and Muslim Uighurs, and others under assault.

This heightened religious sensitivity to persecution represents a resource for human rights activists. When threats of genocide arise, religious leaders can be enlisted in efforts to mobilize public opinion. Thus, I recommend that the Committee of Conscience identify crucial religious leaders and begin conversations with them to create a kind of rapid response network to genocide threats.

A final resource of the faith-based movement is its deep connections to vulnerable communities around the world. The growth of church-based international development and relief programs, which reach into remote corners of the world, along with an expanding communications and advocacy infrastructure, expose human rights abuses. In a previous age, for example, the attacks by Laskar Jihad against religious and ethnic minorities in Indonesia might have remained in the dark for months. Today networks of information and advocacy bring such atrocities to light. Because the Christian community is so widely dispersed around the globe it may provide early warning signals of impending threats. To be sure, sometimes the churches fail

and, as in Rwanda, fail tragically to play this role. But these failures may have attuned leaders to their stewardship responsibilities. Or at least I hope so.

As a way of illustration of these themes, let me turn to the catastrophe in Sudan. I need not to dwell on that story, which is documented so well in a special exhibit here at the Museum. The National Islamic Front regime has engaged in a brutal effort to Islamicize or subdue its African population. Khartoum's systematic effort to wipe out a people and their religion and culture through massacres, terror, manufactured famine, concentration camps, enslavement, rape, abduction of children, and forced conversions compelled the U.S. Holocaust Museum's Committee of Conscience to issue an unprecedented "genocide warning" on Sudan.

It has also sparked a campaign of conscience that illuminates the points I have made here. First, the crisis in Sudan was largely ignored until it was engaged by the faith-based movement. Second, connections between Western churches and Sudanese communities provided crucial information about what was happening there. The Catholic, Anglican, and evangelical communities in Sudan are linked to relief programs that channel information to the West about abductions, famines, violations of cease fire agreements and the like. Third, though concern for co-religionists provided an initial motivation, Christian advocates routinely champion animists and moderate Muslims also under siege. Fourth, the Sudan campaign involves a true coalition, as evangelicals, Catholics, Episcopalians, and Jews have joined with the African American pastors and the Congressional Black Caucus in demanding a robust American response.

A final feature is that the mobilization of ardently religious Americans reaches the very heartland supposedly most isolationist in sentiment. In places like Kansas and Texas politicians

are hearing about Sudan. This is vividly illustrated by the case of Midland, Texas, home of the Bushes, which has become something of ground zero in the grassroots public awareness campaign against genocide in Sudan. Last fall local promoters organized a rally against slavery and genocide in Sudan in conjunction with an event titled “Rock the Desert,” a Christian music festival that drew more than 30,000 youth to Midland. One of the featured artists was Ken Tamplin, a well-connected Hollywood recording artist and songwriter who became engaged in the issue after attending a benefit dinner for Sudanese Christians sponsored by his evangelical church. Midland also hosted the national service of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Throughout the weekend, a host of prominent national and international speakers fanned out to some forty participating congregations, with Sudan dominating the discussion. Baroness Carolyn Cox of Christian Solidarity Worldwide spoke at First Presbyterian Church of her numerous travels to the Sudanese bush, while down the street at First Baptist Church Kevin Turner of Strategic World Impact offered a fiery sermon, in a service broadcast throughout the region, about the suffering of the Sudanese. The local Catholic church, meanwhile, hosted a speech and video presentation by the director of the Bishop Gassis Relief Fund for Sudan, while ex-slave Francis Bok was featured at numerous events, including at a local Hispanic church.

The impact of this kind of mobilization is suggested by the striking response to mounting evidence that genocide is being fueled by Sudan’s new oil industry. The House of Representatives last summer passed the Bachus Amendment to the Sudan Peace Act, which would deny access to U.S. capital markets for oil companies doing business in Sudan. Not surprisingly, on the same day that the House so acted, delegates of the 15 million member

Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution condemning the regime in Khartoum for its genocide and calling for direct aid to the victims. The threat of this remarkable congressional action probably induced Khartoum into a grudging agreement to participate in peace talks, and some form of capital market sanctions would ensure continued pressure on the regime to follow through.

But the Bachus amendment also caused apoplexy in the investment community on Wall Street, which convinced the Senate to exclude the provision and block a conference committee with the House. Unless conferees are appointed, the Sudan Peace Act will die at the end of this congressional session.

In many respects this showdown represents a crucial test of the faith-based movement -- whether it can move the system when “experts” and monied interests say the cost is too high?

My editorial response is this. In the film “Judgment at Nuremberg,” the chief justice of the tribunal, played by Spencer Tracy, renders a controversial verdict by declaring that “a country is what it stands for when standing for something costs.”

Our leaders are now facing a decision in which effectively standing against genocide will extract a price. Alan Greenspan says so. Goldman Sachs says so. Some in the State Department say so. That is why the judgment on Sudan could define the politics of human rights for a generation. Despots hope, and dissidents fear, that in the end business values or pinched calculations of realpolitik will trump human rights concerns in American foreign policy. Enacting capital market sanctions against Sudan will send a powerful signal around the globe that we are willing to pay a price to advance the fundamental cause of human dignity.