Defending International Religious Freedom: US foreign policy in the XXI century

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Abstract:
In the contemporary world, religion has been largely re-defined. It has become increasingly evident in international arena as it composes identities and international religious movements, legitimates political process and origins conflicts. These new dynamics impose several challenges to International Relations, evoking a research Agenda that puts into question the mainstream theories of the field. We intend to mull about the intersections of religious and political spheres in United States. The main purpose is to comprehend the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and its consequences, how the establishment defines religion and traces strategies to promote religious freedom abroad. Some questions come out: the American national identity, the Christian ethos, the Founding Fathers fundamentals rights heritage, the American exceptionalism, among others. In rhetoric and practice, the U.S. international religious freedom advocacy stresses the global controversy about the universality of Human Rights and the Modern experiment, distinct of the whole oriental tradition that hasn’t processed the liberalization, individualization and privatization of religion. Overall, the purpose is to understand how the international religious freedom policy reflects the American history and political culture, and how this foreign policy tool, erected under the secular premise, dialogues with different communities in the world.

Key words:
Religion; Foreign Policy; United States of America (USA)
Introduction

In a broadest context, the twenty first century faces the resurgence of religion as a prominent factor for the composition of collective identities and the legitimation of political processes, for transnational religious movements and religiously motivated terrorism or even ethnic-religious conflicts in a wide array of world regions. The theory of Modernity that has once pointed out to the privatization of religion, as well as the decay of its social role, has now to cope with a setback of still unknown extensions of religion in this new century, which has been called by some specialists as “post-secular”. Expressions as the “revenge of God” and the religious “return from exile” exemplifies the analysts concern to a renewed presence of religious belief and behavior in the public square. It is highly important, therefore, to establish a debate about religion in International Relations research agenda.

Whenever considered the path through which religion has made itself a sensitive issue in the international scene, it is of a quick reminder the conflicts in Darfur, the afghan Taliban, the Islamic Saudi Arabians, and the social pressures derived from the Hindu nationalist movement and from the Turkish Islamic party. In the international system’s periphery, we witness a growing multitude of examples of ascending religious loyalty as an explicit challenge to secular ruling and the whole model of the Liberal State.

In Europe, the resurgence of religious phenomena has led to unprecedented crisis in which several countries have seen their multicultural projects frustrated and have as well found themselves compelled to adopt a more restrictive attitude as a way to protect their secular identities. This paper, however, aims at assessing particularly the one country that has remained as an important pillar of the international system, the United States.

The American nation is one of the most religious in the contemporary world. Almost all of its citizens (95%) declare themselves as faithful in God, and at least 40% of those attend some sort of religious services once a week. (DEMERATH; STRAIGHT, 1997: 7). As an example, the American religious tradition has been reaffirmed through a mobilization towards the voting ballots, as has become especially clear during George W. Bush electoral campaigns. In 2000, as well as in 2004, the evangelicals have performed the biggest supporting group to the republican candidate.

For his first presidential term, Bush has received 68% of white evangelical’s votes. The massive adhesion of wasp\textsuperscript{1} electors (78%) to his candidacy four years later represented 40% of the share of total votes to the republican candidate. (THE PEW FORUM, 2004).

\textsuperscript{1} Wasp is an acronym that refers to white, Anglo-Saxon and protestant.
During the electoral process of 2008, the religious element has surfaced again, in the case of a widespread suspicion towards the Muslim backgrounds of Barack Obama. This understanding has pervaded for a long time, as 20% of Americans continued associate the elected president with Islam. (THE PEW FORUM, 2010)

The so-called “religious attendance gap” shows us that the most conservative of electors is the one who attends cults the most and not the one devoted specifically to a religious denomination. This phenomenon is especially relevant to American domestic politics and partisan dynamics, since many religiously inspired moral standards, like the ones related to homosexual marriage and the right for abortion have been kept steadily associated to the ballots. The so-called “cultural war” is deeply influenced by televangelists and religious activists.

The group of interest led by religious conservatives has pushed its agenda over decision-making centers in Washington, in the White House and in the Capitol Hill. It has substantially influenced public policies since the 70s and since the 90s has driven its efforts towards international policies, such as those concerning human rights and the protection of persecuted Christians. The research hereby presented, developed during the course of a master degree graduation, assesses the recent incorporation of religion related issues by American foreign politics. Since 1998, US government proclaimed the religious freedom advocacy as a relevant foreign policy goal.

The religious freedom commitment has always been a core feature of the American collective imagination. The United States was born as a direct experiment of European religious intolerance and the inability of states with established churches to deal with religious plurality. “Thus while secular Europeans see church-state separation as a means of protecting the state from religion, Americans see it as protecting religion from the state.” (HERTZKE, 2008: 17-18)

The Europeans who have come to the new world onboard of the Mayflower, intending to build a safe home for their faith, have constructed a worldview filled with plenty of puritan illustrations, which was consolidated in the American society, remaining until our times. A historical example of foundational myth is the interpretation of American colonies as the “New Israel” in which the chosen people should erect a city upon a hill – the mission to shape moral standard and inspire the entire humankind.

In the XVII and XVIII centuries, Americans have defined their living purpose in the new world in biblical terms. Those foundational myths have endured for centuries and composed the very concept of being American as well as important features of American
civil religion. The connection between the religious and political imaginary is a discursive tool that enables social consensus and offers meaning to community belonging.

Current illustrations would be the expressions “In God we trust” (that was engraved for the first time in the two cents dollar coins in 1864), “Under God” in the pledge of allegiance and the widely used motto “God Bless America”. Religious and moral matters have yielded meaning and the substance of motivation for the American civil war, the Manifest Destiny in conquest of the West and even to the Cold War. The idea of America being a nation with a special mission (American exceptionalism), is permeated of religious imaginary. Recently, it can be exemplified by George W. Bush’s “God talk” – the use of biblical passages to motivate US citizen in the fight against terrorism in the world.

As old as the American religious background, it is the institutional separation between church and state in the United States. The first constitutional amendment guarantees the free exercise of religion and prohibits any law respecting an establishment of religion. The secular tradition has been a pillar of the American democracy right from its beginning.

The ideal aimed was that American legal apparatus should focus on safeguarding religious neutrality, which, by its turn, should guarantee the maintenance of the plurality of religious communities and their coexistence in the public sphere. To counterbalance a republican and democratic political system with the religious sentiment emanating from its own people, the US founding fathers have sketched an unprecedented model of secular liberalism.

The free exercise clause encouraged the religiously informed attributes necessary to democracy as identified by Washington, Madison, and Jefferson, respectively: democratic dispositions and habits, the freedom necessary for man to perform his duty to God, and public affirmation of then transcendent origins of American proposition. (FARR, 2008: 88)

Actually, the puritan identity pointed out above was so distinguishable in the American society that it has even become an important support to its political system. According to John Adams “A republic can only be supported by pure religion or austere moral.” In an analogous way, George Washington stated that “Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles.” (apud HUNTINGTON, 2004: 84-85).

It seems like there must have been a consensus among the leaders of the country defending that one of the most effective ways to avoid the possibility of anarchy within a widely politically free society would be to inspire self control into each one of its citizens though strong moral or religious convictions. (SILVA, 2009: 84).

The United Stated have, in fact, entered the third millennium as one of the countries with the highest levels of state and church separation, that being an exception when
considered global levels, where 75% of countries either support an official religion or are hostile to religious minorities, and almost a fourth (22%) of countries held some official religion. (FOX, 2006). It is in this particular American context – which combines a highly spiritualized population with a secular prerogative – that religion has emerged as a foreign policy topic.

**International religious freedom advocacy and institutionalization**

The initial mobilization around the matter of religious rights in the US has been developed concerning the defense of persecuted Christians in the world. During the 80s, some American politicians begun to express their concerns over religious prisoners abroad, as senators Richard Lugar and Don Nickles, congressmen Frank Wolf, Chris Smith, Tony Hall and Tom Lantos. Later, the mobilization towards religious rights gained important adhesions in the Senate, in the figures of Sam Nunn, Dan Coats and Jon Lieberman, and in the House of Representatives in the figures of Tom DeLay, Joe Pitts and Bob Clement. (HANFORD, 2008: 33).

Among the civil society, only two or three NGOs aimed their struggles at the cause of religious freedom during the 80s, amidst which we could indicate the Puebla Institute (led by Nina Shea) and the Institute for Religion and Democracy (led by Kent Hill and Diane Knipper). During the 90s, the adhesion to efforts in protecting religiously-persecuted grew through initiatives as the Christian Solidarity International, from Steve Snyder (which would later become International Christian Concern), the Jubilee Campaign and Just Law International (led by Ann Buwalda), Advocates International (from Sam Ericsson), Institute for Religion and Public Policy (from Joseph Gireboski), as well as other advocates of religious freedom such as Lauren Homer, Keith Roderick, Stan de Boe, just to cite a few. (HANFORD, 2008: 33-34)

The matter gained a real boost when Chuck Colson and Michael Horowitz gave birth to a heterogeneous coalition that proved able to mobilize the public against religious intolerance and persecution. In 1995, Horowitz, a neoconservative connected to the Hudson Institute, published the article “New intolerance between the Crescent and the Cross” in the Wall Street Journal. In January 1996, Horowitz and Nina Shea organized the “Summit on worldwide religious persecution for American religious leaders” in Washington DC.

During this Summit, the National Association of Evangelicals released a “Declaration of Consciousness” in which it compromised itself to the cause of persecuted Christians and to the incorporation of that subject into the American foreign policy. More than a hundred
relevant religious national leaders participated in the meetings, including Chuck Colson, Richard Cizik, Richard Land, Don Argue, Janet Parshall, Gary Bouer, Ravi Zacharias, and others. (SHEA, 2008, p.25-26)

The concrete substance of this movement depended on the solidarity of millions of Americans face to an unknown and undervalued humanitarian matter. The first step should be, therefore, to fill the information gap, in an effort to be made in the churches pulpits, on the streets and schools and, finally, at the Capitol Hill.

Chris Smith (R/NJ) the current leader of the Subcommittee of Human Rights (at the House of Representatives’ Commission of International Relations) started an informative campaign made of a series of public audiences about the global persecution of Christians. Still in September of 1996, a double resolution passed in both houses of Congress, entitled “Condemning the Persecution of Christians”.

Regarding popular consciousness, evangelical and traditional protestant churches played a leading role. The World Evangelical Fellowship organized a round of lectures and documentaries display concerning the persecution of Christians, which inaugurated the “Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church” in November 26, 1996. That was a more spiritual than political movement that begun with the support of five thousand churches.

Two years later, the meeting had an audience of one hundred thousand churches. In 1998, one third of churches in the US, included Methodists, south Baptists, roman and orthodox Catholics, Pentecostals, the Salvation Army and other religious entities joined together in prayer for their suffering brothers abroad. If secular media did not reserve much attention regarding the persecution of religious groups, whether Christians or not, that matter gained attention with its evangelical peers, mainly through televangelism and popular radio programs. (GOODSTEIN, 1998)

Even though human rights issues had gained political strength in the United States throughout the 90s, the religious matter itself remained undervalued by the Department of State officials. The bills that brought international religious freedom to the debate in the Congress had to fight a “secular myopia” and a broad skepticism towards religious subjects in the Executive. It was necessary build reliable information nets and proper channels in the Department of State to start a discussion about global issues that blend religion and politics, ideology and violence, incorporating the matter in US foreign policy.

In May 1997, the coalition led by Horowitz introduced the “Freedom for Religious Persecution Act” (FRPA), intermediated by Congressman Frank Wolf (R/VA) and Senator Arlen Specter (R/PA). This was the first bill regarding religious freedom to be discussed in the American Congress, and was known as the Wolf-Specter bill.
With good personal records regarding human rights defense and good relationship with both conservative politicians and evangelical figures, Frank Wolf was considered trustworthy by his colleagues in the Capitol Hill. Members of the House of Representatives approved Wolf-Specter bill in May 14, 1998. In the senate, nonetheless, there was a different perspective, and the general suspicion around the religious freedom topic impeded even the bill to go to floor vote.

The FRPA was an incisive project, based in the axes of naming, shaming and sanctioning the countries that most severely violate the religious liberties. The very structure of the bill translates a punitive methodology and a distrust of the usual diplomacy. The main political tool provided by the bill was a set of automatic sanctions to be applied in countries classified as religious persecutors by an Office of Religious Persecution Monitoring.

The coalition led by Horowitz aimed to guarantee, ergo: the automatic cut off the non-humanitarian assistance to persecuting countries (as well as the funding channeled by international organizations), and smart sanctions, whose goal was to ban the exportation of “persecution facilitating products” to the offending governments. The automatic measures could only be revoked under public justification based on national security, made by the President himself.

Based on State Department human rights reports, the proposed Office would identify the countries who actively or passively permitted “the abduction, enslavement, killing, imprisonment, forced mass resettlement, rape or crucifixion or other forms of torture” of “persons because of their membership in or affiliation with a religion or religious denomination, whether officially recognized or otherwise”. The bill also indicated the facilitation of asylum concession to religious refugees according to a straight order from the Director of Religious Persecution Monitoring (regardless of individual criteria and legal requirements).

Despite Michael Horowitz’s personal inclination to the cause of Christians persecuted, the Wolf-Specter Bill embedded a multiple-religious approach, mentioning at its text the Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, Jews, Baha’is and Hindus. “The very Christians who supported Wolf-Specter rejected this Christian-centric approach, successfully insisting that the movement deal with all religious persecution.” (SHEA, 2008:26)

In fact, FRPA was opposed by liberal sectors of the Clinton administration from its beginning, as well as by foreign policy circles and even by traditional human rights advocates. In accordance with Thomas Farr (2008), Horowitz was trying to build a religious freedom policy away from the Department of State, legislating through the sanctions of a director nominated directly by the President and allocated in the White House. In doing that,
Wolf-Specter bill was isolating religious freedom from other foreign policy subjects and creating a hierarchy of human rights.

The pressures stemming from the private sector created a tough lobby against the commercial sanctions foreseen by the FRPA, originated mainly from the USA Engage, a coalition of 676 entrepreneurs from industry, commerce and agribusiness. The influence of Big Business over the Republican Party led to a strong opposition to the Wolf-Specter bill, channeled by senators Rod Grams (R/MN) and Chuck Hagel (R/NE), which defended the interest of exporters and criticized the automatic sanctions.

The overwhelming support for the legislation masked differences among Republicans over the bill. Social conservatives like the Christian Coalition say the measure is essential to protect religious freedom worldwide. But moderates and business groups, like the United States Chamber of Commerce, say the bill's sanctions would alienate important diplomatic and trade partners. (SCHMITT, 1998)

In the Department of State, the concern was towards the “one size fits all” approach, because mandatory punishments would end up tying the president’s hand and damaging America’s interests. The standardized answer proposed by the FRPA did not consider the very nature of the relationship between the US and a given religious offender country.

At the same time, in the secular civil society the critics to the FRPA abounded. Even liberal traditional protestant sectors, represented by the National Council of Churches, were opposed to the Wolf-Specter bill. Also amongst human rights NGOs and activists, predominated a rejection of the notion that Christians were victims of persecution. Among them, the main idea was that, quite on the contrary, the Christians were mostly the perpetrators of religious intolerance. (SHEA, 2008: 28)

The big failure of the Freedom for Religious Persecution Act drives Trent Lott (R/MS), majority leader in the Senate at the time, to point out a task force intended to redesign the religious freedom agenda under the watch of Senator James Inhofe (R/OK). Suffering strong opposition, the task force did not last two months. From then on, John Hanford, staff member of Senator Richard Lugar (R/IN), silently started a draft for an alternative proposal. The project of a second bill relied on the support of Laura Bryant (staff member of Bob Clement, D/TN), Steve Moffitt (staff member of senator Nickles), William Inboden (staff member of congressman De Lay) and other experienced advisors on the subject of religious freedom.

This second bill would have to revise fundamental details of the FRPA, primarily the automatic sanctions, in order to establish a more flexible set of policy tools to face religious freedom violators. In March 26, 1998, the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) was introduced in the Senate, supported by senators Don Nickles (R/OK) and Joseph Lieberman (D/CT).
The repeated idea permeating the Nickles-Lieberman bill was to encourage behavior change and not punishment. It brought a wider purpose of promoting religious freedom, centered in a “quiet diplomacy” strategy in charge of the Office for International Religious Freedom to be located in the Department of State. Only a few elements coexisted in both the proposed bills, mainly the nomination of the worst offenders of religious freedom, so called countries of particular concern (CPC), and the training of diplomats and officials who would manage directly the immigration and asylum policies.

The discrepancies were dominant between the bills, in general terms. The automatic sanctions mechanism was replaced by a broad list of diplomatic tools that would allow the president to measure both the offense and the context, counting in the recriminations and more severe sanctions against the CPCs, and, at the same time, safeguarding the interests regarding national security and commercial relations. For Chris Smith, “The House had given the President a great deal of flexibility in deciding whether to impose sanctions against governments that severely persecute religious believers, but the Senate stretches flexibility almost to the breaking point.” (apud SHEA, 2008: 29).

The focus of the IRFA is not built on restrictive terms focusing on “systematically violent acts of religious persecution”. It was rather positive (or to some of its critics, utopic) focusing on the promotion of cultural and political values that give support to the religious freedom. By the time the bill was discussed in the Congress, only two states fit in the strict concept (of egregious religious persecutors) as defined by the FRPA, being that Sudan and North Korea. As the flexible concept of “violations against religious freedom” was adopted, IRFA broadens its reach, responding then to the most and least alarming cases, in intent to build an international regime of protection of religious rights.

Following this purpose, the proposed post of an ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom should withhold the duties of diplomatic negotiation and divulgation of IRF Office activities. The notion of “quiet diplomacy” indicates that the negotiation process with targeted countries is not centered at punishment, but instead begins before the sanctioning or the nomination of a country as a CPC.

Aiming at confronting the two versions of the bill and the two groups of interest that have sustained them, it is adequate to highlight a last difference between the texts originated at the House of Representatives (Wolf-Specter) and in the Senate (Nickles-Lieberman). That is the existence of a Commission of International Religious Freedom, an independent body to function as a watchdog – to monitor the religious freedom policy, the State Department performance, and to elaborate direct recommendations to the President and the Congress.
The proposition of an independent IRF Commission is a reaction, led from Horowitz’s coalition, to the centrality of the Department of State proposed by IRFA. For the coalition led by Horowitz, political pressures and economic interests surrounding the State Department bureaucracy could diminish the combativeness of IRF policy. According to Nina Shea, “For Wolf-Specter supporters, the Commission was the saving grace.” (SHEA, 2008: 29).

After two years of debates and two bills proposed, only a few people hoped some religious freedom mechanism could be materialized. The end of 1998 carried a heavy atmosphere due to the legislative elections and the president Clinton impeachment process. The Lewinsky sexual scandal had distressed the evangelical community towards the Clinton administration, and the IRFA approval was seen as an alternative to regain their support. At the same time, parliamentary figures recognized the importance of religious conservative groups’ support to candidacies at play in the Capitol Hill. (SCHMITT, 1998).

In the end of 1998, none of the versions of the bill had acquired enough support to triumph in Washington. In the last minute, the senators Bill Armstrong and Don Coats (R/IN) exerted pressure to send the IRFA to floor vote. Horowitz started to investigate the audience for a possible draft bill in the Senate that could take the sanctions issue (in Wolf-Specter bill) completely off the table and then empower the IRF Commission. Horowitz only received the support of a few parliamentarians, those from the Chamber of Commerce, the administration itself and the National Council of Churches.

The Senate (with a 98-0 score) approved the IRFA in the penultimate day of the 105 Congress Session. There was no time available to work out the differences between the two draft bills and the senators were not willing to award concessions to the defenders of the Wolf-Specter bill. It was a take it or leave it situation: “Cong. Frank Wolf saw one last move and with great humility, commitment to the cause, and legislative deftness, he took it.” (SHEA, 2008: 30)

In the last legislative day of 1998, in October 10, Wolf altered the bill that he had presented the year before (FRPA), fully replacing its content by the text approved in Senate the previous day. The International Religious Freedom Act (H.R. 2431) was approved unanimously by the House of Representatives. In October 27, 1998, it was made into law, signed by President Bill Clinton. The formal entry of the religious subject in the American foreign policy was sealed, then, in the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This dispute hosted at the Capitol Hill did not represent an inter-religious debate but a polarization inside the evangelical movement itself. The heated defense of the two versions of the bill was intimately linked to the personalities involved and their main allies.
“Had the debate been more rational and less at the mercy of some of the coalition leaders, it is entirely possible there would never have been two bills.” (HANFORD, 2008: 35)

In consequence, the polarization affected negatively the apparatus created by the IRFA. The new IRF Office was not really welcomed by the State Department, and many bureaucratic and budget limitations were imposed. In addition, there was a great pressure from outside the State Department, mostly from the IRF Commission. Horowitz himself, in face of the failure of his proposals, got attached to the Commission, lobbying openly for the US$3 million/year budget, a nine members (bi-partisan) composition and for the complete government independence. Concomitantly, he tried to undermine the authority of IRF Office and of the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. (FARR, 2008)

Consequently, the IRFA led to a competitive atmosphere between the IRF Office and IRF Commission. For the general audience, the limits of competence of each one of them remains unclear. Either the Office or the Commission arrange travel agendas, public audiences, analyze the performances and make recommendations concerning the CPC. Not only in the United Stated, along with the civil society and the Congress, but mainly for other countries, it is difficult to distinguish who actually signs on behalf of the American government.

During the first years of the religious freedom policy, the Commission has adopted the strategy to oppose the IRF Office, in defense of a large list of CPC and more severe sanctions for those. On the other hand, different evaluation criteria culminate in discrepant notions of progress regarding religious rights changes in CPCs. One example is Vietnam, which after some domestic reforms, was taken out of the IRF Office’s CPC list, but remained in the Commission’s CPC list. (SEIPLE, 2004).

Focused at criticizing the Department of State, the Commission has undervalued the role of the public debate sessions along with civil society and the arrangement of meetings with other governmental agencies, like the Department of Defense, Treasury or the White House, in order to inform about religious freedom. The ideological and party-related divisions eroded the potential of the IRF Commission.

Besides the steady opposition to the IRF Commission, another counterproductive aspect to IRFA reception was an already consolidated distrust in Washington. The incorporation of the religious issue (seen by many as dangerous or secondary) and the attempt of establishing an IRF Office attached to the Department of State represented a challenge to the secular status quo.

The initial resistance from Washington officials was also based in the emphasis that the Horowitz coalition dedicated to the persecuted Christians. Though it decayed rapidly,
the Christian-centered approach remained recollecting domestic and international criticism, which resulted in a stigma to IRFA. Even nowadays, IRFA is considered an instrument of the Christian Right, whose goal was to create space to its missioners abroad.

In the end, IRF Office effectiveness was restrained by its premature isolation at the Department of State. Sustaining pressures derived from the bureaucratic culture, the secular atmosphere and the priority yielded to matters as security and economy over human rights. The Department of State seemed to be very busy with daily bilateral operations to be considerate of deviating its attention to the subject of religious freedom. Administrative meetings showed the lack of interest of the peer agencies regarding the foreign policy's “new priority”. The IFRA was perceived as a meddling from the Congress on the Executive's businesses, as a blackmail from the Religious Right, or even both.

In its early days, the IRF Office could not rely on Capitol Hill’s support, which was still uncertain about the scope of the passed bill. At the other hand, the activists that formed the pro-religious rights coalition in 1996 had already quit the effort long ago. They chose either to support the IRF Commission’s work, or to transfer their attention to other issues such as human trafficking or the fight against HIV. The missionary atmosphere put by George W. Bush first term stimulated Religious Right’s interest in counterterrorism and democratization campaigns (such as the one in course at Iraq). The list of bills that religious conservatives helped to approve in Congress illustrates the shift towards other human rights’ themes. (HAYNES, 2008: 75)

Due to the funding shortage and the absence of institutional support, the first steps of the IRF Office were quite dependent on its ambassador’s personal activism to interpret the law, set the agenda and interweave relations amidst the Department of State’s offices and main figures. Only three ambassadors have been in charge of the IRF Office, intermediated by long gaps between their nominations.

**US international religious freedom policy in action**

The first ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom was Robert Seiple, a soft evangelical, also a republican and a Vietnam War veteran. Before heading the IRF Office, Seiple had run World Vision, an evangelical NGO dedicated to promote development and provide humanitarian aid. Julia Taft (assistant of Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration) and John Shattuck (secretary-assistant of the Bureau Democracy, Human Rights

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and Labor) indicated his name for the position. President Bill Clinton offered him the position, supposedly after being advised by his pastor. (FARR, 2008: 137-138).

Bob Seiple’s personality and his interpretation of the IRF policy proved essential to the future of the Office. He adopted a non-combative posture, relying primarily on the diplomatic dialogue, adopting an extensive travel itinerary from the beginnings of the IRF Office. For the ambassador, the religious freedom could not be advanced by sanctions, but rather by the very nomination of the CPC list, balancing the benefits or setbacks that each strategy could represent in a given country.

Seiple was theoretically subordinate only to the Secretary of State. In practical terms, Ambassador Seiple was a “special advisor on IRF issues in the bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, and […] subject to the broad direction and overall policy guidance from the assistant secretary for DRL.” (FARR, 2008: 142). During the first year of his term, Seiple did not meet the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once. Without the support from the Congress, let alone the IRF Commission, to delimit the extent of the Office’s activities within the bureaucracies in the State Department, the isolation and disregard towards IRF policy tended only to increase.

The bureaucratic labyrinth imposed a slow pace to the works of IRF Office. Seiple reported, in an interview to the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs (FARR, 2009) that, in order to have published a simple op-ed, he had to submit the text to the revision of 55 officials in Department of State. In fact, all of them listed some change to it. To people unused to the slow-paced rhythm of the governmental decision-making core, even the emission of a simple memorandum can turn into a battle.

In Seiple’s case, the first trench to be fight was the Bureau Democracy, Human Rights and Labour (DRL), where the IRF Office is located until the present days. Initially, the hierarchical relation was balanced by the mutual respect between Seiple and John Shattuck, by then the DRL’s secretary. Months later, when Shattuck was replaced by Harold Gongju Koh, the relationship hardens. According to Farr, the distressing factor was the absence of clear limits to the activities of the IRF ambassador or even the delimitation of the post to whom he should report. “Koh was faced with the presence of a senior official in his bureau whose lines of authority were not clear.” (FARR, 2008:143).

For two years, Ambassador Seiple fought a daily strife to confirm the legitimacy of the IRF Office and guarantee its dialogue with the other executive agencies. One of its biggest practical impediments was the lack of staff members to organize the meetings schedule with the Department of State, the conferences with religious leaders and NGOs or
to travel abroad. At first, IRF team it was composed only by the ambassador himself, a secretary and a halftime official lent from the DRL Office.

To the poorly structured Office, it was not even viable the elaboration of its first annual report. DRL’s personnel, then, were in charge of organizing the material, writing the hundred pages report and also pay for it. In favor of the partnership was the fact that the DRL was already used to that kind of task as they drafted annually the Country Reports on Human Rights. It was a consolidated practice, for example, the one of collecting data from the American embassies around the globe.

Nevertheless, the charge of one more report, exclusively about religious freedom, roused critics about the hierarchy of human rights and the overload upon the DRL Office. Besides material factors, there was a series of particular elements regarding the religious freedom approach and another scale of criteria for the management of the data to be used to elaborate the report.

The strategy defended by Seiple for the IRF Office was exhaustive negotiation, hence materializing the positive purpose of building a culture of respect to the religious freedom. In the following eighteen months, Seiple and his staff traveled to forty different countries, in an attempt of establishing a primary diplomatic engagement. Between January and June of 2001, he visited China and Indonesia five times, and he managed to talk to religious leadership in Russia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Laos, Austria, Belgium, Germany and France. (FARR, 2008: 148).

Seiple personally put himself against the punitive methodology of the sanctions. He deposited his trust in the strength of the US example. The ambassador was also contrary to the political-partisan usage of IRF policy, and criticized the offensive international proselytism, which made him target of the opposition from evangelical sectors, the Wolf-Specter coalition and, mostly, from Michael Horowitz. Even though he might have suffered great pressure from the State Department officials, and not entirely advanced the autonomy of IRF Office, Ambassador Seiple's term (1999-2002) was important to publicize the newest goal of American foreign policy. His personal experience as the director of World View has brought a sense of humanity to the IRF policy.

Among so many important episodes, stands out the struggle to include China as a CPC, which represented a gain of autonomy and legitimacy by the IRF Office in face of the structure of the American foreign policy as a whole.
In my mind, given a careful reading of the legislation and of what was happening in China, there was no reason not put them on. I knew, however, that this issue would make or break the credibility, viability of the Office. There were high stakes for us if we failed. We would never be able to touch any other country with multiple interest points for the US – commerce, consumerism, economics, etc. (FARR, 2009: 4)

By that time, the nomination of China as an “offender to religious expressions” was fully opposed by the East Asian and Pacific Bureau (EAP) and the National Security Council (NSC). They feared a possible deterioration of bilateral relations because of a public condemnation regarding human rights matters. The NSC members attacked Seiple’s initiative, as they affirmed that China did not sustain the level of a “systematic, ongoing and egregious persecution”. Relying on Madeleine Albright’s support, the IRF Office enrolled China to the first CPC list, in 1999.

After Bob Seiple left the IRF Office in September 2000, it took the Congress long twenty months to nominate the next IRF ambassador. In this period, the IRF Office was at risk of being completely integrated to DRL’s portfolio, due to pressures coming from the Congress itself and the IRF Commission. Concomitantly, George W. Bush administration made changes in both the foreign policy agenda and the bureaucratic approach. In the Department of State, Colin Powell organized an administrative reform, in which he reduced the number of staff members, ambassadors and advisors.

Without an IRF ambassador to fill and defend the position in IRF Office, there was a great fear that the position would end up suppressed or just completely subordinated to the DRL. The State Department personnel reform occurred at the same time as Lorne Craner’s nomination to DRL Office, which added pressure against the fragile institutional instrument created by the IRFA. The new secretary for human rights was much less sympathetic to the cause of religious freedom than his predecessors.

In the lack of a new ambassador appointment, Thomas Farr was in charge of the IRF Office for almost three years. He tried to arrange lectures and civil society gatherings, as well as meetings with Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu leaders. In 2001, John Hanford was considered to the position, but it took one year to be finally nominated. In May 2, 2002, Hanford assumed the IRF Office, the same day he was informed that IRF ambassador would no longer participate of senior staff meetings at the Department of State.

In the usual bureaucratic structure, the position of ambassador-at-large stands above the assistant secretaries. In this case, however, Ambassador Hanford was subordinate to Craner (then the DRL secretary) and ended up missing the scarce contact that Seiple had been able to establish along with the other State Department officials in that very confusing bureaucratic net of foreign policy making.
The Chinese impasse surfaces again during Hanford’s term. George Bush’s public condemnations of Beijing government religious persecution and the sanctions applied (such as the prohibition of exports licenses to equipment for crime detection and control) did not prove effective. Since 1999, China has been nominated, unceasingly, as a CPC. The Viet case, on the contrary, was the first success of IRF diplomatic bargain in which a country was withdraw from the CPC list. (FARR, 2008:197-205)

In 2006, the Viet government offered some important concessions for the benefit of religious rights in the country, altering including the Constitution. Critics pointed to the fact that Hanoi concessions were induced by the need to maintain the most-favored-nation treatment by American trade policy. Anyway, after been classified as a CPC for three years (2004-2006), Vietnam managed to get out of the list. Further advancements in CPC list were related to the American military interventions such as those in Serbia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

John Hanford’s legacy was to leave a consolidated IRF Office working autonomously. Relying on the support from the Congress, mostly that from Congressmen Chris Smith (R/NJ) and Frank Wolf (R/VA), the IRF Office grew their staff to 25 members, among its secretariat and officials. In 2005, it reached its autonomy regarding the production of the IRF Report. The diplomatic victories were gained case by case, as it was diminished the degree of religious persecution at stake and it could be seen the promotion of constitutional changes in the most intolerant countries.

As Hanford left the IRF Office, in January 2009, a new leadership void occurred. It took more than one year to Barack Obama nominate an IRF ambassador to the Department of State. In June 2010, Obama designated Suzan Johnson Cook to the position. Cook, a religious activist of an eclectic profile, had been the chaplain at the New York City Police Department since 1990 and a pastor at Bronx Christian Fellowship Baptist Church. She was also active in various social programs in New York, besides having funded and presided the Wisdom Worldwide Center.

The main critics towards Cook referred to her lack of relevant experience concerning either the human rights or religious freedom matter. In addition, she did not have experience in foreign policy-making. Thomas Farr states, in open opposition to Obama’s choice, that:
If the Obama administration were taking this issue seriously, it would choose an expert in international religious freedom with experience in foreign affairs. It would choose a proven leader who can change things at the State Department and re-energize our flagging IRF policy. (apud WAN; BOORSTEIN, 2010)

According to William Inboden (scholar associated to the Georgetown University’s Religious Freedom Project), "While Johnson Cook brought energy and devotion to the job, she faced several hindrances, including the office’s tertiary location in the State Department’s bureaucracy, the Obama administration's relative indifference to religious freedom, and her own lack of foreign-policy experience." (apud MARKOE, 2013)

Less than two years into the job, Suzan Johnson Cook resigned as ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom in October 2013. As head of the IRF Office, she tried to promote religious freedom policy not only establishing relations with government officials, but also with religious leaders. Suzan Cook stressed "The front lines demand strategic action, not emotional nor reactionary tactics, but strategic, prayerful action…Either we deal with it now or fundamental extremists can fill the power vacuums where regions have lacked democratic institutions." (apud MARKOE, 2013)

Analysts identifies the new vacancy at the post of IRF ambassador as a renewed opportunity to Obama’s administration to nominate someone with enough expertise to advance IRF Office purposes. In the other hand, as pointed Thomas Farr, “A continued vacancy will confirm the suspicion that already exists among foreign governments, persecutors, victims and American diplomats that the issue is not a priority.” (apud MARKOE, 2014)

Conclusion:

The present paper aimed to understand how religion has been valorized as an international affairs theme as much as to be incorporated at US foreign policy by State Department in 1998. In order to do so, it analyzed the socio-cultural basis of religious presence in the American public sphere, which represents a paradigmatic counterpoint to the modern and secular expectation of the contemporary times.

The historic separation of church and state that has shaped American politics is found on the opposite side to the steady presence of religion in the public space and in electoral dynamic, as the religious influence resides as a vector of support to conservative candidacies and to the backstage lobby in the Congress.

Amongst its particularities, the United States inaugurated, on the verge of the third millennium, a legal mechanism that includes the advocacy of religious freedom worldwide.
The IRFA has its origins in the Christian Right activism and, as consolidated in the Department of State, begun to face skepticism of traditionally secular diplomatic officials. The discourse built throughout its reports and public speeches highlight the United States as an heir of the religious freedom tradition and advocate of universal human rights. However, the promotion of religious freedom is still about to be integrated to the broader agenda of the American foreign policy.

All three presidents and all the Secretaries of State who have presided over the implementation of IRFA (Albright, Powell, Rice, Clinton and Kerry), have insisted that they support international religious freedom. But none has made any attempt to integrate the advancement of religious freedom into the foreign policy of the United States. (FARR, 2013:7)

The reach of the IRF Office activities are either the release of religious prisoners or the concession of asylum to refugees who have been threaten by their faith. If there is already a space destined to the religious freedom in the rhetorical ground, it is still a highly controversial subject to be brought to discussion during foreign policy decision making, especially regarding countries like China, Russia, Saudi Arabia or Iran.

Many biases are still permeating the IRF Office activities. In the United States, there are critics who consider the IRFA as a Christian Right maneuver intended to send missioners abroad, and others who do not trust the exportation of secular standards. Worldwide, this initiative is usually interpreted as a tool of American cultural imperialism and as a shortcut to the proselytism and activity of evangelical churches. We could not deny, however, that it must also be recognized as a pioneer attempt by the US government to incorporate the religious problematic into foreign policy agenda.

References:


