

The virtue of religion: rethinking America's approach to international religious freedom

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It is not uncommon today to hear *religious freedom* and *bigotry* used disparagingly in the same sentence. The American Civil Liberties Union, for example, [writes](#) that “the Trump administration has embraced a distorted view of religious freedom that is rooted in bigotry”. Whether intentionally or not, such pairing of terms casts religion itself in a dismal light, creating an unwelcome knock-on effect on American foreign policy. After all, why would an authoritarian regime take seriously American calls to respect religion if America itself is seen to deride its free exercise? Biden would do well to correct this inconsistency. But how?

To start, his administration might work from the ground up, recovering the much-neglected idea that religion is not primarily the object of partisan rights, but rather a positive strength of character—in other words, a moral virtue.

Religion as justice

In the western tradition, religion's association with virtue is long-standing. Virgil portrays Aeneas as an exemplar of religious piety, as one who follows the will of the gods. And John Adams, while praising the 1780 Massachusetts constitution, [opined](#) that (the Christian) religion equips citizens with necessary civic virtues. The medieval theologian, Saint Thomas Aquinas, speaks to Virgil's vertical and Adams's horizontal dimensions when, in the [Summa Theologiae](#) (ST), he defines religion as a virtue—specifically, a form of justice (ST II-II, 81, 4).

“A virtue”, Aquinas writes, “makes its possessor good, and his act[s] good likewise” (ST II-II, 81, 2). The virtue of religion thus works from the inside out, so to speak. As a manifestation of justice, it disposes a person to give due honor to God, through “sacrifice, adoration and the like”. And it orders that person's virtuous activities—visiting “widows in their tribulation”, for instance—towards God's honor. Religion thus “excels among the moral virtues” (ST II-II, 81, 1 and 6), with its vertical or transcendent source empowering compassion and service for others.

Would this approach to religion be appropriate for secular democracies like the United States? Perhaps not. After all, the separation of church and state forbids government promotion of religion. To conceive of religion as a virtue and to promote it through state mechanisms (as, say, tolerance is

promoted through [civic education](#)) would undermine an important institutional safeguard. Or so it is said.

Although well-intentioned, this hesitation is misplaced. As Cécile Laborde recently [argued](#), secular democracies are not characterized by a strict division between church and state. Instead, they feature democratic sovereignty, even in matters of religion. Despite popular belief in a [Jeffersonian wall](#), the United States *can* promote religion without violating its constitutional principles. Aquinas, too, lays down principles by which a state may promote religion while respecting the beliefs of its citizens: “Belief is an act of the will”, he writes, unbelievers “are in no way to be compelled into the faith” (ST II-II, 10, 8).

Religion in action

Assuming political liberal warrant, a virtue approach has potential to transform American foreign policy. Religion as justice—with its stress upon giving others their due—is a powerful source of moral reasoning. Committed to human dignity, regardless of background or national border, it animates calls to raise the refugee-resettlement cap (which Biden has [promised](#) to do) and to stop unequal treatment of Muslims (as happened with Trump’s [travel bans](#) and in [Tanzin v. Tanvir](#), a case involving FBI retaliation).

A looming question is whether, or how, religion will extend under the Biden administration to matters concerning abortion and contraception. If the Hyde Amendment and Mexico City policy are reversed, and if Trump-era exemptions to the contraceptive mandate are [rolled back](#), will the exercise of certain—and often conservative—forms of religious justice be possible? To give religion its due, the administration would do well to ensure that accommodations are readily available. Doing otherwise will not only alienate large segments of religious voices, but it will also silence an important source of social justice.

Religion’s insights

That religion (in its progressive *and* conservative forms) should be heard, speaks to the virtue’s role in the generation of moral knowledge—a necessary ingredient of foreign policy negotiation. Yet, as Thomas Farr [noted](#) in 2008, this aspect of religion is often overlooked. Insufficient engagement with Shia Muslims, including their spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was a key mistake (Farr suggests) of neoconservative efforts to build democracy in Iraq. Against Bush-administration hopes, a secular middle class did not create a thriving secular democracy.

Even here, Aquinas’s view of religion has something more to say. Religion, like any virtue, he claims, is aimed towards good ends: it is a “habit which is always referred to good” (ST II-II, 81, 2). Religion thus illuminates the ends, or objects, of others’ moral concerns. Attuned to it, foreign policy makers are equipped with invaluable insights. Deaf to it, they lack a clear understanding of the moral—and religiously motivated—goods at stake.

Listening to rights claims, of course, may also provide moral knowledge. But not all concerns are voiced in terms of [rights](#). Moreover, it is a function of virtue—especially temperance—to seek clear-eyed moderation. A good way to achieve this is through patient dialogue, something often missing in today’s combative rights discourse. Thus, in addition to on-the-ground measures, continued use of the annual [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom](#) (an innovation of Secretary of State, Mike

Pompeo) and of the State Department’s religious freedom training (as required by the [2016 Wolf Act](#)) may be prudent means for the Biden administration to respect, and to learn from, religious communities abroad.

A saint for our times

Are there strong prospects for a virtue approach to international religious freedom? With the Biden administration, there is room for hope. Building upon established foreign policy institutions, learning from religious perspectives abroad, accommodating religious exercise across the political spectrum—each action is within Biden’s reach, each would exemplify religion as a moral virtue.

Perhaps, then, Biden might consider following the previous administration’s surprising lead—by proclaiming a new “[patron saint](#)” of international religious freedom. With Aquinas’s feast day soon after the inauguration, the saint’s perspective on virtue—as a complement to Thomas Becket’s contentious [jurisdictional](#) approach—may indeed be of the moment.