

## *World of Faith and Freedom:* Seeking True Religious Freedom

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Religious tolerance. It is a familiar concept, one which permeates every level of modern society from the first grade classroom to global leaders' conference rooms. In *World of Faith and Freedom*, Thomas F. Farr argues that "religious tolerance" has evolved into a type of negative liberty, aimed only at preventing religious conflict.<sup>1</sup> Many in American society, including liberal internationalists and rationalists, ignore the fact that religious freedom, the achievement of the American Republic, was not merely a "negative" separation of church and state, nor did this freedom exile religion to the private sphere where it no longer could threaten the stability of public life. Farr rejects this view, identifying the relationship between religion and politics as "twin toleration, that is a political covenant that trades a ban on establishment for the active involvement of religious individuals and communities in the democratic public square on the same basis as other members of civil society."

The intent is not for this review to become mired in semantic pedantry, analyzing the difference between toleration and freedom, but Farr makes an astute distinction that contains serious real-world policy implications. Overall,

Farr concludes that religion has been marginalized to the point of obscurity and irrelevance, an occurrence that has detrimental effects on the practicality and effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. He goes so far to argue that the U.S. government's only significant acknowledgement of the importance of religion in shaping democracies has been through reactionary humanitarian aid, not through proactive foreign policy. Farr avers that culture matters, that the faith versus politics dilemma is reconcilable, and finally that religion is in fact a public concern, not just a private one.

In recent years there has been a shift in American political thought on the theories of democratization back to a more cultural point of view, though not to the extent of the Cold-War era emphasis on ideology. But even in the cultural theories prevalent during the Cold-War period, which assumed ideology to be the key determinant of regime types, institutions of liberal civil society excluded religion, even arguing it had to be separated from society in order for democratic institutions to grow and flourish. In order to overcome the cultural ambivalence towards religion, Farr focuses on the relevance of religion to cultural understanding on the basis of human nature. We are hard-wired to

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 127.

seek ultimate truth, Farr argues, and “to assert a right of religious freedom in this fashion is to affirm a truth claim about human nature and on behalf of human beings.”<sup>2</sup> The nature of God is still important in this equation, but the nature of human beings is the link between religion and culture. Farr further argues that in the foreseeable future, religion will have a significant and increasing impact on public matters in virtually every region of the world.

Religion’s relevance to culture does not just apply to countries experiencing the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism, but also to societies where religion is largely ignored. These societies, in order to expand their democratic liberties, must find a way to accommodate religion. For example, former Chinese president Jiang Zemin publicly stated that religion in China “may outlast the party and the state,” addressing China’s struggle to either accommodate religion or cope with social and political instability. Farr mentions that the growing popularity of religion, especially Christianity, worries the political elites in China. Unlike Tibetan Buddhism or Islam, the Chinese directly associate Christianity with both Western imperialism and China’s past humiliation.<sup>3</sup> The government is forced to choose between ruthlessly suppressing religion and channeling it into efforts for the public good. One can easily see, from this one example, that it is irresponsible for foreign policy to ignore a key determinant of the cultural society, and therefore the political climate, within any state.

Farr does not hesitate to critique those who would push religion out of the political sphere. “Where religious liberty truly exists, citizens are

certainly free from torture and abuse, but something far more transformative and durable has occurred in the political order.”<sup>4</sup> Farr claims there is a positive relationship between faith and politics. He bases this on the hypothesis that the mutual accommodation of faith and politics serves the common good. This mutual accommodation consists of religious liberty matched with limits on the power of religious communities. Farr attributes the common misunderstanding of religion and religious freedom to the misused concept of “pluralism.”<sup>5</sup> To those who view religion as divisive, the privatization of religion is a useful dispersion of passion. Similarly, many treat religion merely as an interest group, whose proliferation helps democracy by restricting one group from accumulating too much power. Farr disagrees with those misguided conceptions of religion in politics, and reminds readers of America’s founding ideals. Invoking the nation’s fourth president and the architect of the Constitution, Farr states that “[James] Madison’s understanding was quite different from the views of modern skeptics in whose hands religious pluralism becomes a warrant for relativism and indifferentism.”<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, it is arrogant to assume full capacity for controlling or manipulating the larger forces that determine democracy’s fate. Once Farr leads his readers to see that religion drives culture and that, in many ways, democracy’s growth is less resolute than that of religion, he makes the argument that religion, properly exercised, can advance social and spiritual capital, and pluralism itself.<sup>7</sup>

In *World of Faith and Freedom* Farr is concerned with American foreign policy makers’ lack of

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

preparation and ability, both philosophically and bureaucratically, to address faith in the public sphere. It is easy to marginalize private faith, but if one acknowledges that faith does play a role in civil society, one must find a way to deal with it. It follows logically, then, that if religion is a public activity, it falls within the scope of government to interact with and moderate that activity in society. It is important to note that interacting with and moderating do not mean controlling. The idea of interaction and moderation, mutual accommodation, is paramount to Farr's argument.

Before any healthy discussion about the manifestation of the public activity of religion can occur, America's existing statutory policy of promoting international religious freedom needs to be detoxified, Farr adds. Fresh thinking about the relationship between religion and freedom needs to filter through society's aversions to the topic. These aversions can be found in any of the United States' diplomacy schools, including realism, liberal internationalism, and neo-conservatism, schools that assert religion is simply not a policy issue. To these dissenters, Farr responds, "the world is steeped in religious thought and action" and "the agencies charged with understanding the world and furthering American interests in it are not yet up to the task."<sup>8</sup>

Farr asserts that society needs to recall the success in the past of reconciling competing authorities of religion and the state. The recognition of religion in the public sphere and as a

component to constructing foreign policy would aid diplomats in their efforts to deal with politically sensitive areas of the world, areas in which religious fundamentalism or religious culture still plays a huge role in society, including the Middle East. As Farr puts it, "If the United States stops peddling strict separation and privatization of religion and begins to address the ways religions can flourish within liberal states, it will be perceived as grounding its policy in respect rather than hostility or ignorance."<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Farr's *World of Faith and Freedom* quotes Alexis de Tocqueville to demonstrate its theme: "Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot." A bold claim, some would say, given the marginalization of religion in today's society, but one that rings with clarity and truth when religion is held to be culturally relevant, compatible with politics, and contributing to the public good. Herein is the difference between religious tolerance and religious freedom. Tolerance breeds separation, whereas freedom breeds an understanding of complementary goods. United States foreign policy, according to Farr, would be wise to understand the distinctions between the two. Liberty cannot govern without faith, indeed, and faith cannot flourish without the liberty to do so.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.