

Religious Freedom Matters

Foreign embassies tend to listen to public outcry for religious liberty.

Each year since 1999, the U.S. Department of State has issued a very interesting document: the International Religious Freedom report. It is released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, one of several bureaus in the State Department presided over by an assistant secretary of state.

But it took an act of Congress, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, to convince the executive branch of the U.S. government that religious freedom actually matters. The act also created a specific job in the State Department that had not existed: the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

The current holder of the title is John Hanford III, who has years of experience on Capitol Hill intervening with foreign embassies in specific religious-freedom cases.

The current report, for 2004, released in mid-September, is the best yet. If you want to know details of the suppression of, say, the Christian church in Laos or the followers of Bahai in Iran, or the unpleasant restrictions upon evangelicals in, of all places, Belgium, this is the resource for you.

Amounting to some 700 pages of very small print and probably several hundred thousand words, the International Religious Freedom report is not exactly bedtime reading. But in its degree of detail, in the even-handedness of its reporting

(improvements as well as deteriorations in religious freedom are noted) and in the ecumenicity of its coverage, the report is an exemplary exhibit of the U.S. government's doing something truly well.

Hundreds of human-rights officers at embassies and consulates all over the world participated in the reporting. In Washington, Hanford's staff carefully sifted through it all.

The report speaks volumes. It says that religious freedom matters so much to the U.S. government that it is prepared to spend millions of dollars annually investigating every aspect of the condition of religious freedom in every country.

The "Executive Summary" alone, for example, focuses on several "countries of particular concern," which notably include China and North Korea, and itemizes more than 30 specific states where conditions of religious liberty are seriously imperiled.

Under the section "State Hostility Towards Minority or Non-Approved Religions," the report ropes in Saudi Arabia, saying bluntly that "freedom of religion does not exist"; Pakistan, where "the government imposes limits"; Sudan, where "particularly severe violations of religious freedom" exist; and Uzbekistan, where it's noted that "serious abuses of religious freedom" occur.

There are some subtle distinctions pointed out as well. The report notes that "state neglect of societal discrimination against, or persecution of, minority religions" is different from "discriminatory legislation or policies prejudicial to certain religions"—a section that, interestingly, includes Israel. It also brings attention to actions of "denouncing

certain religions by affiliating them with dangerous cults or sects," referencing Belgium, France and Germany as examples.

Christians sometimes think that conditions of religious freedom in various parts of the world are not affected by what the American government or private agencies in the United States say or do. Not true.

When Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao made his first official visit to Washington in December 2003, President Bush specifically took up with him the issue of religious liberty in China. A persistent drumbeat of complaint from private citizens is particularly annoying to foreign embassies, which are normally obliged to report local public opinion back to their governments. But it yields results.

Do you remember Zhang Yinan, the Chinese Christian intellectual I wrote about in August who was arrested in September 2003 and sentenced to labor camp for something he wrote in a private prayer journal? The local authorities have begun to feel the heat from China's central government over his case and are seeking a face-saving way to release him.

Almost certainly, this came about because the United States and private bodies complained to the Chinese about his arrest.

Keep praying for those in prison (see Heb. 13:3) and don't stop sending those cards and letters. People read them.