

How Religious Freedom Has Become a Non-Issue in Our Country

“It would be difficult to name a single country in the world over the past 15 years where [the State Department’s] religious freedom policy has helped reduce religious persecution or increase religious freedom. ...”

That was the testimony of Thomas Farr, the widely respected director of Georgetown University’s Berkley Center. Farr was testifying before the House National Security Subcommittee of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. And in his original statement, he referred to “America’s **religious freedom** policy,” not the bracketed “State Department” I added.

But that is exactly the problem: The U.S. State Department is the nexus. It is there that American foreign policy is largely hammered out. And it is there that religious freedom is routinely hammered down.

Farr testified that some foreign policy professionals think it violates the **First Amendment** for the United States to promote religious freedom abroad. Others view the defense of religious freedom as a battering ram wielded by American evangelicals to open mission fields in hostile lands.

George Weigel, in a column at First Things, defended Farr and recognized the world historical import of religious freedom and America’s defense of this “first freedom.”

Why call religious freedom a first freedom at all? It is the first freedom listed in the **Bill of Rights**.

But more than that, our Founding Fathers so regarded it. James Madison’s *Federalist 51* states:

"In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights."

Madison knew whereof he spoke. He had been the legislative champion of Thomas Jefferson's historic Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, which, for the first time in history, established not a specific religion or a particular church but religious freedom itself.

Upon its passage by the Virginia General Assembly in January 1786, Madison proudly wrote to Jefferson in Paris that the statute would "add to the lustre of our country." This letter was written in the middle of our nation's critical period, a time when our country saw Shay's Rebellion, state repudiation of debts, the near collapse of the economy and American seamen seized with impunity by Muslim Barbary pirates.

In truth, Madison's glad tidings from Virginia may have been the only "lustre of our country" the young statesman could report. Even so, Jefferson while in France eagerly translated and distributed the handiwork of his state's lawmakers.

No late 18th-century European state, monarchy or republic could begin to approach America's new standard for religious freedom. And few nations since then have attained that highest standard.

Not only did this widely-commented-upon Virginia statute create a sensation among the *philosophes* of France and the Enlightenment thinkers of Europe, but America's religious freedom also began a surge in immigration by common folk yearning to breathe free.

All such understandings of the religious freedom foundation of American civil liberty and foreign policy seem long forgotten by the elites of today. The media cares little about religious freedom. The famous Rothman-Lichter study of 1981 surveyed 240 journalists from the prestige press. Of course, 80 percent of them voted one way, but a whopping 91 percent said they never

attended a religious service of any kind. No wonder CNN's Bill Schneider could famously say the media "doesn't get religion."

But if 91 percent of top journos never worship, they are a tent revival in comparison to our foreign policy clerisy. And there's the rub: Not only is religion not important in their own lives, but our top foreign policy thinkers also fail consistently to understand why religion is important in the lives of others—especially those restive peoples whom they are forever trying to explain to America's rapidly dwindling readership on **foreign affairs**.

It's no exaggeration to say the once-proud foreign bureaus of major American news outlets have atrophied. They look strangely like the church pews of the mainline Protestant churches that once played so prominent a role in American life.

Americans who do care about religious freedom need to speak up and make their voices heard. Thomas Farr is right: There is not one country in the world where U.S. policy—as enunciated by this administration and the permanent foreign policy elite—has moved "a country of concern" toward greater respect for religious freedom.

As a matter of fact, Americans' religious freedom is in grave jeopardy. We are forced to prop up and pay tribute to oppressive regimes abroad. Consider Egypt, Libya, the PLO. These are persecutors of Christians, Jews and off-brand Muslims.

But we are also taxed to support an administration that issues "mandates," including the Obamacare's contraceptive mandate. Some of these mandates are the greatest threat to religious freedom at home since 1786. It is no accident, as our non-believing Marxist friends would say. When those in power care nothing for religious freedom, all civil and religious liberty are at risk.

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