

Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Relations
Panel talk: Evangelical Reflections on U.S. Role in the World
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Beginning in the mid 1990s a new movement burst unexpectedly onto the international stage – a faith-based quest devoted to advancing human rights through the machinery of American foreign policy. This movement of unlikely allies passed a series of landmark congressional initiatives, each of which faced fierce opposition. They are:

- The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998
- The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000
- The Sudan Peace Act of 2002
- The North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004

In 2005 movement leaders set their sights on an even more ambitious goal: legislation aimed at implementing comprehensive long-term strategies for ending dictatorships around the world. If true to form, this legislation will pass at the end of the 109th Congress, in 2006, rounding out a decade of lobbying achievements.

As I argue in *Freeing God's Children*, this movement is filling a void in human rights advocacy, raising issues previously slighted – or insufficiently pressed – by secular groups, the foreign policy establishment, and the prestige press. We see this by a brief look at how the movement has erected a new human rights architecture in American foreign policy.

Prior to 1998 religious freedom was the step child of human rights. Human Rights groups slighted or sometimes even dismissed reports of persecution, especially

against Christians, and American diplomats were often ignorant of religious communities in their countries. That has changed through the scaffolding built by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Promotion of religious freedom is now a basic aim of American foreign policy. Because our foreign service must investigate and report on the status of religious freedom in every country, light is shined on abuses and policies advanced to ameliorate them.

Second, the interfaith movement plucked the tragedy of Sudan from the backwaters of international concern. Long before the tragedy in Darfur, Christian solidarity activists and their Jewish allies were warning about the nature of the Khartoum regime, whose racial and religious ideology led to a twenty year war on an African civilization, with two million dead and five million displaced over two decades. In a stunning development, pressure brought by the Sudan Peace Act and the movement led the government of Sudan to sign a peace treaty with southern rebel groups, ending Africa's bloodiest civil war. Advocates hope the same kind of pressure can bring some resolution to the conflict in Darfur.

To take another previously slighted issue, the trafficking of women and children into grotesque sexual exploitation and sweatshop labor metastasized in the freewheeling globalization of the 1990s. Yet the response by governments and some even some human rights groups was complacent until the religious community engaged the issue. Now because of the new law, and its vigorous enforcement by the State Department office on Trafficking, countries around the world are changing laws and practices, crime syndicates are being broken up, and emerging norms are taking shape. Women and children are literally being set free

Finally and most recently the faith-based alliance has focused attention on the North Korean regime of Kim Jong Il, whose abysmal human rights record includes a vast system of brutal gulags, wide-scale arrests, torture, and killings, and engineered starvation in which the authorities literally decide who eats and who doesn't. North Korean refugees who flee this hell are subject to rampant exploitation in China, or are sent back to face concentration camps or execution, especially if are suspected of being Christians. In response, the North Korean Human Rights Act expands protection for refugees, conditions U.S. humanitarian aid to North Korea on transparent improvements in access for people in need, and calls for the inclusion of human rights considerations in all negotiations with the regime. Included in the legislation is a special envoy with responsibility to champion these measures.

Any one of these initiatives is a major story, but together they represent *the most important human rights movement since the end of the Cold War*, a movement that is shaping international relations in ways unimaginable a decade ago.

Central to this movement are American evangelicals, heretofore associated with domestic skirmishes in the *culture wars*, but now increasingly engaged in international humanitarian and human rights causes. This engagement has facilitated unlikely alliances, as evangelicals provide the grassroots muscle for causes backed by a wide array of activists. Indeed, in various campaigns I watched conservative evangelicals team up with liberal Jewish groups, the Catholic Church, Episcopal leaders, Tibetan Buddhists, Baha'is, secular human rights groups, feminists, labor unions, and the Congressional Black Caucus.

What accounts for this international activism by evangelicals?

The answer can be traced to two developments that were moving in parallel fashion, like tributaries of a river, until they finally converged.

The first development is the tectonic shift of the globe's Christian population to the developing world, a momentous trend captured by Phillip Jenkins in his book *The New Christendom*. Whereas the vast majority of Christians in 1900 lived in greater Europe and North America, today at least 60% of all Christians now hail from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and the figure for born-again believers is probably higher. Given population trends, the shift to the global south will accelerate. Many Pentecostal and evangelical congregations, therefore, are increasingly nested amidst poverty, violence, exploitation, and persecution.

Through global communications, travel, and international development networks, American evangelicals increasingly hear about, and identify with, fellow Christians living amidst persecution and hardship. Indeed, in evangelical circles one routinely hears of "the suffering church" abroad, of 200 million Christians persecuted for their faith. These suffering Christians, and especially their indigenous leaders, are viewed as role models of Christian fidelity. Not surprisingly, some 70% of evangelical elites say that combating religious persecution should be a priority of American foreign policy. Beyond fellow believers, however, American religionists are awakening *more generally* to the afflictions visited on the world's vulnerable, fostering sympathy for their plight. Thus we see evangelical backing for global debt relief and AIDS funding for Africa.

The second development enables evangelicals to act politically on these concerns. Animated by distress over the drift of American culture, evangelicals have built a booming network of alternative schools, colleges, national associations, publishing houses, direct-mail groups, para-church organizations, and broadcast ministries. As Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam observed, American evangelicals have built the “largest, best-organized grassroots” social networks of the last quarter century.

As these two developments connect, the social networks of the evangelical world, born initially of domestic conservative impulses, are increasingly put in service of human rights and justice concerns normally associated with progressive politics – a striking development indeed. And my co-panelist Rich Cizik is one of the premier representatives of this phenomenon, and he deserves enormous credit for his leadership.

But I must end my remarks with a cautionary note. Can this movement sustain its vigor? The jury is still out on that question. We know from history that social movements are hard to maintain, that energies easily dissipate without constant effort and energetic mobilization, that new issues arise to siphon attention.

Here the case of Darfur gives pause. While some notable evangelical activism has focused on this massive human rights tragedy, to date it has not generated the same level of unified intensity we saw in the campaign for southern Sudan. I discuss a number of reasons for this in a piece coming out shortly in the journal *First Things*, but briefly I will highlight two.

First has been the recrudescence of the culture war. Thanks to the Massachusetts Supreme Court, gay marriage and the related issue of judicial appointments exploded onto the domestic agenda just as the Darfur crisis deepened. This clearly siphoned attention from Darfur. Indeed, one prominent born-again leader, deeply engaged in defense of traditional marriage on multiple fronts, admitted that “the timing” was not convenient for a full court press on the international front.

A second and related factor is the decentralized and entrepreneurial nature of the evangelical world, which provides both its vitality but makes coordination difficult on all but the most immediately salient issues. Ironically but tellingly, it took the prodding and buoying by leaders outside of the born-again community to help stitch together the evangelical elite in common strategies for prior international initiatives. Fragmented responses to the crisis in Darfur, therefore, reflect the ongoing challenge of getting high profile evangelical leaders – many with vast organizational maintenance demands – in the same place long enough to plot common strategies. One result is that the Bush Administration has not felt the same heat on Darfur it experienced on southern Sudan – which I believe helps explain why it has not acted with vigor equal to the crisis.

Why does this matter? In her searing book on American responses to genocides, Samantha Power recounted how a national security advisor explained that the Clinton Administration did not act on genocide in Central Africa because “the phones weren’t ringing on Rwanda.”

Given their unique access to the president and capacity to reach millions, evangelical leaders can get the phones ringing on Darfur and perhaps move the U.S. government to greater action. This creates a special, almost fiduciary responsibility, and their response may tell us a lot about the future of the faith-based human rights movement.