

---

## Religion and Security in World Affairs: The Ethical Dimension

Todd Huizinga

Senior Fellow for Europe, Religious Freedom Institute

---

*The author delivered the following remarks at the 33rd International Military Chiefs of Chaplains [Conference](#).*

\*\*\*

Thank you Chaplain Barclay. It's a great honor for me to be here. I hope you'll find my remarks useful.

Yesterday [RFI Executive Vice President] Eric Patterson spoke about the Strategic Dimension of Religion and Security in World Affairs. Today I will venture some thoughts on the ethical dimension of religion and security in world affairs. It is my belief, and one of the bedrock ideas of the Religious Freedom Institute, where [RFI President] Tom [Farr] and Eric [Patterson] and I work together, that the ethical and strategic dimensions of religion and security are completely inseparable. Though they can be analyzed and discussed separately as we're doing at this conference, they are utterly of a piece in real life. The strategy without the ethics is flawed, incomplete and shortsighted; and the ethics without the strategy is unrealistic and utopian.

One of the challenges in dealing with the ethical dimension is that many – many who consider themselves foreign affairs realists – think that ethics are out of place, or at least that they are of far lesser relevance to success in world affairs than strategy. Many famous practitioners of world politics and many leaders who have waged war have also been skeptical of the role of ethics.

One of the most famous denials of the significance of moral authority in world affairs occurred at the Tehran Conference in 1943 at which U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin coordinated their military strategy against Germany and Japan and began to think about the post-war situation. When Churchill apparently suggested the possibility that the Pope be associated with some of the decisions taken, Stalin is said to have replied, "How many divisions does the Pope have?"

Stalin made a good point on one level, but he was wrong to dismiss the vital importance of the spirit in human affairs. I will discuss the role of another, more recent pope in world affairs, and his remarkably effective use of his moral authority, in a minute.

First, though, let me say that the interplay of strategy and ethics is fundamentally about what Henry Kissinger said was the essence of statesmanship: striking a balance between stable power relations and legitimacy, the two main objectives of world order. Foreign and security policy, viewed from this perspective, is about two things that must be in balance: the strategic use of power in the pursuit of national interests, and the necessity of legitimacy to effective statesmanship. In the long run, power cannot be sustained without the legitimacy that comes from moral authority. It is only moral authority – the compelling rightness of a just cause – that can gain and hold the allegiance of peoples' hearts and minds over the long run.

I've already referred to the Tehran Conference in 1943. Let me tell you two other stories from the World War II era. Both of these exemplify the interplay of strategy and ethics, power and legitimacy. In both of these examples, religion looms large as a central factor in foreign and security policy. In his State of the Union address in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of the war, Franklin Delano Roosevelt noted the global threat to what he called three "indispensable" American institutions: "The first is religion," he said. "It is the source of the other two – democracy and international good faith...In a modern civilization, all three – religion, democracy and international good faith – complement and support each other...Where freedom of religion has been attacked, the attack has come from sources opposed to democracy...And where religion and democracy have vanished, good faith and reason in international affairs have given way to strident ambition and brute force...the defense of religion, of democracy, and of good faith among nations is all the same fight. To save one we must now make up our minds to save all."

Let me give you a second example, from President Roosevelt, of the interplay between power and legitimacy, an interplay that includes religion and religious freedom at its center: In 1941, Winston Churchill and he had signed the Atlantic Charter, which set out the British-American war aims and a joint vision of the post-war world. The Atlantic Charter declaration was one of the important steps toward the establishment of the United Nations a few years hence. Commemorating the first anniversary of the Charter, President Roosevelt in August 1942 issued the following message:

"A year ago today the Prime Minister of Great Britain and I, as representatives of two free nations, set down ... a declaration of principles common to our peoples... [Now] a great union of humanity [has formed], dedicated to the realisation of [those] ... purposes and principles ... through world-wide victory over their common enemies. Their faith in life, liberty, independence, and religious freedom, and in the preservation of human rights and justice in their own as well as in other lands, has been given form and substance as the United Nations...If the forces of conquest are not ... defeated there will be no freedom, no independence and no opportunity for freedom for any nation. It is, therefore, to the single and supreme objective of defeating the Axis forces of aggression that the United Nations have pledged all their resources and efforts. When victory comes we shall stand shoulder to shoulder in seeking to nourish the great ideals for which we fight."

Roosevelt's message was not overblown rhetoric meant to serve narrowly political purposes. Roosevelt spoke the truth. And he was proven right: The interplay between power and legitimacy, strategy and ethics, the willingness to stand up militarily and make great sacrifices for what is right, is what won the largest and deadliest war in world history.

Approximately 45 years after World War II was won, the West prevailed in the Cold War as well, a long, drawn-out struggle of attrition between the Western democracies and Soviet communism. All of the threats and troubles now arising out of Russia should not distract us from the amazing victory of the West that toppled totalitarianism in Europe, put an end to the Soviet Union, and brought new hope to millions.

How was the Cold War won? In his book *The President, the Pope, and the Prime Minister: Three Who Changed the World*, John O'Sullivan advances one theory of how it was won. He describes how Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher and Pope John Paul II together helped bring down communism, each one of them using their principal strengths to enhance the effect of the others. Reagan's primary strength was military; Thatcher's was economic and cultural; and John Paul's was moral. John Paul's decades-long efforts that severely weakened and ultimately helped topple European Communism could be summed up essentially as a determined and persistent campaign for religious freedom – in his native Poland, and throughout the East Bloc.

As pope, John Paul visited communist Poland three times. His third trip in June 1987 came at a time when Poland's authorities realized that they would not long be able to govern over the opposition of the Catholic Church. That had been made clear already that January, when Poland's head of state General Jaruzelski traveled to Rome, hat in hand, for an audience with John Paul. Now, in June 1987, the pope's visit helped bolster and revive the pro-democratic Solidarity movement. John Paul had insisted on visiting Gdansk, the birthplace of Solidarity. There, before an audience of probably more than a million people, he spoke powerfully of the rights of workers to "make decisions concerning the problems of the whole of society." That was a direct challenge to the government's claim to absolute power, and it was a key part of the effort that ultimately led to the first free elections in the East Bloc two years later, on June 4, 1989, in which Solidarity was elected in a landslide and the government defeated.

Needless to say, it was the ethical dimension, the moral authority of the pope in his fight for religious liberty and human dignity, that gave him the huge influence he had.

So the strategic and the ethical are interrelated. They belong together. Both are necessary. Both the strategic and the ethical dimension were key to what were probably the two most important security successes of modern history: the defeat of Nazism and its Axis allies in World War II, and the defeat of Soviet Communism in the Cold War. And the commitment to religion and the struggle for religious freedom were central to all of that.

And it is no different today. If you look at the world today, religion just simply *does* play a huge role in world affairs, and the ethical dimension of it looms large. Around 70-80 percent of humankind lives in areas where religious freedom is either broadly suppressed or denied in its entirety. Significantly, the countries from which the greatest military threat arises are also places in which religious freedom is denied: China brutally persecutes Uyghur Muslims, Christians, Falun Gong, and other religions; in Russia the oppression of Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant evangelicals has been particularly egregious in recent years; Iran harasses and persecutes Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews,

the Baha'is, Zoroastrians and other religious minorities; in North Korea the adherents of any religion suffer unspeakable atrocities, especially Christians.

The greatest deniers of religious freedom are also the greatest security threats to the democracies of the world. And the reverse is also true. As Will Inboden points out, "There is not a single nation in the world that both respects religious freedom and poses a security threat to [the democracies]."

How does one respond ethically to these challenges to religion and religious freedom? There can be no single answer to that question, because what is feasible and what is not feasible will be different in every case. Every situation is different, regarding the exact nature of the religious freedom problem, the means available to influence or change the situation, and the possible consequences of action or non-action that must be weighed. There is never an easy answer, never a substitute for what Joseph Nye calls "good judgment and contextual intelligence" when deciding whether and how to intervene.

But I would maintain that there is at least one general rule that should apply in every case: we must remember that religious freedom is an unalienable right that belongs to us as human beings. It is an integral part of *who we are* as human beings to practice the faith in which we believe. Thus, it is an ethical obligation of the world's democracies to do what they can to protect religious freedom. And again, the question of what is possible, of what we can do, must be decided in each case, partially through the prudence and vision of the political leaders, partially through the democratic process in each of our democracies.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo named perhaps the one thing we can always do. He urged the allied democracies to "exercise our moral voice" to confront assaults on human dignity. We should not shy away from that obligation, except under extremely unusual circumstances.

Let me name one other way in which the ethical dimension interacts with the strategic, and does so at its core: In order to formulate and implement a coherent policy concerning each strategic question, one must first decide what the national interest is in regard to that strategic question. After all, there can be no strategy without having first determined the national interest in each case. But determining the national interest is essentially ethical, before it is strategic:

International relations scholar Arnold Wolfers, a pioneer of the realist school of foreign relations, said it this way: "the interpretation of what constitutes a vital national interest – and how much value should be attached to it is a moral question."

The American philosopher and diplomat Charles Frankel, as quoted by George Weigel, said that "the heart of the decision-making process ... is not the finding of the best means to serve a national interest already perfectly known and understood. It is the determining of that interest: the reassessment of the nation's resources, needs, commitments, traditions and political and cultural horizons – in short, its calendar of values.' In debating the national interest and the national purpose....A country's citizens are debating who they are as a people, and what they want to be, for themselves and for the world." (George Weigel, *Idealism Without Illusions*, pp. 233-34.)

I'd like to conclude with two observations. First: You as chaplains make an invaluable contribution to the ethical dimension of security. And you make this contribution every day, in your day-to-day work of chaplaincy. You encourage in your nation's service members the virtues that religious faith brings, virtues that are necessary in the military as they are in every other institution in society – and for that you richly deserve our thanks.

Here is my second observation: If God exists, then that makes a difference – in everything, certainly including world affairs.

God's existence – his greatness and our smallness – (to say nothing of the difficulty of making moral decisions in world affairs), gives us, if we are thinking rightly, something that is absolutely necessary to true ethical reasoning: a consciousness of our limitedness. In short, it gives us humility. God's existence encourages us to be humble.

Let me illustrate that with a pearl of wisdom from Abraham Lincoln, arguably the greatest of all United States presidents. Lincoln governed at a time in which the country was torn apart by a bloody civil war, fought over the greatest blight on American history, namely slavery. And he was a brilliant and very involved commander-in-chief of the U.S. armed forces during that war. Providing as he so often did a radical example of the wisdom of humility, Lincoln once said:

"I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go."

Humility regarding oneself and reverence in regard to the transcendent – that is at the heart of the religious ethic. Reminding service members of this wisdom of humility, and of the blessings of reverence toward God, modeling this, and shepherding them in living that out – that is something that chaplains are better equipped to do than anyone, and it is a vital contribution to a strong, courageous, compassionate and humane military.

With that, I conclude my talk and thank you for your service in the chaplaincy.

---

*Todd Huizinga serves as Senior Fellow for Europe at the Religious Freedom Institute. A U.S. diplomat from 1992-2012, Huizinga is the author of numerous books and articles, including The New Totalitarian Temptation: Global Governance and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe (New York/London: Encounter Books, 2016).*

---



All views and opinions presented in this essay are solely those of the author and publication on Cornerstone does not represent an endorsement or agreement from the Religious Freedom Institute or its leadership.

**Permanent Link:**

<https://www.religiousfreedominstitute.org/cornerstone/religion-and-security-in-world-affairs-the-ethical-dimension>

The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

**Religious Freedom Institute**  
316 Pennsylvania Ave. SE | Suite 501  
Washington, D.C. 20003  
202.838.7734 | [rfi.org](http://rfi.org)