RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ADVOCACY AND THE CHALLENGE OF PLURALISM:
PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the promotion of religious freedom among a representative selection of evangelical groups in order to identify a set of ethical principles for advocacy that take into account contemporary pluralism, best practices derived from the social sciences, and core debates within Protestantism over religion in public life. The three case studies presented here cover political mobilization by American evangelicals, rights-based development by Coptic evangelicals in Egypt, and transnational religious freedom advocacy represented by the Institute for Global Engagement’s efforts in Vietnam.

The primary social science methodology employed to examine these advocacy and mobilization efforts is Social Movement Theory. Each of the three case studies examines how each group identified a political issue, framed the issue according to its ideological outlook, developed political resources to address the issue, and mobilized its resources to resolve its grievances. This study explores the limits of religious mobilization through the theological critiques of leading Christian theologians and public intellectuals such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Stanley Hauerwas. These critiques highlight the paradox of Christians seeking to maintain the integrity of their faith while seeking to exercise political power. It also examines approaches among religious freedom advocates that transcend the common mobilization narrative in an interdisciplinary way that
increases their effectiveness and mitigates concerns about the polarizing effect of identity group politics. The result of this analysis is a set of principles for religious freedom advocacy that reflects practical observations from the field and addresses theoretical and theological concerns. The principles are as follows: (1) Christian leaders should emphasize within their own communities the central role of the universal free conscience that appears in scripture, theology, and tradition, and the implications of this in a pluralistic context. (2) Christian public engagement in defense of religious liberty should be consistent in its emphasis on freedom and justice for all religious and nonreligious groups in society. (3) Religious freedom advocacy should emphasize the role of faith groups serving the common good through participation in civil society. (4) Religious freedom advocacy groups integrate their work with others across religious and social identity lines.
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CHAPTER ONE
Religious Freedom Advocacy and Pluralism

Introduction

In the United States and around the world, religious groups seek protection from what they observe as encroaching government restrictions and rising social hostilities.\(^1\) This issue remains at the forefront of many debates over the role of religious groups in society. The question arises as to whether current rhetoric and mobilization approaches are sufficient to address religious freedom concerns.\(^2\)

This project examines the different modes of religious freedom advocacy at work among contemporary Protestant organizations, including evangelicals, in the United States and in international contexts. It examines how a cross-section of religious networks and organizations tackle the pursuit of religious freedom in the contemporary context. From the case studies examined here, four principles emerge that help religious freedom advocates avoid the pitfalls of past efforts and produce a more robust and lasting presence in the pluralistic public square.

In addition to sociological analysis of how Christian groups have mobilized in the public square, these principles draw upon current conversations within Protestantism


about the role of Christians in a pluralistic secular society. This includes the perspective of those who would advocate a retreat from a public square they see as incommensurable with Christian ideals, as well as the perspective of those who seek an enduring presence for Christians in civil and political life. If adopted, the principles outlined in this project will help ensure the success of religious groups seeking greater religious freedom and lasting public influence, while staving off the corrosive effects of partisan politics.

In this study I will examine three modes of religious freedom advocacy and public engagement:

- Local evangelical mobilization in the United States, exemplified by the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act and the anti-Sharia movement in the mid-2010s.
- In-country organizations operating with high social and political hostilities, exemplified by the work of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services
- Religious freedom initiatives that traverse national boundaries, exemplified by the work of the Institute for Global Engagement’s work in Vietnam.

The case studies were chosen as representative forms of public Christian engagement that show how the challenges of pluralism shape the behavior of religious freedom advocates. Woven throughout the following case studies are examples of how Protestant Christian groups are changing the way they view their role in society, and debating internally how they should respond to the rapidly changing political and legal
landscapes of the early 21st century. Taking stock of those developments will assist leaders in the various movements within Protestantism in understanding the trajectories that are being set forth in the coming decades and inform their own contributions to public debates.

By using a common methodological analysis of the case studies in the project, I chart a path through the paradox of faithfulness and engagement to reach a set of guiding principles for religious freedom advocacy. Throughout the project, the leaders in each case study find themselves in circumstances that are unique to a post-modern, pluralistic age in which many groups are struggling to find both protection for their constituencies, and faithful expression with respect to the public order. In each case, the possibility of Christian public dialogue is tested, and the strands of civil discourse and pragmatic reasoning required for Christian engagement are drawn from the evidence.

**Methodology**

This study employs tools found in Social Movement Theory to analyze religious freedom advocacy among three domestic and international Christian groups. This methodology was chosen because it best illustrates the anatomy of mobilization among groups seeking a remedy to an injustice or advance a human right. The political process of identifying a grievance, raising support for an address the grievance, and putting pressure on those in power for political change constitute the current paradigm of how political change is pursued in modern democracies.

Social scientists employing this methodology attempt to make a holistic assessment of how a movement forms, executes its agenda and goes into decline. This
includes examining the group’s underlying ideology, how it defines its agenda, why members join, the resources used to advance the cause, and the consequences that flow from a group’s mobilization.³

Researchers studying the internal mechanisms of social movements are largely concerned with the narratives groups construct for themselves, and how the outlooks, values, principles found in these narratives manifest themselves in practice. Social Movement Theory (SMT) offers useful tools for this kind of analysis. SMT gets behind a group’s behaviors to find the cultural and organizational resources that drive their public actions. This ranges from the various groups’ ideological components, their ability to reach a certain audience, and their ability to move that audience.

SMT works particularly well through case studies since it provides a mechanism to look inside how a given group works to expand a set of rights or address a grievance. A social movement is defined here as a group engaged in collective action, drawing upon a dynamic interplay of factors to address a grievance or dissatisfaction with institutional or cultural context.⁴ The change sought by social movements range from changing laws for the self-protection of the group, to prescriptive social changes that a group wishes for the larger society in which it is situated.⁵


⁴ This is a slightly modified version of the definition found in: Bob Edwards and David Snow, “Resources and Social Movement Organization,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, Kindle. David Snow, Sarah Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), Kindle Location 2274.

⁵ Ibid.
Social Movement Theory encompasses a family of methods that attempt to explain the life cycle and effects of social movements, particularly those that have the objective of effecting a political or social change. Researchers in this field examine a wide variety of groups. In recent years, social movement theorists have broadened their base of inquiry to religious groups seeking political or social change.

The techniques are inherently interdisciplinary, drawing upon a variety of tools that can help explain the collective action of a movement, its ability to locate and draw upon resources for mobilization, and how their behavior fits into the political process of a given context.

The field has grown in its sophistication and influence over the past five decades. In 1975, William Gamson wrote a seminal study called *The Strategy of Social Protest*, in which he assesses a series of groups in American history that have attempted to gain influence with or extract concessions from those in political power. In the study, Gamson defined “success” for a social movement in two ways, either the group (and its agenda) gains acceptance in the larger culture, or the group extracts legal and social advantages as a result of their challenge to the political status quo. Gamson observed that the pursuit of success in social or political change is determined in large part by the how the group defines their goals, chooses their tactics, and how they organize around their goals. Gamson argued that how groups handle these challenges determines whether the group is
successful in achieving the success they seek, or whether they are co-opted by the agenda of another group or otherwise fail in their pursuit of change.⁶

Gamson places a heavy emphasis on the ability of the organization’s leadership to gather the potential energies of their constituents, and focus the movement’s membership on a defined course of action: “Mobilization is a process of increasing the readiness to act collectively by building the loyalty of a constituency to an organization of group of leaders.”⁷

In recent decades, other researchers extended SMT’s range of the inquiry. For example, Sidney Tarrow supplemented Gamson’s framework with the observation that social movements are further defined by the cultural resources they contain. This includes attributes such as shared understandings of the world, a relatively dense social network connecting its members, and organizational infrastructures that can rally the members to collective action on a given issue. He argues that, even a smaller group can be a forceful opponent to more powerful players in the public square if it can harness the social networks and political infrastructure of its constituents. Yet, movements both large and small are subject to political opportunities that present themselves within the ebb and flow of contentious politics.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 15.
Robert Benford and David Snow sought to a method of identifying the internal processes in which like-minded social groups are organized into movements. They identified the role of “framing,” or constructing a definition of the movement’s grievance as a critical component of movements mobilization. These grievances are applied to the cultural and political resources that a movement possesses, which launches a cycle of protest by the group. Benford and Snow observed that the way the grievance is framed is constrained by the culture and values of the group undergoing mobilization.\(^9\)

In a critique of his own field, Robert Benford, pointed out that much of the literature in this area concentrates on the rise of successful social movements and their political campaigns, and not so much on those that have failed.\(^{10}\) Some scholars have sought insights into the failure of social movements and the inadequacies of current social movement theory to describe why they decline. For example, Kim Voss of the University of California-Berkley identified “cognitive encumbrance” as a factor in the sometimes rapid decline of social movements. Cognitive encumbrance reflects the tendency for a movement to create a self-reinforcing narrative that marginalizes voices within the movement that present evidence of a new context the group needs to grapple with, or flawed image of the world outside the movement.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Kim Voss, "The Collapse of a Social Movement: The Interplay Of Mobilizing Structures, Framing, And Political Opportunities In The Knights Of Labor", *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements* (1996): 256.
Benford also argues that some SMT literature relies on circular, unverifiable claims with respect to the connection between how a group frames a grievance, and how successful they are in mobilizing for change: “We tend to work backward from successful mobilization to the framings activists proffered and then posit a casual linkage between the two.”\textsuperscript{12} Recognizing the limits of the closed-system analysis that Social Movement Theory tends to rely upon, Benford suggests examining factors that reach beyond the straight-line picture that Social Movement theory suggests. He says this would require an interdisciplinary understanding of how groups coalesce, in addition to studying how they affect their political and social surroundings.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite the critiques, SMY has proved itself as a useful method of inquiry for religious movements. Along these lines, Mayer Zald also argues that the field of Social Movement Theory needs to broaden its base of understanding in terms of what a social movement is, and the way its attributes are assessed by researchers in the field. Zald argues that this area of inquiry can focus on a variety of social phenomena beyond what is traditionally considered a social movement as well as informal networks of ideologically like-minded people that collectively move toward a political objective.\textsuperscript{14}

Among the groups Zald recommends for further study are religious groups, which have at times, he argues, escaped the gaze of social movement researchers. Zald, with

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 423-424.
\end{flushright}
John McCarthy, identified churches and denominations as well as para-church organizations as crucibles of the type of social movement organization that this methodology is designed to describe. They see religious groups as one of the chief facilitating forces behind social movements, contributing to both the social fabric from which movements arise, as well as the values and worldviews that helped drive how grievances are framed and political opportunities are seized. Zald argued that the interdisciplinarity inherent in Social Movement Theory extends to the study of religion: “It is clear that the study of social movements from a resource mobilization perspective and the study of the transformation of and within religion have much to offer each other.... Both the sociology of religion and the sociology of social movements can be invigorated by continuing this interchange.”

Particularly since the Sept. 11th Attacks, religion as a catalyst for mobilization has captured the attention of social movement theorists. Religious groups are now facing classic social movement questions, such as: “What are the motives for political activity by religious groups? By what means to these groups facilitate political action? What features and political conditions of the political system provide them opportunities for effective political action?”


16 Ibid., 95.

John Hannigan observed that “spirituality and contemporary social movements are part of the same socio-cultural fabric.” Hannigan’s observations regarding the nature of religious movements reflects the overall trend in SMT toward a more holistic look at how people gather around ideologies and organize into social movements. He noticed that religious movements often express themselves as social movements to defend themselves against a state or a dominant culture that they find threatening in some manner. He also sees religious groups taking proactive moves to achieve a new status quo that is aligned with their values and worldview. He argues that underlying both religious and political/social involvement is an effort to resolve the tension between their personal religious lives and the contentious world of politics, “attempting to overcome the split between a public world of competitive striving and a private world that was supposed to provide the meaning and love that make competitive striving bearable.”

Hannigan also recognizes the phenomenon of globalized religious movements that make transnational mobilization among religious adherents possible. He observes that the resources for religious movements have expanded in the age of globalization. Whereas religious movements once were primarily concerned with local and national issues, today’s religious movement are able to communicate and coordinate with their co-religionists around the world. This includes the ability to agitate for change in contexts

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19 Ibid., 321
far from the homes of those mobilized to call for political change on an issue important to a religious community.

The critiques of Benford, Hannigan and others show the limitations of traditional Social Movement Theory. This includes the underlying social and cultural factors behind the formation of protest groups, as well as the range of groups considered “movements” subject to SMT analysis. These critiques have shown a way forward for today’s social movement theorists by opening up the range of inquiry to include groups that escaped the gaze of SMT researchers. This includes religious groups that act as powerful social movements in the public square.

When religious groups deploy resources or field public arguments, they do so with a set of values and principles tied to their group identity. This methodology seeks to find the relationship between these values and principles and the groups’ public behaviors. Using SMT to observe how well these values and principles survive political engagement and mobilization can help contribute to recommendations for groups hoping to preserve and expand religious liberty while remaining authentic to their faith tradition.

The qualitative approach used here allows for a deeper analysis of the how these groups and their members put into practice the religious and political ideas that they have adopted. The lived religious and political experience of the people involved in these initiatives requires a form of inquiry that is difficult to quantify through, for example, a survey analysis.

As in other major world religions, the global family of Christian communities transcends national boundaries, cultures, and political affinities. As Christianity continues
to grow, it is becoming less white, wealthy, and western. Demographic shifts in the faith are under way, moving the religion’s center of gravity from the West to the global South. In addition to the umbrella label “Christian,” these communities carry distinct identities, formed through the dynamic interaction between their sacred texts, historical challenges, and the stories they construct about their place in the world.

Developing an understanding of how Christian groups in various contexts form their defining narratives and mobilize according to these narratives is an interdisciplinary task. By using SMT as a methodology in this project, the subjects of mobilization (i.e. religious freedom, human rights, etc.) are examined with respect to groups identify their grievances, how they frame their arguments in the public square, and how they pursue a remedy. The objective here is to illuminate how believers exercise their voice in the public square with respect to religious freedom advocacy, as well as how they view themselves as people of faith, political citizens, and neighbors to those outside their faith.

Two approaches within the Social Movement framework that are particularly useful for this study are framing and resource mobilization. In short, framing theory examines how a group articulates an issue in a way that prompts their constituency into action. Resource mobilization delves into the practical and ideological resources put into play by a social movement to advance its cause.

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Investigating how arguments are framed and resources put into play by religious organizations provides a gateway into the interdisciplinary study of these movements within Christianity. Other researchers have utilized social movement analysis as a point of entry for the interdisciplinary examination of religious groups. For example, Ziad Munson employed similar approaches to examine the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the mobilization of pro-life groups in the United States. The arc of similarities in his studies and this project warrant a brief look at the factors and effects he observed. In each case he took stock of the role theological and political ideas play in mobilization, in balance with other factors that draw participation from religious individuals.23

Munson’s goals included identifying the role ideas play in mobilization with respect to organizational and political resources. In his study of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, he discerned factors that historically strengthened the group. In a nutshell, the Brotherhood’s organizational structure made it easy for Egyptian Muslims to join, and employed a structure that thwarted government efforts to repress the organization. He also observed that the group intertwined religious beliefs with its political agenda in such a way that it readily gained like-minded supporters, providing some resiliency against government repression. Third, the Islamic message of the group was framed in such a way that it related directly to the daily lives of Muslim Egyptians.24


Operating as a protest movement from its founding in 1928 until 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood offered a religiously-infused alternative to autocracy. Yet, the group’s ideology proved troublesome when it took the reins of power. The group’s failed effort to govern is often attributed to the Brotherhood’s effort to monopolize power and undemocratically reshape Egypt according to its ideological vision. Munson found that its unique mix of social ideology and particular Islamic interpretation pervades the Brotherhood’s historical structure and message. This contributed to its popularity and decades of resiliency in the face of government efforts to stamp out the group, but was not effective in building a government itself.

Munson extended his argument regarding the role of ideology as one among several resources for mobilization in his study of pro-life groups in the United States. He argued that identifying religion as merely a set of ideological propositions does not account for all the mechanisms that accompany those beliefs, why those beliefs are employed and not others, and the limits of those beliefs with respect to the goals of a given group. Rather, he observed that religious groups generate a dynamic interplay between institutions, ideas, and rituals.

Of note, he also found that many activists joining pro-life mobilization efforts were not always drawn from the pool of true believers in the cause. Rather, participants came from a variety of theological and political perspectives, including “pro-secular” and


pro-choice individuals, who changed or solidified their beliefs in the cause only after they had joined the mobilization efforts. Munson attributes this to the strength of institutional, social and experiential factors that lie outside of ideological or theological commitments.

Examining the inventory of resources used by religious movements further illuminates what is behind mobilization on a given issue. In addition to the ideological resources that contribute to the cohesiveness of the group, there are a series of boots-on-the-ground resources as well. This includes associations and coalitions formed specifically to address a grievance, as well as events such as public meetings, vigils, demonstrations and the like. Charles Tilly defined the purpose of the mobilization actions as “WUNC” displays, demonstrating the worthiness of the cause (W), the unity of the group around the cause (U), the sufficient numbers to give it credibility (N), and the commitment they have to overturn the status quo (C).

The framing structures and the resources used for mobilization point to the nexus of two domains. The first domain incorporates the components of a religious community that inform the identity they wish to practice and protect. This includes products of their subculture, including in-group media, their unique theological perspectives, as well as the character of their worship, moral commitments of the community, and their ability to convince outsiders to join their cause. The second domain determines the capacity of a

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27 Ibid., 582.


given religious community to participate in a pluralistic public square. This includes identifying shared political interests with other religious or nonreligious communities, emphasizing a larger national or ethnic identity, and by communicating the tangible contributions to the common good by the religious group.

Through the lenses of framing and resource mobilization, this project will highlight cases where religious freedom advocates approaches have served their stated objectives, as well as instances where advocacy campaigns have stalled over competing rights claims. Emerging from this is a practical and conceptual set of principles for denominations and para-church organizations hoping to engage the civil and political arenas in a way that transcends the limited effectiveness of identity politics.30

Case Studies

The case studies that appear in this project were chosen according to the following criteria. First, taken together they present clear examples of the three main modes of Protestant/evangelical group mobilization relevant to the contemporary context. This includes the form of domestic American evangelicalism that remains a powerful political force in the United States. This mode is represented by American evangelical mobilization for the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, and the subsequent anti-Sharia mobilization efforts within the same group. The second case represents the rising importance of Protestant/evangelical groups in the global South. In this case, the project

examines the public role played by Coptic Evangelicals in Egypt as an example of local religious public engagement independent of the agendas and oversight of Western denominations and para-church organizations. The third case study examines the role of globalized religious organizations that work across international boundaries to effect change. The Institute for Global Engagement was selected for this case study because of its emphasis on religious freedom advocacy, its representative challenges regarding the framing of its diplomatic role in a conversion-oriented evangelical context, and its ability to engage both governments and religious actors far beyond its own borders.

The first case study will compare evangelical mobilization behind the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act with contemporary mobilization among many evangelicals against the American Muslim community. This case illustrates the critical role a pluralistic perspective plays in advancing or hindering religious freedom in the United States. It introduces evidence contrasting the exclusive vs. inclusive approaches to religious freedom advocacy. The story behind the mobilization effort to pass the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act indicates the practical importance of an approach to political pursuits that are inclusive of other religious and political groups. By eventually organizing their political strategies with activists and policy experts across religious and party lines, evangelicals played a large role in landmark legislation that created institutions within the United States government designed to monitor religious freedom issues around the world. The legislation had first emerged as a bill focused on the plight of Christian minorities, but was soon rivalled by proposed legislation with an expanded focus. The story of how the final legislation came about demonstrates how concern for
Christian persecution was used as an initial catalyst for mobilization, but viability for the legislation depended on a pluralistic approach that sought to protect the religious freedom across the spectrum of faiths.

This example is contrasted with the anti-Sharia movement among evangelicals, which sought to characterize the American Muslim presence in the United States as a threat to the American court system and national security. Evangelicals were mobilized according to a problematic view of American Muslims, which resulted in legal efforts to restrict the Muslims from ostensibly attempting to introduce Islamic religious law into American courts. As anti-Sharia legislation failed to produce the results intended by evangelical activists, new lawsuits and model legislation were introduced designed to restrict the use of any religious law, including Catholic canon law and Jewish law, in binding arbitration by any religious community. In this way, a mobilization effort that sought to restrict the religious freedoms of one group resulted in a threat to many religious groups, including the evangelicals’ Catholic allies.

This case study addresses the need in contemporary SMT analyses to seek examples of both successful and failed contemporary mobilization efforts. The passage of IRFA legislation was a victory for evangelicals, with lessons to be learned within the nuts and bolts of the process for those seeking effective mobilization in the future. Likewise, the anti-Sharia mobilization efforts were a defeat for evangelicals seeking greater religious freedom at home and abroad due to the insularity of their efforts, the clear inconsistency between their call for greater Christian religious freedom and their campaign targeting Muslim Americans, the co-option of the evangelical movement in the
service of political players outside evangelicalism, and the overall failure of the effort to effect the change they desired. While the successes of the IRFA campaign fits squarely into the model of successful mobilization outlined by Benford, Snow and others, the failures of the anti-Sharia campaign act as an example of what constitutes failure by a social movement outlined by Gamson in *The Strategy of Social Protest* (co-option by another group, inability to gain a broader social consensus, and the inability to extract legal or social advantages.)

Both the mobilization effort to pass the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) and the evangelical anti-Sharia mobilization efforts lend themselves to social movement analysis. In particular, the internal process of mobilization outlined by Benford and Snow is particularly evident. In each example, the group undergoes a period of “framing,” in which the key grievances are identified that will be the subject of mobilization efforts. In the case of IRFA, the primary frame initially focused on the persecution of Christians overseas. For anti-Sharia advocates, it was the fear that Islamic law would become incorporated into the American legal system. Each example also takes stock of the political and social resources at hand. In the case of IRFA, a host of resources were included in the mobilization effort to pass national legislation, including rank-and-file evangelicals, Capitol Hill lobbyists, legislators and political allies on both sides of the aisle. The resources used by the anti-Sharia campaign relied heavily on rank-

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and-file evangelicals to stir sentiment over the issue, alongside evangelical members and allies in local and state government to seek legal changes.

The next case study examines efforts by Egypt’s Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS). Since the Arab Spring, Coptic Christians in Egypt have suffered increasing persecution and violent social hostilities. CEOSS’s civil society efforts are part of a twin strategy for governmental and societal engagement that they hope will result in greater religious liberty and reduced social hostilities. The leaders of this organization believe that violent extremism can be mitigated by addressing needs related to poverty, disenfranchisement, unemployment and other pressing social issues. They believe that actively seeking to relieve these pressures will prevent some Egyptians from seeking violent remedies to their grievances. CEOSS remains closely engaged across different strata of government, from local councils to national leaders. This strategy emphasizes their unity with other Egyptians across demographic lines and keeps open a conduit for communicating their own concerns among government leaders.

This case study employs social movement analysis by examining CEOSS’s unique, two-pronged approach to framing and mobilization. The process of framing occurs with the Coptic Evangelical community itself in the form of identifying a form of public engagement for their members that is consistent with the teachings and values of their faith. The cause of mobilization is framed around what they see as the Christian imperative to help the poor and oppressed in their community, regardless of their faith or social status. They utilize the tools outlined by SMT for mobilization as the mechanism for their service to others. This includes the process of framing, gathering resources,
assessing political opportunities and mobilizing a wide variety of vulnerable groups seeking greater human rights in an oppressive context. This highly strategic effort to identify ways they may practice their faith in a country that ranks low in religious freedoms and demonstrate their commitment to the pluralistic public good provides a strong example of this project’s principles of engagement at work.

CEOSS has deployed a particular type of rights-based development they see as consistent with their role as a Christian community in Egypt. This approach trains members of vulnerable communities to identify and secure their rights according to national and international law. This emphasis on public rights includes and transcends religious freedom advocacy, and engages Egyptian citizens across the country’s religious, social and economic demographics. Their active pursuit of human rights across Egyptian society draws upon cooperation among both Muslim and Christian Egyptians to bolster a sense of cross-religious citizenship. In doing so, they have attained the support of each successive Egyptian regime. CEOSS’s pluralistic civic approach has also reduced suspicions toward the organization that have endangered its ability to remain politically and social engaged as a religious organization. This is all despite the fact that both orthodox and evangelical Coptic Christians continue to suffer government restrictions and social hostilities in this volatile country.

The third case study examines the Institute for Global Engagement’s effort to address religious freedom concerns across international lines. This includes IGE’s ongoing efforts in to relieve human rights and religious freedom concerns in Vietnam.
This case study illuminates the process by which an international religious freedom advocacy group situates itself within both its home religious community as well as on the international stage. Using the tools of SMT, this case shows how the leaders of IGE endeavored to frame their non-proselytizing approach to engagement governments and religious groups as fitting squarely within the evangelical tradition.

IGE’s strategy employs what it calls a top-down, bottom-up approach by working among the country’s political leaders, as well as religious representatives who operate outside the country’s power structures. IGE’s leaders articulated the mission of the organization according to principles they find in Christian scripture and in the evangelical tradition. At the same time, they worked to assess the religious freedom concerns felt by Christian minorities in Vietnam, as well as the concerns of both the Vietnamese and U.S. governments with respect to religious freedom for these minorities.

IGE and the other groups examined here are each exploring ways to address the religious freedom needs they have identified in their unique contexts. The way these groups address these issues can either further their ability to freely engage the public square on this issue or lead to further conflict and religious restrictions.

The tools of Social Movement Theory provide a powerful way to delve into the patterns and processes behind the organization and mobilization of groups around a cause. SMT provides a system for assessing how a group mobilizes, and even offers a set of standards for judging whether a movement is successful in their push to remedy an injustice or advance a human right. For many secular political movements, pragmatic lessons found in social movement analysis may be enough to forge a strategic path ahead.
Yet, forming a set of principles about how religious groups should approach their public role requires another dimension of inquiry that can only be found within the tradition itself.

There is a substantial tradition of debate among Christians about the role of the faithful in public life. Competing normative claims tackle whether and to what degree Christians should engage the political process. Forming a set of principles about how believers should approach civil and political life requires taking stock of the normative arguments that continue to shape how Protestant groups see themselves in a pluralistic secular society. Integral with this examination is the idea that a Christian approach to public engagement must be consistent with the theological and moral outlook of the tradition itself. The following chapter outlines these debates as they relate to the contemporary context and provides context for this project’s principles of engagement.
CHAPTER TWO
Ethics of Engagement

The normative big issues that inform the moral outlook for public engagement also inform principles of religious freedom advocacy. Depending on one’s outlook, Christian engagement with the political process is either unavoidably necessary, or theologically impossible. Each carry with it a set of observations and warnings about the integrity and survivability of the Christian witness in society.

A touchstone in this project is the observation in Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. In this book, Niebuhr contends that political behavior among large religious groups tends to run counter to the moral ideals of its members, and almost inevitably veers into a power-play rooted in self-interest. This project tests his assertion that Christian political behavior in the contemporary political context almost inevitably tends toward a predatory stance against competing groups in society.¹

Niebuhr argued that this inclination has a bearing on how Christians should approach public life and the pursuit of justice and human rights: “The most perfect justice cannot be established if the moral imagination of the individual does not seek to comprehend the needs and interests of his fellows … Any justice which is only justice

soon degenerates into something less than justice. It must be saved by something which is more than justice [that is, love].”

According to Niebuhr, a Christian group or movement that does not cultivate a broader perspective of the common good is condemned to perennial conflict and a spiral of immorality and injustice. The evidence presented in this project seems to align with Niebuhr’s observations that seeking religious freedom for one’s religious community without a concern for all members of a pluralistic society defeats the overall project of addressing a need within the common good, and ultimately defeats the quest by the group to look after its own interests.

The case studies here indicate that Niebuhr’s argument remains relevant in that the contemporary rhetoric and mobilization of identity politics, from which religious freedom is sometimes argued. Yet, some examples emerge among the cases that counter Niebuhr’s pessimistic view of group behavior. These examples show that, when grounded in an ethic that meets the challenges of a pluralistic context, religious freedom advocacy by Christian groups can help mitigate cycles of political and social polarization.

The definition of an “ethic” is the collectively determined set of guidelines for conduct. What is a Christian ethic of engagement in the current context? In this case, the ethic contributes to how advocating for religious freedom and rights of conscience occurs among individuals and groups. I define engagement in public life as activities that

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3 Ibid., 257.

include both political activity (mobilization to support or oppose legislation, running for political office, etc.) and civil society participation (relief organizations, education partnerships, service organizations, churches, etc.). In this study, what makes the ethic “Christian” is the specific way practitioners in the various Christian traditions see the world and frame their public arguments in light of their scriptures and moral traditions.

Acknowledging the qualifier “Christian” indicates that it springs from a certain community on the world’s stage that has a unique (and often wide ranging) set of beliefs about humanity’s relationship with God. A complicating factor is that Christians make up a diverse community. Protestants are a fractious bunch, with evangelicals, progressives, Pentecostals, Anabaptists and others all offering competing visions of the Christian way of life.

As Christian ethicist Robin Lovin points out, Christians are not immune from seeing themselves as those who hold the key to social order (just as others in groups with a comprehensive worldview sometimes do as well): “We are always biased to see our own group or our own nation as representative of rational humanity. We should not be surprised that those whose experience differs from ours have different ideas about what natural law requires, and we should not expect that even people who are trying to be rational will come to the same conclusions unless they also share some traditions that shape them to share common values.”

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5 Ibid.
Considering this insight, this project offers a measured outlook as to who this ethic of engagement may apply to (i.e. Protestant or evangelical Christians), and acknowledges the pluralism inherent in the public square as well as the varieties within contemporary Christianity itself.

**An Ethic of Engagement**

One of the more fascinating features of Christian communities across the axes of time and geography is the ability to construct, contest and reconstruct the meaning and manifestations of their faith. Peter Brown, one of the world’s premiere authorities on early Christianity sees interpretive industriousness and inevitable division as an important survival feature of the faith: “What I do see in late antique Christianity is a constant, constant debate, constant hiving off of small groups, constant chatter. And I think that if Christians had not been so divided Christianity might have gone under. It might have become like Buddhism in China, a ritual alternative but not really interesting. It is the sheer capacity for fighting each other that kept Christians going.”

Timothy Shah observed a similar process of contestation and division continuing to the present day. Shah also sees this process as a survival feature among contemporary evangelical groups in developing nations. He observes this behavior as both limiting the immediate power of evangelical communities within certain contexts and securing their place within a society in the long-term: “For reasons deeply rooted in its belief and identity, evangelicalism does not constitute a single monolithic movement in the Third

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6 Peter Brown, video “What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?” (Georgetown University, 4 December 2014), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Hu0Ttv7Khc (accessed September 22, 2015).
World but a multitude of movements that divide and sub-divide in an endless ecclesiastical mitosis.”

Shah observed that evangelical social movements in different countries adopt perspectives and frame their grievances differently according to the national and cultural context in which they live. Evangelicals around the world may be identified by a more or less common set of theological ecclesiastical commitments, but their political leanings and manners of framing grievances and ways of taking advantage of political opportunities may vary widely. That is, where evangelicals in the United States may largely have an affinity for conservative politics, those in Europe or in the Global South may align politically with the left or remained attuned to a very specific set of grievances that escape these polarities.

This “hiving off” and “ecclesiastical mitosis” shows how theological and political perspectives, and the values and principles that flow from them, are in a constant state of re-negotiation. Economic pressures, the presence of other religious groups, new technologies, and a host of other influences interact with received traditions in forming how communities respond to their world. As a result, history has revealed a cornucopia of cultural and religious responses to outside forces within a faith.

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8 Ibid.

The dynamic of cultural change as it relates to mobilization unfolds as an intertextual process. Communities interpret authoritative texts (scriptures, for example) according to the challenges they face in their historic moment. The behaviors flowing from these interpretations impact the culture of the community. This, in turn creates new challenges for the community, and starts the dynamic process over again.\(^\text{10}\) The more one understands how this dynamic, intertextual process has unfolded over time, the more one may understand the dynamics involved in the formation of values and moral behaviors.

Our current historical predicament is one in which many communities, holding often incommensurable worldviews, must live alongside each other under a common political and social system. In some ways, it reflects the continual of the mitosis and hiving off observed by Brown and Shah. Disparate perspectives regarding the nature of humanity, the presence and role of God, and the placement of authority continue to divide segments of contemporary society.\(^\text{11}\)

With respect to styles of public engagement, American Protestant Christianity has divided itself for more than a century into three main categories. These can be simplified as: (a) mainline denominations characterized by a modernist approach to theology and a Social Gospel orientation to public engagement, (b) fundamentalists, exemplified by theologically-conservative denominations and sects that have removed themselves from public life, and (c) neo-evangelicals, populated by theologically-conservative Protestants


\(^{11}\) Ibid.
who broke away from fundamentalism in the 1950s in order to remained engaged in civil and political life.\textsuperscript{12}

21\textsuperscript{st} century debates over the proper role of Protestant Christianity in society carry forward the debates of the past, albeit with some blurring of the lines over how groups in each category behave. For example, many theologically-conservative and conversion-oriented evangelicals have re-discovered the value of providing social services that were once the domain of theologically-liberal followers the Social Gospel.\textsuperscript{13} Methodists such as Stanley Hauerwas (hardly a fundamentalist) draws upon Anabaptist theology to articulate a very influential arms-length stance against contemporary public engagement.

Meanwhile, Reinhold Niebuhr’s critiques echo through contemporary American Protestantism. Niebuhr criticized Christian liberals for abandoning the message of humanity’s imperfection and God’s revelatory role in history for the gospel of human progress, in effect discarding the theology of Atonement and ignoring the entrenched effects of sin: “Having made reason and history the means of redemption, it had no real place for the doctrine of [Christ’s] Redemption.\textsuperscript{14}

At the same time, Niebuhr’s general theological perspective about the enduring sinfulness of humanity and its need for redemption provided some common ground with

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the evangelicals such as E.J. Carnell and Billy Graham. Yet, Niebuhr criticized evangelicals for focusing too much on individual conversion as a catalyst for producing a more just society, and not recognizing the need to address injustice inherent in social structures. On this front, Niebuhr thought the Social Gospel, with all its faults, was “infinitely more realistic” than the individualistic pietism of Graham and other evangelicals. Niebuhr’s agreements and critiques of evangelicalism remains relevant in this study of religious freedom advocacy. As seen in the following case studies, evangelicals entering the realm of social change in the form of religious freedom advocacy are learning to address unjust social and legal structures in order to look after their own interests within the context of the common good.

A central argument in the contemporary debate about the nature of the Christian outlook and the possibility of public engagement in a pluralistic public square belongs to Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas’ Idealist position sees the chief role of the Christian in the world as maintaining his integrity with respect to the precepts of his faith: “Christian ethics does not provide solutions to moral problems that everyone understands. Christian ethics identifies the human qualities that make it possible for a community to follow Jesus and shows us how those virtues can be sustained. Such a life will make little sense


to people who seek other goals, but the aim of Christian witness is neither persuasion nor social transformation.\textsuperscript{17}

The heart of Hauerwas’ critique Christian political activism is not far from Niebuhr’s complaint in \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}. To a point, they agree that the current political system compels religious actors to violate ideals of selflessness integral with an authentic Christian witness: “Any consideration of the truth of Christian convictions cannot be divorced from the kind of community the church is and should be….For Christians no theory of justice can substitute for their experience and their discussion of what implications their convictions have regarding how they should care for and treat others within and without their community.”\textsuperscript{18}

Hauerwas sees this structural political problem as inimical to authenticity: “Put as directly as I can, it is not the task of the church to try to develop social theories or strategies to make America work; rather the task of the church in this country is to become a polity that has the character necessary to survive as a truthful society.”

Niebuhr and the Realists agree that the Christian must maintain their integrity, insofar as that is possible in a fallen world, but the central Christian role is to reach for social transformation. Christian Realists see their efforts as making halting but relentless steps to improve the public order, in full knowledge of their own limitations and need for group security. Lovin describes the Christian Realist as seeing “the human person is both

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 53.

\textsuperscript{18} Stanley Hauerwas, \textit{A Community of Character} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 1-3.
made in the image of God and separated from God by a sinful urge to seek security and power in the self. Realism approaches moral problems by maintaining this balance between human freedom and human limitations, between the transforming power of love and the restraining influence of self-interest. Christianity neither sinks into pessimism that thinks it can do nothing, nor allows itself to imagine, as reformers of all sorts have often done, that it can see the future so clearly as to transform this world into a new one.”

Acknowledging a Christian ethic for public engagement implicitly challenges the either/or question that drives believers to public engagement for the sake of the world’s redemption, or away from it for the sake of Christian purity and witness. One of the chief critiques of Hauerwas’ position is that it offers little practical guidance for Christians working in the political arena, government policy or a host of other positions where secular engagement is inherent, and where their absence would be felt by the Christian and non-Christian community alike. Christian Realists, including Niebuhr see the need to be engaged in the flawed and sinful secular public square as, among other things, being faithful to the biblical mandate to show God’s presence through work for the common good and go into the all the world. One of the main Idealist critiques of the Niebuhrian Realist perspective is that believers find themselves passively or actively endorsing coercion or violence by the state; an unconscionable position for the faithful Christian. Niebuhr’s classic position also seems to be situated in a historical, 20th century

19 Ibid., 56.
20 1 Corinthians 12:7, Mark 16:15
circumstance where the Christian outlook had a much higher standing in American
culture and politics.

To some degree, this study finds itself closer to the Christian Realist perspective,
since it strives for a continuing position of collaboration and competition with others in
the civil and political arenas. Even so, public engagement intent on protecting the
integrity and prophetic witness of a faith community may find itself at odds with the
dominant culture, or with potential partners from other communities.21

An ethic of engagement for religious freedom advocacy acknowledges the
common good of preserving Christian distinctiveness alongside that of other religious
traditions. Niebuhr acknowledges that the question of government-sanctioned violence
offers a challenge to the Christian Realist vision. However, he argues that violence is
sometimes a necessary evil to prevent evil from triumphing over good, and a Christian
life lived in the real world is always tainted with guilt at some level: “There is no escape
from guilt in history. This is the religious fact that Saint Paul understood so well and that
is so frequently not understood by moralistic visions of the Christian faith.”22

In the mid-1980s, the Yale theologian George Lindbeck observed that Christianity
was among religions that are “in an awkwardly intermediate stage of having once been
culturally established [as in Niebuhr’s day], but not yet disestablished.”23 Today,

21 Proverbs 1:21, Luke 3:4

22 Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Bombing of Germany,” Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion
and Politics (New York: Literary Classics of America, 2015), Kindle Location 10100.

23 George A Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology In A Postliberal
Age. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 120.
Hauerwas leads the way on the theme of the disestablishment of Christianity. He sees the role of the Church in society primarily as a witness. He offered his perspective in a nutshell after the Sept. 11th attacks, delivering a vision of the Church as a community increasingly estranged from American culture:

Christians are not called to be heroes or shoppers. We are called to be holy. We do not think holiness is an individual achievement, but rather a set of practices to sustain a people who refuse to have their lives determined by the fear and denial of death. We believe by so living we offer our non-Christian brothers and sisters an alternative to all politics based on the denial of death. Christians are acutely aware that we seldom are faithful to the gifts God has given us, but we hope the confession of our sins is a sign of hope in a world without hope. This means pacifists do have a response to September 11, 2001. Our response is to continue living in a manner that witnesses to our belief that the world was not changed on September 11, 2001. The world was changed during the celebration of Passover in A.D. 33.24

By 2017, Rod Dreher pronounced Christianity irrevocably disestablished, and the liberal political order inherently hostile to a faithful Christian life. In The Benedict Option, Dreher points to a qualified public withdrawal and a contemporary take on monastic discipline as a way for the Church to weather the moral decline of civilization. Though Dreher sees the church’s salvation in building a stronger sense of Idealism, he paints a dark picture even for the Church in withdrawal: “The culture war that began with the Sexual Revolution in the 1960s has now ended in defeat for Christian conservatives. The cultural left—which is to say, increasingly the American mainstream—has no intention of living in postwar peace. It is pressing forward with a harsh, relentless occupation, one that is aided by the cluelessness of Christians who don’t understand

what’s happening.” Dreher concedes that Christians “cannot afford to vacate the public square entirely.” He envisions a “prophetic” role for the church, speaking Christian truth to politicians from across a divide, and perhaps occasionally working with those on both sides of the aisle on certain topics. He sees Christian engagement in the public square as “fragile” and walking a fine line between political cooperation and complicity in creating an immoral public order.

Critics of the trajectory envisioned by Dreher and Hauerwas say their vision of the Church leads to increased isolation and a muted witness, with suffering as a by-product of the Church’s distance from non-Christian culture and politics.

On the other hand, Niebuhr argued for a central presence of Christians in public life, where they could act at some level as a moral compass for the political order. Though Niebuhr was the Christian Realist, par excellence, 21st century realist theologians have placed him within a succession of Christian Realists that stretch across Christian history and reveal a broader application of their perspective.

Augustine of Hippo is counted as one of the first Christian Realists. In City of God, Augustine sets in high relief the religious and political polarization of the 5th century Roman empire. At the time Augustine wrote the work, Christians were being blamed for the sack of Rome because of their abandonment of traditional Roman religion. For Augustine, the Earthly City (i.e. the non-Christian public order) is set in complete

26 Ibid.
dualistic opposition to the City of God (the community of faith and its ideals). Yet, they were not entirely separated by incommensurability when it came to practical matters and the common good. Some of the goods sought by those of the Earthly City (peace, justice, human flourishing, etc.) are in fact goods created by God that can be obtained in this world.

Augustine saw the rulers of the Earthly City as existing in a state of ignorance, and sometimes opposition, to the form those goods take according to God’s design. Nevertheless, he saw that Christians have a role to play. Rather than shunning involvement in the public square, Christians should help bring about a society that produces peace, justice and other features of the common good. Although a perfect society can never be obtained during the City of God’s pilgrimage in the Earthly City, Christians can play a role in the penultimate expression of God’s intent by building consensus with others around the goods that God has for human society, goods that ultimately require a moral orientation to God’s design. The perfect order can only come at the eschaton, but that does not preclude the effort to create consensus around the goods that God has to offer in the Earthly City:

In this life, therefore, justice is present in each man when he obeys God, when the mind rules the body, and when the reason governs the vices which oppose it, by subduing or resisting them. Also, it is present when man begs God for the grace to do meritorious deeds, and for pardon for his offences, and when he duly gives thanks to Him for all the blessings he receives. In that final peace, however, to which this justice should be referred, and for the attainment of which it is to be
maintained, our nature will be healed by immortality and incorruption.\textsuperscript{28}

Martin Luther also plays a role within the Christian Realist tradition. That is, in Luther’s view, the personal orientation to the virtues of the Christian life are only attractive to a small portion of society, so the pursuit of Christian government is a foolhardy enterprise. Yet, he recognizes a religious role in the ordering of society:

To try to rule a whole country or the world by means of the Gospel is like herding together wolves, lions, eagles and sheep in the same pen, letting them mix freely, and saying to them: feed, and be just and peaceable; the stable isn't locked, there's plenty of pasture, and you have no dogs or cudgels to be afraid of. The sheep would certainly keep the peace and let themselves be governed and pastured peaceably, but they would not live long. Therefore, care must be taken to keep these two governments distinct, and both must be allowed to continue [their work], the one to make [people] just, the other to create outward peace and prevent evildoing.\textsuperscript{29}

Niebuhr saw the tradition of the Hebrew prophets as part of the Realist tradition. He was certainly no evangelical in the contemporary meaning, or an inerrantist at any rate. This is seen in his analysis of the contradictory advice found in the book of Isaiah that remains relevant today. Isaiah 31 advises Israel to shun an alliance with Egypt against Assyrian invaders, relying instead only on God’s protection:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots, and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord. Yet he too is wise and can bring disaster; he does not take

\textsuperscript{28} Aurelius Augustinus and R. W. Dyson, \textit{The City of God Against The Pagans} (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), 961.

\textsuperscript{29} Martin Luther, \textit{On Secular Authority}, ebook (Waltham, MA: Fig Books, 2013).
back his words. He will rise up against that wicked nation, against those who help evildoers. But the Egyptians are mere mortals and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit.30

Niebuhr’s perspective on this passage anticipated some of Idealist arguments against his position. Niebuhr saw an earthly reliance on God alone as an ultimately disastrous approach to the peril faced by the Israelites, and a recipe for complacence in the face of grave evil in his day (which was contemporary with the rise of Hitler and atrocities of Stalin).31 Niebuhr echoes Luther’s remarks about the dangers of a Christian approach to earthly life that dismisses the need for coercive power: “Isaiah’s error re-occurs perennially in the history of Christian thought and life. It consists in the belief that God’s providence establishes a special immunity from disaster to a nation which makes itself worthy of such immunity by perfect righteousness. Actually, the historical process is not so simply moral. Nations, as well as individuals, may be destroyed not only by violating the laws of life, but also by achieving a defenseless purity, incompatible with the necessities of survival.”32

Niebuhr much prefers the nuanced view of Isaiah 45, which asserts God’s sovereignty over all of history as the prevailing factor when it comes to justice: “This prophet, in some respects the profoundest of all prophetic interpreters of historical

30 Isaiah 31:1-3 (KJV)

31 John Howard Yoder, for example took the opposite perspective with regard to this passage, asserting that a denial of God’s ultimate efficaciousness, and a quest for “effectiveness” in the world instead leads to some forms of fruitless social activism, and is tantamount to a sort of functional atheism.” John Howard Yoder, The Politics Of Jesus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 106, 227.

destiny, insists on the hidden character of God’s sovereignty over history, precisely because he is so conscious of the moral inexactness of any specific execution of divine judgment in the actual process of history.”33 In this vein, Niebuhr argues that the fact that Jesus as Messiah that did not bring about a political solution as his first followers had hoped epitomizes the perspective that God is working toward a horizon of perfection, partially through his people but ultimately according to His own schedule and purposes. The Kingdom of God that Jesus speaks of has arrived in a sense, but at the same time, it has not quite yet. Followers of Christ are caught in the tension between their own historical contingency, and the transcendent truth of the Gospel located beyond human reason:

Men are inclined in every age to resist a truth which discloses the contingent character of their existence and discredits the false answer to this problem of their contingent life in which they are always involved. To make faith the requirement of the ultimate meaning of existence is to recognize the divine mystery as impenetrable by human reason. To find that revelation in an historical drama and person is to understand history as potentially meaningful rather than meaningless. To experience a divine forgiveness reaching out to man in his predicament is to recognize that the human situation, both individually and collectively, is such that man is not only unable to complete his fragmentary life but that, viewed ultimately, there is always false and sinful completion in it. Thus faith is the final expression of man’s freedom; but it is an expression which involves the consciousness of an element of corruption in any specific expression of that freedom. It is the expression of his final freedom in the sense that faith achieves a point of transcendence over all the contingent aspects of man’s historic existence, individually and collectively. But it must contain a recognition of the contingent and the false element in all his actual knowing. It is thus recognized as a knowledge beyond the capacity of human wisdom, as a gift of “grace.” The New Testament insists that the

33 Ibid.
recognition of Jesus as the Christ is possible only by the Holy Spirit. This perspective has real-life implications for the believer. That is, Christ’s followers should not be swayed by the temptation toward an otherworldly perspective and way of life, which leads to complacency and a disregard for the needs of the vulnerable outside the community of faith. Nor in Niebuhr’s estimation should the Christian community become so enamored with the rationality of the modern age and the liberal political order that it loses the power of the faith and the promise of the perfection. He argued that a loss of religious faith was particularly dangerous, since faith in human rationality alone may lead one to a sense of meaninglessness. Rather, Christians should embrace the truth each perspective (as far as it goes), as they embrace the transcendence of God’s role in human history:

If the truth of faith merely becomes a ‘fact’ of history, attested by a miracle, or validated by ecclesiastical authority, it no longer touches the soul profoundly. If it is made into a truth of reason which is validated by its coherence with a total system of rational coherence, it also loses its redemptive power. The truth of the Christian Gospel is apprehended at the very limit of all systems of meaning. It is only from that position that it has the power to challenge the complacency of those who have completed life too simply, and the despair of those who can find no meaning in life.35

Niebuhr’s thought evolved during his lifetime. His critics, particularly those influenced by Anabaptist thought, zeroed in on his acceptance of violence by the state, as a theological error. Perhaps one critique of Niebuhr’s perspective relevant to today’s

34 Ibid., Kindle Locations 2483-2493.

context is his historical placement in the early-mid 20th century era of dominant Christian culture. The post-modern environment of the 21st century is arguably much different than Niebuhr’s world. His life intersected somewhat with the Civil Rights era, but it is hard to say what he would have thought of the ongoing battles in 21st century legal and cultural life.

Even so, Niebuhr’s thought about the nature of Christian ethics in public life may carry with it certain insights that remain relevant to the behavior and effectiveness of Protestant public engagement. Niebuhr was working in a cultural and political context that held Christian ideals with much more broad authority than today. Yet, some of his observations remain relevant when observing the public behavior of Christians operating as minorities in many countries.

Niebuhr wrestled with the Idealists’ complaint that it is impossible for the Christian community *en masse* to faithfully participate in the secular order. He also set forth an observation in his book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, that the political behavior of large groups almost always accommodates a predatory stance against competing groups in society.\(^\text{36}\) Niebuhr argued that this is the case even when members of the group (i.e. the Christian community) consists of honest citizens seeking a moral and ethical individual life. Niebuhr argues that this inclination has a bearing on how Christians should approach public life and the pursuit of justice and human rights.\(^\text{37}\)

\(^\text{36}\) Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 84.

\(^\text{37}\) Ibid., 258.
Niebuhr argued that group political engagement often means seeking justice exclusive of the welfare of those outside the group. According to Niebuhr, a society of individuals that does not cultivate this perspective is condemned to perennial conflict and a spiral of immorality and injustice. This viewpoint can be described as follows when it comes to contemporary religious freedom advocacy: Seeking religious freedom for one’s religious community without a concern for all members of a pluralistic society defeats the overall project of creating a better society, and ultimately defeats the quest by the group to look after its own self-interest in religious liberty.38

**Niebuhr and the Contemporary Context**

The search for a 21st century ethic of engagement leads back to Niebuhr’s doorstep. His denominational home was the (German) Evangelical Synod of North America, into which he was ordained in 1915.39 His pastorate attracted many beyond the German-American community, and his subsequent writings found wide appeal among those across denominational lines. After his ordainment in 1915, he pastored a church in Detroit attended by auto workers. During this time, he developed a public voice in defense of auto-workers, and the oppressed in general. However, he did not entirely accept the Social Gospel theological strain of leading thinkers such as Walter Rauschenbusch. Rather, he incorporated some elements of that theology with what he would later popularize as “Christian Realism.” After leaving his Detroit church in 1928,

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38 Ibid., 257.

having grown its congregation from dozens of parishioners to hundreds, he became a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He remained at this post for more than three decades.\textsuperscript{40}

Niebuhr’s Christian Realism saw the need for continued engagement in public life as part of a Christian’s duty to be salt and light in the world. He also argued that that Christianity had much to offer the “earthly city” in terms of identifying the character of social justice and the role of believers in fulfilling the promises of a liberal political order.

Niebuhr’s approach had several attributes. First, it recognized the effect of “original sin” as effecting all human endeavor, particularly in the realm of large group behavior. His work, \textit{Moral Man and Immoral Society}, set up a dualistic view of the good that can be accomplished by individuals and small groups (i.e. congregations), and the propensity toward evil of large groups and social movements. For Niebuhr, a peaceful utopia could not be obtained through Christian isolation from the world, nor from a purely secular order devoid of an ethical center. Rather, Christians doing activities prescribed by the Christian faith in the public order can help serve as a moral and ethical center of an otherwise power-centered social order. Christian Realist thought and action are situated between what one might call the Christian Expedients, those who attach their public hopes to political figures and social movements with attitudes and agendas far from the tenets of Christianity, and the Idealists, who see the public social order as incommensurable with Christian life and thought.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 27.
Christian organizations seeking to engage in religious freedom advocacy do so in an inflection point in history. Religious demographic changes in the United States, for example, have showed a trend toward greater diversification. A century ago, white Protestantism, and to a lesser extent white Roman Catholicism, were considered the cultural drivers of law and ethics.41

Today, some have characterized the current religious demographic trends as “the end of white Christian America.”42 Not only have mainline denominations experienced a dramatic drop in the number of adherents, American evangelicals have also experienced pressure in the general aging of those who identify with the movement, greater ethnic diversification, and slow growth among younger demographics.43

At the same time, the interaction of religious and nonreligious constituencies, with their competing values and sources of authority, has given birth to an increasingly polarized public square.44 From the late 20th century until about the turn of the millennium, the backdrop of this profoundly polarized moment in history was the “secularization thesis.” This assumption about the course of history arose as a prevailing idea among Western political theorists in the late 20th century. The secularization

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predicted the demise of religion as an authoritative player in the public square. In a nutshell, it argued that as modernity advances the role of faith diminishes. Early proponents of the idea, such as Peter Berger, characterized the social and political arenas as places where religion would inevitably recede. Science would replace church teaching as the chief interpreter of reality for the regular citizen. Reason-based political liberalism would replace the religious authority in political matters. Indeed, one could see the decline of church attendance across Western Europe as evidence of the march of secularism and the fading role of religious life. Yet, religion did not go gently into history.

Berger recanted his adherence to the secularization thesis, arguing instead for a global resurgence of religion. In his later years, Berger observed that public life is marked by plurality, with active and contentious religion as an enduring feature of global culture. Outside of Europe, religion had never gone away as a locus of authority for religious individuals and groups, or as a mobilizing force for democracy. Today, the demographic mix of believers and non-believers is becoming more pronounced. The recent Religious Landscape Study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life indicated a dramatic rise in the number of Americans who do not identify with a religious group, with a corresponding decline among Roman Catholics and mainline Protestant denominations. This group of “nones,” marked not only by their lack of adherence to a denomination but also by their secularity (if not also generalized form of spirituality).

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Even with this rise in secularity, the United States remains a deeply religious country. More than 70 percent of the population belongs to a religious group. At 22.8 percent of the population, the religiously unaffiliated come in second to the population of evangelical Christians at 25.4 percent. According to the study, evangelicals experienced a drop of less than one percent with regard to its share of the population and increased its net number of adherents by two million between 2007 and 2014.46

The question that rises out of the former idyllic secularist visions is how to manage this pluralism in a way that discourages violent conflict, protects the sector of belief, and leads to greater human flourishing. While Berger’s latter hypothesis about religious pluralism seems to bear some evidence, the degree of contentiousness that it has brought upon the public square, often with religious freedom at the center of controversy, seems to not have been fully anticipated by movements that now compete for a place of influence in public law and ethics.

Evangelical and Roman Catholic organizations are often at the center of the controversies stemming from the greater religious and ideological diversification of the public square. Disputes ranging from the hiring of denominational employees to the tax status of religious organizations, to public law about the coverage of birth control have a bearing upon the conscience commitments of adherents of these groups. The tension between protecting the pure expression of the faith (insofar as that is possible) and

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engagement with a public order that sanctions laws that run against the faith commitments of certain types of Christian adherents has a long history.

The question for religious organizations and individuals seeking greater religious freedom in the courts, and in the court of public opinion, is what principles for engagement they ought to follow. Old models of engagement that relied on cultural dominance seems untenable considering the greater diversification of the American public. Though evangelicals and Catholics advocating for religious liberty can point to some victories and some losses in the first two decades of the 21st century, a coherent ethic of engagement seems yet to be fully articulated.

Niebuhr’s (not to mention Augustine’s and Luther’s) insights about the role of Christians in society speak to the idea that faithful Christians have a role to play within whatever larger cultural context they find themselves in, and despite their own limitations as sinful human beings. Additionally, those who have pointed toward public retreat have also warned that retreat may itself may not be enough to save the community from the ever-increasing power of the state on the faith community.

A central concern for both Hauerwas’ perspective as well as Niebuhr’s is the inextricable draw of the Earthly City toward beliefs and actions that run against Christian

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48 Dreher, The Benedict Option, 3.
teachings. As noted, the effort to withdraw from public engagement may be ultimately impossible in light of obligations that might run against rights of conscience.49

If one buys Niebuhr’s argument that the faithful must remain engaged in public life to protect the Christian community as well as bring about the God-given goods of peace and justice, what does it look like in an age of religious and ethnic diversity? Niebuhr was skeptical of social movements and of mobilization on a large scale. However, today’s diverse landscape seems to require this to some degree. Political mobilization may have triggered Niebuhr’s distaste for large group behavior. It may also be a sign of what both he and Martin Luther warned against, the death of witness at the hands of those willing to use the tools of power for their own ends. On the other hand, Niebuhr makes a strong case that individuals and small groups have the ability maintain a religiously coherent approach to social engagement, while large groups cannot.

**Principles of Religious Freedom Advocacy**

The following case studies are examined through the lenses of SMT and the normative debates about the Christian community’s public role. These principles cover what works in a practical sense, as well as what is consistent with the Protestant/evangelical communities’ values. These values include the deep Christian tradition of the free individual conscience’s role in its relationship with God, the ethical life modelled and exhorted in scripture, and ideal of love to those outside of one’s

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49 Melvin Schmidt, "Tax Refusal as Conscientious Objection to War," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 43, no. 3 (1969): 234-246. Some Mennonites, for example, have experienced this for decades. This can be seen, among other instances, in their occasional efforts to avoid paying taxes to a government that would use their money to make war.
cultural or religious group. The principles acknowledge the need for faithfulness to one’s own tradition as found in the Idealist perspective, as well as the compelling arguments for participation in public life made by the Christian Realists. They also reflect the current pluralistic religious and social environment that may not have been fully anticipated by theologians such as Niebuhr, and may be off the radar of Christian Idealists. They also challenge the approach of what might be termed Christian Expedients, who may feel tempted, for the sake of increasing their own power over and against others in society, to attach their hopes to political groups and politicians who have little concern for Christian ideas if morality and justice. These principles are not meant to endorse or condemn a particular branch of Protestantism or theological outlook. Rather, they are intended to be flexible enough to allow the individuals and groups who find them useful to follow their own conscience commitments on the path to greater faithfulness and effectiveness.

- **Principle One**: Christian leaders should emphasize within their own communities the central role of the universal free conscience that appears in scripture, theology, and tradition, and the implication that has in a pluralistic context.

- **Principle Two**: Christian public engagement in defense of religious liberty should be consistent in its emphasis on freedom and justice for all religious and nonreligious groups in society.

- **Principle Three**: Religious freedom advocacy should emphasize the role of faith groups serving the common good through participation in civil society.
• **Principle Four**: Religious freedom advocacy groups should work with others across religious and social identity lines.
CHAPTER THREE
American Evangelical Political Mobilization

Evangelicals are a perennial force in American politics. Despite some demographic challenges, they are poised to remain a formidable group into the future. Many of today’s most visible and contentious battles over religious freedom in the American public square are tied to political and legal battles fought by evangelicals. Some of these battles directly challenge the idea of universal religious freedom on the United States, including lawsuits and legislation ostensibly fighting the specter of Sharia in the United States. These hotly contested lines cut across the political debates and campaigns utilized by mobilized ideological groups.¹

This case study examining American evangelical mobilization was chosen because it delves into behavior and trends of one of the most significant religious voting blocs in contemporary public life. The shape of American evangelical involvement in the political process also lends itself to social movement analysis. The following case study shows how the way evangelicals frame arguments, marshal resources, organize constituencies, and execute mobilization efforts demonstrates their rootedness in the liberal democratic process that Social Movement Theory was designed to describe. At the same time, it brings to the forefront some of the normative questions about Christian public engagement raised by theologians such as Niebuhr and Hauerwas. In a nutshell,

the examples assessed in this chapter show how evangelicals have at times worked in a pluralistic context for the public good while maintaining the integrity of their tradition, and at times mobilized against other groups in a way that runs counter to their values regarding religious freedom, arguably, Christian teaching.

This chapter explores how within the American secular legal and political framework, religious groups find their public voice. Charles Taylor points out that these voices are often tied to political identities as much or more than they are tied to a strictly religious expression.\textsuperscript{2} Taylor speaks of the Secular Age as coming in several forms, including the Age of Authenticity, the subjective Age of the World-Picture (à la Heidegger), and the Age of Mobilization. The examples of anti-Muslim mobilization from this chapter show how some forms of religious political mobilization strain against spiritual principles toward loving one’s enemy found in Christian scripture.\textsuperscript{3} This seems to support Reinhold Niebuhr’s argument against the morality of groups in \textit{Moral and Immoral Society}. On the other hand, one argument of this project is that immorality, according to a Christian ethic, not a \textit{de facto} product of group behavior among religious actors in the public square. One task of this chapter is to show the importance of leadership decisions in Christian advocacy campaigns, which directly impact the ethics of a group’s behavior. To demonstrate this, the following examples will delve into the internal and external mechanisms of contemporary religious mobilization to find where ethical strains may occur.

\textsuperscript{2} Charles Taylor, \textit{A Secular Age} (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 766.

\textsuperscript{3} Luke 6:27-36
Over the past two decades, two major issues have risen to the top of American evangelical and Catholic discourse: religious freedom and the presence of Muslims in the United States. These two issues reflect the perception among many American Christians that their role in society is defined by a two-front war against secularism and Islam. The culture wars have been waged in earnest for more than five decades. In recent years, social and political mobilization among evangelicals and Catholics has increasingly turned to religious freedom as a primary rallying cry.

Methodology

This study compares the American evangelical campaign for the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act with the ongoing social and political campaign against Islam and Muslims in the United States. This comparison will reveal a degree of symmetry in how evangelicals were mobilized on these issues. It reveals indicators that point to two divergent trends. That is, as Christian groups pursue universal religious freedom in a pluralistic environment they find success consistent with their own stated values and an increase in religious freedom for themselves and those of other faiths. Conversely, as Christian groups seek to wage a battle for special rights, or against the religious freedom/freedom of conscience for another group, they tend to fail their own principles of universal religious freedom and reduce religious freedom in their own society.

To explore these arcs of mobilization, this chapter will delve into the form evangelical mobilization takes with respect to how political grievances are identified and how campaigns to remedy those grievances are carried out. The sources of rhetoric used
for this study include sermons and speeches by key mobilizers, published articles and books by activists, and the language of proposed legislation meant to expand or curb religious liberties. It will also examine the process by which mobilization campaigns central to religious freedom were organized and carried out.

The primary documents examined in this study include a range of public comments, newspaper opinion articles, literature distributed to constituents, podcasts and mass media broadcasts used by organizations and leaders to frame their grievances and argue for action among their constituents. These primary sources range from book-length treatments of a related issue, to social media postings. This study also includes examining legal resources that show how public arguments intersect with the legal framework that religious freedom advocates are trying to impact.

American Catholics, evangelicals, Mormons and other major religious groups have disparate ways they handle components of the culture wars. The controversy surrounding Kim Davis, a county clerk in Kentucky who refused to comply with a federal court order to issue same sex marriage licenses, offers a snapshot at the range of reactions from groups and individuals instrumental in religious mobilization. Davis spent five days in jail for contempt of court after the Supreme Court decision, *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same sex marriage across the United States.

Following Pope Francis’s visit to the United States in September, 2015, news emerged that he had met with Kim Davis before returning to the Vatican.⁴ On his return

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flight, the pope indicated that government workers possessed a human right to conscientious objection if they are asked to discharge duties that go against their conscience. Same-sex marriage activists, such as Dignity USA’s Marianne Duddy-Burke, who had been heartened by the irenic tone of the pope’s visit were alarmed at what appeared to be an emerging papal endorsement of Davis’s actions: “I was totally shocked, and I actually heard from a lot of LGBT Catholics and supporters who originally could not believe that this was true. And then as the details came out, you know, there was just a huge sense of betrayal and outrage. One person wanted to have a big bonfire and burn pope memorabilia, you know — just a real sense that this pope, on whom so many people had pinned so much hope, would do something like this was seen as a real slap in the face.”

The Vatican carefully responded to critics in order to mitigate the appearance that the meeting was an “official audience” with the pope, or a tacit endorsement of Davis: “Such brief greetings occur on all papal visits and are due to the Pope’s characteristic kindness and availability. The only real audience granted by the Pope at the Nunciature was with one of his former students and his family. The Pope did not enter into the details of the situation of Mrs. Davis and his meeting with her should not be considered a form

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of support of her position in all of its particular and complex aspects.” The former student and family mentioned in the Vatican press release was a gay man, his partner and a number of friends.

Long after the brief public relations controversy surrounding the pope’s meeting with Kim Davis, the debate continues among American Catholics and Protestants about how to respond to laws that potentially violate some aspects of their social teachings yet may also lead to greater polarization. Robert George argued that Davis was within her legal rights to resist what he described as an invalid legal opinion by the Supreme Court, and that Christians should be willing to go to jail to resist unjust laws: “There’s nothing in the text or logic or structure or historical understanding of the Constitution to justify a judicial intervention to impose any particular view of marriage on the states. It’s an anti-constitutional, illegitimate decision. It should be defied by public officials for the sake of the Constitution.”

On the other hand, Mormon leader Elder Dallin H. Oaks, offered a restrained approach that sought to avoid combativeness on the issue: “Differences on precious fundamentals are with us forever. We must not let them disable our democracy or cripple

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our society. This does not anticipate that we will deny or abandon our differences but that we will learn to live with those laws, institutions, and persons who do not share them. We may have cultural differences, but we should not have ‘culture wars.’

These and other examples demonstrate the lack of agreement among many religious groups that seek to maintain a voice in the public square yet maintain their theological commitments. The forms these controversies take seems to be expanding with each passing year. As a matter of focus, the cases here dig into two major campaigns launched by evangelicals that impact religious freedom advocacy. These cases are analyzed according to the classic arc of social movement mobilization. In a nutshell, the arc follows this model:

1. Grievances are identified and framed according to the movement’s values,
2. Resources available to the movement are used address the grievances.
3. Members are mobilized to change laws, urge reform, etc.

**Evangelical Mobilization**

After the September 11th Attacks, evangelicals began to wrestle with a response to Islam and the presence of American Muslims. Some evangelicals did not see Muslims as a menace or Islam as a monolithic, democracy-threatening entity. Rick Warren, the enormously popular and influential pastor of Saddleback Community Church has

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defended his partnerships with Muslims against criticisms from fellow evangelicals at the same time he argues for greater religious liberty in a pluralistic context.¹²

Warren was largely the exception to the rule. Influential evangelicals more often took a hard line against American Muslims and the religion of Islam. For example, Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Center, argued that Islam should not enjoy the same religious freedom protections under the Constitution as Christianity: “I defend religious freedom. However, as the founders understood it, those freedoms, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, all was [sic] under ordered liberty, meaning that it could not tear at the fabric of our society. And those who practice Islam in its entirety, it’s not just a religion, it’s an economic system, it’s a judicial system, and it is a military, a military system, it has Sharia law that you’ve heard about, and those things will tear and destroy the fabric of a democracy. And so we have to be very clear about our laws and retrain those things that would harm the whole.”¹³

Perkins failed to address the religious liberty concerns of American Muslims, including blocked efforts to construct mosques, and the spate of bills in local legislatures designed to curb the purported presence of Sharia law around the United States. This is despite data indicating an uptick in government restrictions and social hostilities toward


religion in the United States between 2007 and 2014, driven in large part by incidents
directed against American Muslims.  

With the outbreak of activity by the Islamic State militant group, and the
increased flow of immigrants from war-torn areas of the Middle East, Evangelical
rhetoric against Islam and Muslim has reached ever-higher levels. Like Perkins,
evangelicals delivering this rhetoric often conflate the Islam of middle-class American
Muslims with the extremism of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State group or dismiss
moderate Islam as a counterfeit expression of Islam. This is often used to stoke fear
among consumers of evangelical media. For example, on Erik Stakelbeck’s Trinity
Broadcasting Network program, The Watchman, Stakelbeck delivers his main argument
that radical Islam is a global threat, and Muslims in the United States are a growing
source of terrorism. “Every week comes a new round of arrests and a new round of plots
were broken out. Or, as we saw in Chattanooga, they're carried out by home-grown
jihadists,” Stakelbeck warns, “If you're more interested in what the Kardashians are doing
than what is going on in the world, I know this information may shock you. But if you've
been watching the show over the past few months, and have read my book, ISIS Exposed,
you know we have an epidemic in this country of U.S. Citizens answering the call of

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February 12, 2018, http://www.pewforum.org/2012/09/20/rising-tide-of-restrictions-on-religion-
findings/#america.
ISIS. They're going overseas to join the caliphate, or just staying put right here and plotting attacks against the homeland."15

Another influential evangelical leader employing this rhetoric is Franklin Graham. The son of the evangelical icon, Billy Graham, asked American evangelicals to urge political leaders to bar Muslim immigrants from coming to the United States: “We are under attack by Muslims at home and abroad. We should stop all immigration of Muslims to the U.S. until this threat with Islam has been settled. Every Muslim that comes into this country has the potential to be radicalized--and they do their killing to honor their religion and Muhammad. During World War 2, we didn't allow Japanese to immigrate to America, nor did we allow Germans. Why are we allowing Muslims now? Do you agree? Let your Congressman know that we've got to put a stop to this and close the flood gates.”16

Anti-Muslim rhetoric by American evangelicals seems to stand as a sharp contradiction to the drive among the same evangelicals for greater religious freedom in previous mobilization campaigns. Yet the political mechanisms utilized by evangelical leaders in favor of religious freedom and against American Muslims share some parallels in how they originated, and in how mobilization efforts were executed.


There is a dissonance between the current rhetoric many leading evangelicals use toward American Muslims and the universal religious freedom agenda that was championed by the evangelical movement in the late 1990s. Echoing the remarks of Perkins, Gen. Jerry Boykin, has said that Islam “should not be protected by the first Amendment, particularly given that those following the dictates of the Koran are under an obligation to destroy our Constitution and replace it with Sharia law.” He has also stated that there should be “no mosques in America. Islam is a totalitarian way of life. It is not just a religion ... A mosque is an embassy. They recognize only a global caliphate, not the sanctity or sovereignty of the United States.”

A key question emerges in the conflict between evangelical calls for religious freedom and rhetoric advocating government restraints on Muslims. That is, in terms of pluralism, to what extent does the pursuit of religious freedom by evangelicals reduce interreligious conflict and promote universal religious freedom? Conversely, to what extent does the pursuit of religious restrictions by evangelicals promote interreligious conflict and advance policies that reduce religious freedom protections for all adherents, including fellow Christians?

Evangelical religious freedom campaigns and the current stream of anti-Muslim rhetoric have similar trajectories in how they were conceived, how they were introduced to the evangelical community, and how evangelicals were successfully mobilized to achieve political change. Both the anti-Sharia campaign and the evangelical push for pass

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of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act attributes of the evangelical movement that are held in common between the two campaigns.

**IRFA-Framing the Grievance**

The passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act was supported by a wide range religious and human rights groups. Within this broad coalition, the evangelical movement played a critical role in mobilizing a large, politically active constituency to lend support to the bill. It also provided key players in drafting the legislation.

The starting point for promoting the campaign among evangelicals was the effort to raise awareness about the persecution of Christians in predominantly Muslim countries.\(^{18}\) Michael Horowitz, a Jewish human rights activist prodded evangelical leaders on the plight of Christians in a group of these countries. The credibility that Horowitz brought to the issue was an important element in framing religious freedom as the remedy for the persecution of Christians. Since he was Jewish, the campaign could not have been labeled (entirely) as a political effort by the Christian Right. His familial background also lent the gravitas of the Holocaust experience to the burgeoning movement against global religious oppression.\(^{19}\)

Horowitz repeatedly challenged Christian activists and leaders such as Nina Shea and Chuck Colson to pay closer attention to the issue. Horowitz convinced evangelical


\(^{19}\) Hertzke, *Freeing God's Children*, 107.
leaders that the persecution of Christians was both pervasive and warranted the active intervention of the American evangelical community. In the words of former senator Bill Armstrong, “a Jew [Horowitz] was responsible, almost single-handedly, for magnifying and focusing the nascent interest of the evangelical community.”

Evangelical and non-evangelical Christian organizations concerned with religious persecution, such as Voice of the Martyrs, have highlighted global persecution of Christians for decades. However, Horowitz’s activism helped evangelicals discover their political voice in the push to change American foreign policy on this issue.

IRFA-Available Resources

One characteristic of the American evangelical movement is the wide network of churches, para-church organizations and activists. This characteristic is certainly not limited to evangelicals. The same can be said of Roman Catholic and mainline denominations. In Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam observed that churches, in general, are large repositories of social capital:

“Churches provide an important incubator for civic skills, civic norms, community interests, and civic recruitment. Religiously active men and women learn to give speeches, run meetings, manage disagreements, and bear administrative responsibility. They befriend others who are in turn likely to recruit them into other forms of community activity. In part for these reasons, churchgoers are substantially more likely to be involved in secular organizations, to vote and participate politically in other ways, and to have deeper informal social connections.”

20 Ibid.

Even so, evangelical, Roman Catholic and mainline denominations differ from one another in hierarchy of authority (or lack thereof) as well in their approaches to social activism and political engagement. Significant differences in theology abound as well. Defining evangelicalism has been a slippery proposition for scholars, since churches and participants within the movement vary widely in their doctrinal emphases, political activism and authority structures. Some scholars argue that the term “evangelicalism” is no longer useful in light of differences on key issues. Others see a “family resemblance” in how evangelicals pick up ideas from one another, apply them through a historical and theological filter, and bring their responses to the public square. David Bebbington identified four fundamental elements of this family resemblance: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism. A short summary of these elements finds that evangelicals are concerned with:

A. Personal conversion based upon an individual decision to accept salvation,

B. the Bible as it stands above other documents in terms of faith and Christian living,

C. the crucifixion as the central moment defining humanity’s relationship with God,


23 Ibid., 252-269.

D. an activist life that spreads the faith and encourages social reform.25

Regarding resources for social reform, Allen Hertzke mentions in *Freeing God’s Children* that the international religious freedom campaign of the late 1990’s drew upon the “thriving network of domestic organizations, both for ministry and social action,” and was aided by the explosive growth of evangelical churches in the Global South.26

**IRFA-Evangelical Mobilization**

Horowitz, along with other Jewish activists and opinion leaders such as Abe Rosenthal of the New York Times and Rabbi David Saperstein, worked with a broad coalition of human rights activists to help launch the campaign for international religious freedom. A milestone of the campaign was a January 1996 conference organized by Horowitz, Nina Shea and others that addressed the issue of religious persecution and American foreign policy.27 In conjunction with the conference, evangelical churches and para-church organizations promoted the campaign nationally through a “Statement of Conscience,” circulated by the National Association of Evangelicals.28 Mobilization of the evangelical community on this issue included a national campaign to raise awareness among rank-and-file Christians. Evangelical leaders such as James Dobson and D. James Kennedy were able to use their broadcasts and mailing lists to invigorate their audiences

25 Ibid.

26 Hertzke, Freeing God’s Children, 146.


in urging Congress to support the legislation. In Washington, conservative evangelical
activists worked closely with liberal Jewish activists to strategize about what would

At first, the Wolf-Specter bill concentrated on persecution. However, that focus
was mitigated by the Jewish participants concerned with the bill’s viability for passage.
The Wolf-Specter bill was eventually rivaled by the Nickels-Lieberman bill, which
placed a higher emphasis on quiet diplomacy, and was more amenable to the Senate. These bills were eventually superseded by IRFA, which accommodated elements of both
bills. IRFA was designed to address persecution of all religious groups, and ostensibly
promote religious freedom. It established an Ambassador-at-Large for Religious
Freedom, the Office of International Religious Freedom and annual report at the State
Department, as well as an independent bipartisan commission. It also called for a Special
Adviser for Religious Freedom to be on staff with the National Security Council, which
never materialized.

Evangelical mobilization to support the legislation began with a primary concern
about the persecution of Christians. However, the support and participation of non-
evangelical groups as well as practical considerations about its viability in Congress

29 Hertzke, Freeing God’s Children,128.
30 Ibid., 143.
32 International Religious Freedom Act, vol. 112 (Washington, DC: U.S. Statutes at Large 112:
2787, 1998).
ensured that the law would seek to protect adherents of any faith.\textsuperscript{33} In this case, the pursuit of international religious freedom by evangelicals established a trajectory toward universal religious freedom advocacy and reduced interreligious conflict.

In the fourteen years since the passage of IRFA, evangelicals, Catholics and many other groups have continued to monitor and advocate on behalf of international religious freedom for all faiths. Scholars such as Brian Grim, Alfred Stepan, Allen Hertzke and many others have helped refine and bolster the argument that religious freedom can be considered a “first freedom” in that other important human rights and a healthy society flow from the freedom of conscience, free religious practice, and the ability to bring core beliefs to the public square.

At the same time, evangelical suspicion of Islam has taken on another form in the first decades of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century. Rather than being a catalyst for pursuing religious freedom for all faiths, evangelicals are seeking ways to restrict certain aspects of Muslim religious presence, fearing that it will lead to an infringement on their own place in the American public square, and even overturn the U.S. Constitution itself.

**Evangelical Anti-Sharia Campaigns**

The current evangelical campaign against Islamic law in the United States is explicitly concerned with “creeping Sharia,” described briefly as the gradual supplanting of the U.S. Constitution with a Muslim legal code.\textsuperscript{34} Before tackling the anti-Sharia

\textsuperscript{33} Hertzke, *Freeing God’s Children*, 228.

campaign itself, it would be helpful to review of the definition of Sharia, key international concerns, and the existing role of Sharia and other religious jurisprudence in American courts.

The most basic definition of Sharia is that it is a legal and moral code that governs all aspects of a Muslim’s life. The word Sharia literally means “path to the watering hole” or, more in the spirit of the definition, “the way to the source of life.”\textsuperscript{35} It is derived from the \textit{Quran}, the \textit{Hadith} (saying and actions of The Prophet), and a tradition of legal opinions by Islamic jurists. Sharia governs a wide range of familial obligations, business dealings, criminal penalties and religious duties. Underneath this definition is a vibrant debate in the worldwide Islamic community about what constitutes Sharia, how applies in a secular state, and the questioned authority of laws that were drafted before the modern period.\textsuperscript{36}

Critics often point to harsh punishments meted out on those convicted of crimes under some forms of Sharia in some countries. These range from the amputation of a person’s hand as punishment for theft, to execution as punishment for apostasy and adultery, conducted according to some interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence. Indeed, the threat of harsh punishments has been the source of deadly violence between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, where Sharia moved beyond resolving civil disputes among


Muslims into the criminal codes of several Nigerian states. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran rely on Sunni and Shi’a versions of Sharia for their civil and criminal law. Violent punishments issued in the name of Islamic law are a perennial concern of among human rights activists. Even so, Sharia’s definition, interpretation and implementation vary widely across the Muslim-majority world.

Despite the most egregious examples of abuse in the name of Islamic law, there is an ongoing debate among contemporary Muslims around the world about the nature of the law for today. Islamic women intellectuals promote a progressive interpretation of Sharia that protects the freedom and dignity of women. Other contemporary Muslim thinkers and activists argue for a reform of some Sharia legal codes to consider modern values regarding democracy, human rights and freedom of conscience.

In the United States, Muslims have considered how Sharia could take its place alongside other religious bodies of law such as Roman Catholic canon law, halacha and Jewish *beit din* to help resolve legal disputes between Muslims. They cite the use of Jewish and Catholic law in binding arbitration (an agreement signed by both sides used to resolve a civil dispute, and approved by a civil court) as a precedent in the acceptance of Sharia in family law and inheritance cases among American Muslims. Literature

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38 Zakia Samile, Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights And Sharia Law In Morocco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 89.

39 Sheila Musaji, "Islamic Sharia and Jewish Halakha Arbitration Courts", The American Muslim, last modified 2012, accessed February 12, 2018,
produced by American Muslims on the issue notes that the U.S. legal code always takes precedent when the religious law being invoked comes into conflict with the secular civil or criminal penalties. In practice, American courts discard religious rulings that are at odds with U.S. law or the Constitution.\(^{40}\)

The frequency in which Sharia is used in legal arbitration around the country is difficult to gauge. One Muslim attorney writing in *The Nation* about the use of Islamic jurisprudence in American courts, says he has served as counsel in more than one hundred cases that range from family disputes to lawsuits between major international corporations.\(^{41}\) The (anti-Sharia) American Public Policy Alliance issued a report in 2010 that outlined fifty cases where Sharia was a factor in U.S. court decisions. These cases dealt primarily with family disputes, including custody and divorce decisions. The report shows how U.S. courts overwhelmingly ruled against the use of Sharia in cases that involved abuse or the violation of rights by one of the parties.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) Garrity *v*. New Jersey (*United States Supreme Court*, 1967). http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=us&vol=385&invol=493#t5 (accessed October 20, 2015). A portion of this case cites the difference between Constitutional protections against self-incrimination found in the 5th Amendment and what appears in Jewish law. The justices cite the legal superiority of U.S. law when a difference arises with a given religious law. The case established that law enforcement officers and other public employees have the right to be free from compulsory self-incrimination, just as private citizens have the same protections under the 5th Amendment and the decision establishing Miranda rights (*Miranda vs. Arizona*).


American Muslim legal scholars are also seeking ways to modernize and reform Sharia. For example, Khaled Abou El Fadl argues that an up-to-date understanding of Sharia can promote diversity, pluralism, and individual rights - including universal religious freedom.43

The anti-Sharia campaign faces a credibility issue when it comes to the actual beliefs of American Muslims in contrast to the extremism that some evangelicals fear. Research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life indicates that the American Muslim community overwhelmingly rejects radical Islamist ideologies and agendas, are assimilating well into American society, and do not see a conflict between being a devout Muslim and living in a modern, secular society. However, many in the community say that it has become more difficult to be a Muslim in the United States since the Sept. 11th attacks.44

**Framing the Grievance**

Anti-Muslim rhetoric that includes opposing Sharia in U.S. courts and the construction of mosques by American Muslims is widespread in certain evangelical circles. However, the anti-Sharia campaign originated with a Jewish attorney named David Yerushalemi. As the founder of the Society of Americans for National Existence, Yerushalemi has a history of sounding the alarm over Islamic influence in world affairs.


For example, Yerushalemi warned that jihadists, through the specter of the Islamic financing model, were poised to take advantage of the 2008 global financial crisis when the West needed access to liquid funds found in Islamic countries. Yerushalemi has also been criticized for his views that “Islam is an evil religion,” and that blacks “are the most murderous of peoples.” (Yerushalemi has denied accusations of racism.)

Yerushalemi’s anti-Sharia activities include drafting model legislation that prohibits the use of Sharia in American courts. The model legislation is designed to prevent the advancement of what Yerushalemi considers the “concerted international effort to insinuate a transnational sectarian law - Sharia - into international treaties regarding blasphemy/hate speech, child custody, marriage/polygamy, international finance, and the like.” This includes banning the use of Sharia in private arbitrations, tribal councils and “ad hoc Sharia courts.” He also authored a study with Mordechai Kedar that attempted to quantify the association between Sharia and the potential for violence in the American Muslim community.

An important link between Yerushalemi’s anti-Sharia advocacy and evangelical circles of influence is his association with Frank Gaffney, president of the Center for Security Policy, a Washington, DC think tank. Yerushalemi is on the organization’s


staff. He also worked with Gaffney on a project called *Mapping Shari’a*. The project’s study concluded that more than 80 percent of American mosques were radicalized, promoting violence against nonbelievers in their sermons and literature. Gaffney promoted the study in conservative media outlets such as the Washington Times as proof that American Muslims were “using our [American] tolerance of religion to create an infrastructure of mosques here that incubate the Islamic holy war called jihad.”

In Gaffney and Yerushalemi’s study, “Sharia-adherent” mosques are identified by the study as those frequented by Salafists, measured by “outwardly observable behaviors such as wearing traditional Arabic, Pakistani, or Afghan clothing and growing beards. Sharia-adherent mosques were also identified by the preponderance of women wearing hijabs, the segregation of genders during services, and enforcement of prayer lines.”

In the Washington Times, Gaffney argued that these outward signs of purported Sharia-adherence are “a useful predictor of sympathy for - and in some cases, at least, action on behalf of - jihad, to include both the Islamists’ violent or stealthy forms of warfare aimed at supplanting the U.S. Constitution and government.” Gaffney’s proposed solution is to target non-violent expressions of Islam in the public square: “Britain’s government has just announced that, pursuant to an update of its counterterrorism program known as ‘Prevent,’ it now recognizes nonviolent forms of Islamist extremism can be every bit as dangerous as the violent kinds. We need to do the same - especially

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48 Yerushalemi and Kedar. “Sharia Adherence Mosque Survey.”
since the Muslim Brotherhood and its Sharia-adherents are successfully suing not only mosques, but academia, the media, financial institutions, political groups and interfaith ‘dialogue’ to pursue their pre-violent yet seditious and therefore anti-constitutional and illegal, agenda.”

An important example of the evangelical argument against Sharia is found in a policy briefing published by the Family Research Council. The FRC is a political spin-off of James Dobson’s Focus on the Family organization. It plays an important role in identifying candidates and issues that harmonize with the values of socially-conservative evangelical voters. The briefing was written by William Wagner of the Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan.

Wagner sets forth a line of reasoning that identifies American Muslims as a new enemy alongside “a ubiquitous secular foe” on the legal front of the culture wars. Wagner asserts that immigrants from Muslim countries are intent on extending the “Abode of Islam” into the United States, and that social conservatives should thus be concerned with “the issue of Islamic theocracy [that] amasses ominously on our rear flank.” He backs this up by quoting number of Muslim leaders saying that they wish Islam to become the dominant religion in the West, and that Sharia should be established locally. Wagner regards Muslim immigrant communities as enclaves where Islamists are trying, through

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49 Frank Gaffney, “American Mosques, Jihad’s Incubators.”

“stealth jihad,” to systematically dismantle an “occupied” government’s legal system and replace it with an Islamic theocracy.51

Wagner argues that American Muslims are trying to exploit First Amendment protections of religious freedom to uproot the current American legal framework. In effect, using the U.S. Constitution to destroy the U.S. Constitution. As a result, he says evangelicals are caught between asserting their rights to religious freedom based on the establishment clause and guarding against the encroachment of Sharia by a group using Constitutional protections to undermine the American legal system.52

He cites the presence of Sharia courts, Islamic financing, government-sanctioned (presumably Muslim) prayer and official suppression of Christian religious expression as “building blocks” for an American Islamic theocracy. He argues that the difference between a Christian asserting a right to bring their faith-based values into the policy arena and a Muslim who makes a similar claim is that the Christian does not wish to eventually form a Christian theocracy. However, in the eyes of the law, both religions must be treated with equal standing, but only if Islam can rightly be viewed as a “religion.”

Wagner argues that Islam is in essence a form of religious government, which is not protected by the First Amendment. Based on this definition of Islam, he argues that Christians should form policy arguments against any recognition of Sharia as a danger to the Constitutional system of government. Wagner does not delve into the variety of thought among Muslims in the United States and abroad regarding the definition of

51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
Sharia. He also does not consider the perspective of Muslims who have moved to the United States to escape governments that used Sharia as a tool of oppression.

Some evangelicals involved in the anti-Sharia campaign dispute the argument that Muslims are potential religious revolutionaries at some level. Legal scholars arguing in evangelical publications, such as John Witte Jr. of Emory University in *Christianity Today*, continue to wrestle with advocating restrictions on Islamic law in the face of a long legal tradition involving the use of canon law and Jewish legal traditions in binding arbitration. Unlike Wagner, Witte doesn’t try to define Islam down into a simply a political movement. In the wake of an appeals court decision that struck down an anti-Sharia law in Oklahoma, Witte attempts to define Sharia as a less-evolved species of religious law than its Christian and Jewish counterparts. Witte first recognizes the presence of Christian and Jewish legal institutions in the American legal culture:

Many Western Christians have religious tribunals to govern their internal affairs, including some family matters. State courts will respect their judgments, even if their cases are appealed to Rome, Canterbury, or Moscow. No one is talking of abolishing these Christian church courts or trimming their power. No one seems to think these Christian tribunals are illegitimate, even when some of them seem to discriminate against women in decisions about ordination and church leadership. Similarly, Jews are given wide authority to operate Jewish law courts to arbitrate marital, financial, and other disputes. Indeed, in New York State by statute, and in several European nations by custom, courts will not issue a civil divorce to an Orthodox Jewish couple unless the Jewish law court, the *beit din*, issues a religious divorce, even though Jewish law systematically discriminates against the wife's right to divorce. If Christians can have their canon laws and consistory courts, and Jews their Halacha and *beit din*, then why can't Muslims use Shari'ah and Islamic courts?53

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Yet, according to Witte, Islamic law comes to the American legal landscape handicapped by the fact that Sharia has not had time to adjust to Western secular legal systems. He also argues that a record of struggle by other religious communities in the West has granted these communities certain privileges in the American legal system: “Muslim simply do not have the same history of persecution Jews have faced in the West ... Over time, and only grudgingly, Western democracies learned to accommodate the core religious beliefs and practices of Jewish communities.”54 Witte goes onto argue that before any form of Islamic law can be accepted in the West, the Muslim community needs to reject anti-democratic ideals: “No Western nation will readily grant concessions to a religious community that rejects liberty, equality, and fraternity, or human rights, democracy, and rule of law.”55

Though Witte goes further than other evangelicals in recognizing the variety of expression in Islam around the world, and the potential place certain types of Sharia may hold alongside Jewish and Christian legal institutions, his solution seems to perpetuate stereotypes about what American Muslims believe about liberty, equality, human rights, etc. It also seems to advocate continued infringements on the Muslim community’s domestic religious freedom until they have fought an “uphill battle” for their religious rights in the West. Or, as one of the online commenters to the article suggested, “Witte

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
seems to be saying, ‘No, Sharia is not permissible, except after a long period of semi-injustice.’\textsuperscript{56}

**Anti-Sharia: Mobilization Resources**

With regard to rank-and-file churchgoers around the country, many of the same resources that were available to the evangelical IRFA activists are now at the disposal of those involved in the anti-Sharia campaign. This includes a thriving network of churches and pastors. It also includes evangelical publishing houses producing books that warn Christians of the American Muslim “threat.” Erwin Lutzer’s *The Cross in the Shadow of the Crescent: An Informed Response to Islam's War with Christianity*, published by Harvest House joins a host of other publications by evangelical publishers that have filled the Christian book market. Groups such as the American Center for Law and Justice, founded by Pat Robertson, had previously opposed the construction of an Islamic Center near Ground Zero in New York. The ACLJ also uses evangelical radio and television outlets to warn American evangelicals of Sharia’s threat to democracy.\textsuperscript{57}

However, there were some political resources enjoyed by the IRFA campaign that are proving more problematic for the anti-Sharia push. First, the universal provisions of IRFA made it attractive to a wide range of religious and human rights groups. The anti-Sharia campaign seems to have some overlap politically with the Tea Party movement,

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

and Trump supporters in recent years, but lacks the wide array of supporters across party and religious lines.\(^{58}\)

Also, the original promoters of the anti-Sharia campaign, David Yerushalemi and Frank Gaffney, have been discredited to a degree by critics and fellow conservatives. Though David Yerushalemi may seemingly be at height of influence with Sharia campaign, his beliefs regarding race ("blacks are the most violent of all races," etc.), women ("the founding fathers knew what they were doing when they did not give women and black slaves the vote"), and his conspiracy-theory approach has provided fertile ground for critics of the anti-Sharia campaign.\(^{59}\)

Frank Gaffney has also experienced a backlash against the wide net he has cast in seeing Muslim Brotherhood operatives throughout Washington’s circles of influence. Gaffney played an influential role in a relevant episode that erupted around Rep. Michele Bachmann. In 2012, Bachmann drafted a letter warning of a possible security threat posed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s deputy chief of staff, Huma Abedin. The letter drew a great deal of criticism from both sides of the aisle, including Speaker of the House John Boehner and Sen. John McCain.\(^{60}\) Gaffney also experienced an embarrassing


episode regarding the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) organized by the American Conservative Union. The ACU’s board of directors formally condemned Gaffney over his accusations that leading conservative figure Grover Norquist and Suhail Khan, a senior fellow at the evangelical Institute for Global Engagement, had secret ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.\(^6^1\)

**Anti-Sharia: Evangelical Mobilization**

Like the campaign for the International Religious Freedom Act, a seminal moment in the campaign was a large public event. Though the anti-Sharia campaign was well under way before “The Constitution or Sharia: Preserving Freedom” event was held at Cornerstone Church in suburban Nashville in November 11, 2011, the gathering at the evangelical mega-church helped galvanize and popularize the campaign. Speakers at the event included Gaffney, Yerushalemi, a number of Tea Party activists as well as Lebanese, Coptic Christian, and Nigerian activists warning of the dangers of Sharia. Topics ranged from “The Influence of the Muslim Brotherhood in America” to “Grassroots Organizing against Sharia and Rabat (Including Mega-Mosques).”\(^6^2\)

One of the most effective voices employed to mobilize evangelicals by the anti-Sharia campaign has been Jerry Boykin. The former army general is just one voice among several influential evangelicals promoting this view of Islam in America. Another


influential voice in the campaign has been Paul Sperry, author of *Infiltration: How Muslim Spies and Subversives Have Penetrated Washington*. In this book, Sperry outlined how “how Muslims have for years been secretly infiltrating American society, government, and culture, pretending to be peace-loving and patriotic, while supporting violent jihad and working to turn America into an Islamic state.”

*Infiltration* was published by Thomas Nelson, the world’s largest Christian publisher, which has also produced books by evangelical luminaries such as Billy Graham, Max Lucado and Charles Stanley. Sperry also collaborated with Paul David Gaubatz on, *Muslim Mafia: Inside the Secret Underworld That's Conspiring to Islamize America*, a book that alleged that the Council on American-Islamic Relations advocacy group was trying, among other things, to plant Muslim spies as staff members in congressional offices.

The anti-Sharia campaign has damaged the religious freedom of American Muslims around the United States through both restrictions on Sharia in state laws, as well as in the effort to construct mosques by American Muslims. A recent study the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life outlined several instances where Christian residents opposed the construction of new mosques. For example, in May 2010, Muslims in Murfreesboro, Tennessee applied for permits to build an Islamic center. Despite protests from some in the community, county officials unanimously approved the plans.

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63 Sperry, *Infiltration.*


Afterward, several residents filed lawsuits against the proposed mosque, echoing the rhetoric from Gaffney, Boykin, Sperry and others that the mosque was not simply a place of worship, but part of a plot to replace the Constitution with Islamic law.

Notably, Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, refused to sign a letter produced by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty that supported the construction of the Murfreesboro mosque.66 Land also opposed the construction of Park51, a large Islamic center near Ground Zero in New York City: “Even though the vast majority of Muslims condemned their actions on Sept. 11, 2001, it still remains a fact that the people who perpetrated the 9/11 attack were Muslims and proclaimed they were doing what they were doing in the name of Islam.”67

Other evangelical groups were also instrumental in opposing the construction of Park51. The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) backed a lawsuit by a former New York firefighter, arguing that, "We're saying no to the group and no to the location. A mosque in the U.S. that's using foreign money from countries with Sharia law is unacceptable, especially in this neighborhood."68

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Oklahoma was the first state to see the passage of an anti-Sharia bill into state law. However, it was struck down by the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals as unconstitutional. At least 41 bills or state-level constitutional amendments that would specifically restrict Sharia law, or foreign or international law generally, have been submitted in 23 states. Most have died in committee, or never reach a vote. However, Kansas, Oklahoma and South Dakota have passed similar bills into law at the time of writing.

After the Oklahoma law was declared unconstitutional, other states (such as Virginia) dropped specific references to Islam and Sharia, and used the umbrella terms “foreign” or “international.” In the case of Arizona, a unique bill was drafted that specifically mentions other religious bodies of law that have a long history of being declared valid for binding arbitration in family and civil matters:

HB 2582: “A court shall not use, implement, refer to or incorporate a tenet of any body of religious sectarian law into any decision, finding or opinion as controlling or influential authority. ... any decision or ratification of a private agreement that is determined, on the merits, by a judge in this state who relies on any body of religious sectarian law or foreign law is void, is appealable error and is grounds for impeachment and removal from office. ... "Religious sectarian law" means any statute, tenet or body of law evolving within and binding a specific religious sect or tribe. Religious sectarian law includes Sharia law, canon law, halacha and Karma but does not include any law of the United States or the individual states

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70 Ibid.

based on Anglo-American legal tradition and principles on which the United States was founded.72

These revised laws affirm the proposition that the pursuit of religious restrictions for one group establishes a trajectory to religious restrictions for a wide variety of faiths. Also, just as the campaign for international religious freedom grew beyond the purview of its early proponents such as Michael Horowitz, Nina Shea and Chuck Colson, the anti-Sharia campaign has grown beyond management of the issue by David Yerushalemi and Frank Gaffney. Today, an evangelical cottage industry has arisen that perpetuates ideas and proposes courses of action designed to restrict certain aspects of religious expression by American Muslims.

As indicated above, the anti-Sharia campaign faces credibility issues when it comes to the targets of their campaign to root out radical Muslim influence in the United States (i.e. Gaffney’s condemnation by the ACU). As seen in the arguments by Wagner and Witte, the evangelical anti-Sharia campaign also faces conceptual problems when it comes to arguing for religious freedom for everyone except American Muslims. To an outside observer this stance would seem to confirm to religious skeptics that “religion is incorrigibly toxic, and that it breeds irrationality, demonization of others, irreconcilable division, and implacable conflict,” rather than promoting the organic relationship

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between full religious freedom and democracy.\textsuperscript{73}

Indeed, alienating American Muslims may indicate a lost opportunity for the socially conservative evangelical community, since Muslim opinions about contemporary hot topic issues such as gay marriage and abortion track very closely with evangelical attitudes.\textsuperscript{74} Polls also show a majority of American Muslims support vouchers for parents who want to send their children to religious schools, government funding for religious institutions providing social services, and even the display of the Ten Commandments in public schools – all which have a common appeal with large segments of the evangelical community.\textsuperscript{75}

**Features of the Evangelical Movement**

Both the IRFA campaign and the anti-Sharia campaign reveal certain contours within the broader evangelical movement. First, both campaigns indicate that mobilization within the movement relies heavily on the initiatives of its leaders, rather than a groundswell from its roots. Hertzke refers to a legislative aide once describing evangelicalism as a “grass-tops movement” influenced heavily by opinion leaders and leading organizations.\textsuperscript{76} Also, the two campaigns displayed a concern about Islam as a competing religion and a potential source of oppression. Seeing the IRFA and anti-Sharia


\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{76} Hertzke, *Freeing God’s Children*, 195.
campaigns together in this context displays a consistent concern with Islam, but an ambivalent commitment to religious freedom itself. The surprising popularity of the anti-Sharia campaign indicates the degree to which the movement tolerates a double standard (even within organizations, like the Family Research Council, which continues to promote international religious freedom).

On another note, evangelical arguments framing the threat of Sharia and promoting courses of action do not seem to draw upon the content of evangelical Christianity itself. Scripture and theological justifications are almost completely absent when it comes to the framing and mobilization arguments in the anti-Sharia campaign. On the one hand, evangelicals promoting pluralistic religious freedom and positive engagement with Muslims attempt to tie their efforts into a biblical framework. On the other hand, the anti-Sharia campaign employs a secular argument that preservation of the U.S. Constitution as a protection against oppressive Islamic law. This demonstrates that members of the evangelical movement can be mobilized to engage in campaigns that are justified by arguments that lie within and outside the content of the faith itself.

The evangelical community continues to be a strong player in national politics. During the last presidential election, the anti-Sharia campaign seemed become a factor in

securing this constituency for Republican candidates. In short, all GOP presidential candidates offered statements against “creeping Sharia” during the last campaign.78

Certainly not all evangelicals subscribe to the “creeping Sharia” thesis. At the same time, international religious freedom, particularly as it relates to Christian communities, continues to hold broad support among evangelicals of all types. In Faith in the Halls of Power, D. Michael Lindsay credited evangelical participation in the IRFA campaign as a hallmark of the movement’s maturation in the world of policy advocacy and human rights.79 Lindsay also observed the “grass-tops” phenomenon in the following terms: “American evangelicalism has gained political momentum as its leaders have built coalitions with others who are interested in similar objectives. This has happened largely at the leadership level, but rank-and-file support has soon followed. Grassroots support within a movement is easier to mobilize when clear boundaries are drawn between allies and adversaries, and evangelicals have excelled at this.”80

The anti-Sharia campaign seems to threaten to roll back the maturation of the movement regarding human rights that Lindsay observed in the IRFA campaign. This could lead to further discrediting of evangelical voices in the primary currents of political debate, and possibly lead to a further splintering of the evangelical movement itself.


79 D. Michael Lindsay, Faith In The Halls Of Power (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 52.

80 Ibid.
More specifically, anti-Muslim rhetoric may threaten the long-term credibility of some evangelicals who argue for religious freedom as a universal principle in the public square but seek to deny it for competing groups. This contrasts with some Catholic and evangelical leaders that call for a truce between American Christians and Muslims. This includes Robert George, who argues that Muslims are the natural allies of American Catholics and evangelicals: “It is not right for us to make them feel unwelcome or to suggest that their faith disables them from being loyal Americans. It is unjust to stir up fear that they seek to take away our rights or to make them afraid that we seek to take away theirs. And it is foolish to drive them into the arms of the political left when their piety and moral convictions make them natural allies of social conservatives.”

Certain patterns emerge in these cases of American Christian mobilization. First, political mobilization is by nature divisive. Both sides of culture war battles tend to portray their political opponents as enemies of morality and personal freedom. Among the consequences of the current political climate, of which modern political mobilization plays a large role, is that the American public is more polarized than ever on party and ideological lines, perhaps an unavoidable aspect of the will to power competitiveness inherent in the political domain.

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Yet Christian groups hoping to secure their place in a pluralistic society are placed in a tough position when it comes to political mobilization. If religious freedom and freedom of conscience is seen as special permission to oppress another group, or merely consists of the state granting special status for religious groups with respect to taxes, compliance with regulations, etc., then the broad assent needed for its long-term survival is endangered.

The idea of religious freedom offers an alternative narrative than a vision of secularism held by some influential thinkers, such as John Rawls. That is, the rights of a free conscience lie outside the jurisdiction of the state, and religious and nonreligious actors in society draw from their free conscience and associations to form the values that should undergird the behavior of the state. The state itself tends to consolidate power unto itself, which can only be checked by a domain that lies outside the state and regulates how it is manifested. This narrative is fundamental to the formation of modern democracy and the thought of the founding fathers. However, making a compelling case for this narrative is difficult when its proponents are using the tools of the state to battle their opponents over competing religious claims.

Moreover, Christianity in its various forms offers alternative narratives to other ideas about the nature of human life, its relationship to an ultimate reality, and even consciousness itself. Some perspectives competing with Christian outlooks have the potential to drastically alter the direction of human development and have also gained a great deal of traction across society. This includes the radical realignment of ethics under the utilitarianism of figures such as Peter Singer, and the strict materialist views of
human consciousness of philosophers such as Daniel Dennett. The ideas inherent in these and other perspectives threaten to unravel the Christian metaphysic and its related values for broad swaths of society.

**Principles of Engagement**

The problematic issues that arise with the anti-Sharia campaigns and anti-Muslim behavior among evangelicals demonstrate the need for consistency within the movement with respect to calls for greater freedom for their own community and legal restrictions and fomenting social hostilities against others. Seen in conjunction with evangelical mobilization for the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, it illustrates how the four principles of engagement for religious freedom advocacy can either falter in its pursuit or be a stabilizing force in a pluralistic context.

**Principle One:** Christian leaders should emphasize within their own communities the central role of the universal free conscience that appears in scripture, theology, and tradition, and the implication that has in a pluralistic context.

The current mechanism outlined in Social Movement Theory presents an inward-focused path to how a group identifies an injustice, frames their grievance in a way that resonates with their primary constituency, identifies a political opportunity, and mobilizes members of the larger movement to affect a political change.\(^{83}\)

However, the first principle transcends in-group grievances by providing a justification within the Christian community for universal religious freedom, including

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those outside of the tradition. It also provides an authentic vision of the Protestant/Christian justification for conscience rights and religious freedom in the public square. It prepares the ground for public arguments regarding for conscience rights and religious liberty using the functionally normative tools such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Biblicism is a key component of evangelical identity, placing a premium on scriptural resources that tie into the pressing questions of the day.\footnote{Mary M. Juzwik, "American Evangelical Biblicism As Literate Practice: A Critical Review", \textit{Reading Research Quarterly} 49, no. 3 (2014): 335-349.} In this case, there is ample justification for a universal free conscience and religious freedom in scripture, as well as in the early church. For example, one of the primary assumptions in the opening chapter of the Book of Job is the main character’s freedom of thought. Job is presented by God as something far above an automaton or animal that is driven by rewards or punishments. Rather, Job is held up as one who respects God and resists evil according to his own conscience, apart from the blessings or hardships he may experience. The wager between God and the adversary is directly tied to Job’s capacity for free thought, which he asserts through the story.\footnote{Job 1:11-12, 27:5-6.}

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus exhorts his followers to look after their own conscience and examine their own failings before invading the conscience of others through condemnation. Passages that resonate with evangelicals find firm footing in the concept of faith rooted in an individual’s response to God with one’s own heart and mind,
versus membership in a particular tribe, nation or social strata (Romans 10:9-17). In 1 Corinthians 8-10, Paul discusses the idea that believers are responsible for their own decision-making when it comes to eating meat that originated in a pagan ritual. The rights of the individual are held as the benchmark, except in cases where the use of that meat may injure the conscience of a fellow believer. That is, one believer ought to set aside their “right” to a certain behavior to maintain a loving stance toward others. In this way, cultivating care for others is tied to the freedom of the individual to make their own spiritual and practical decisions. For those following their own convictions, Paul emphasizes that God is the ultimate judge (1 Corinthians 4:2-5), and that individuals have the responsibility for their own conscience, free of compulsion. (1 Corinthians 10:29).

Early Christian apologists also emphasized the rights of a free conscience when it comes to faith. The second-century Epistle to Diognetus addressed the issue: “Did He send him [Christ], as a man might conclude, to rule in tyranny and terror and awe? Not so, but in gentleness and meekness He sent him, as a king sending a son who is a king, He sent him as God, He sent him as Man unto men. He was as it were saving when He sent him, (as persuading, not compelling (for force is no attribute of God).”

Tertullian, writing around the turn of the third century, affirmed the freedom of the individual when it comes to participation in a religious community: “It is a fundamental right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions: one man’s

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86 Henry George Meecham, The Epistle to Diognetus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1949). 83. Also quoted in the Manhattan Declaration.
religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel
religion – to which free will and not force should lead us.”

Other examples of this line of thought ring through the history of Christianity. By
using these and other examples, Christian advocates for religious liberty can help their
own constituents understand the role of a free conscience, and the importance of
preserving the free exercise of religion, as well as the careful approach needed when
arguing for ideas regarding Christian theology or ideals in a pluralistic context. It also
lays the ground work for a more tolerant and welcoming approach with respect to other
groups. Beyond pragmatic concerns, this pluralistic understanding of a free conscience
helps maintain a moral and theological consistency in the public square.

Additionally, as seen in the case studies and supporting examples, a firm
understanding of the role a free conscience plays in Christianity coupled with the
relational passport to work with other across religious and ideological lines, aids in
reducing conflict and increasing influence in the public field and helps maintain a public
square that respects the free individual conscience. Looking beyond evangelicalism, Pope
Benedict XVI emphasized this principle in a message titled “Religious Freedom, the Path
to Peace:”

In a globalized world marked by increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious
societies, the great religions can serve as an important factor of unity and peace
for the human family. On the basis of their religious convictions and their
reasoned pursuit of the common good, their followers are called to give
responsible expression to their commitment within a context of religious freedom.
Amid the variety of religious cultures, there is a need to value those elements
which foster civil coexistence, while rejecting whatever is contrary to the dignity


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of men and women…. The path to take is not the way of relativism or religious syncretism. The Church, in fact, "proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6); in Christ, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, people find the fullness of the religious life.’ Yet this in no way excludes dialogue and the common pursuit of truth in different areas of life, since, as Saint Thomas Aquinas would say, “every truth, whoever utters it, comes from the Holy Spirit."  

**Principle Two:** Christian public engagement should be consistent in its emphasis on freedom and justice for all in society.

There are logical and ethical gaps between the calls for greater religious liberty for members of the Christian community, and the calls for greater restrictions for members of other religious groups, as seen in the anti-Muslim evangelical campaigns of the past two decades. Evangelical mobilization against the construction of mosques as well as the push for anti-Sharia legislation stands in contrast to the rhetoric demanding religious freedom for Christians in the United States and abroad.

As seen in these case studies, by articulating the theological importance of a universal rights of conscience, religious freedom advocates can help remedy the dissonance between their calls for greater freedom for one group, and greater restrictions for another. The evangelical anti-Muslim/anti-Sharia mobilization efforts is a classic example of Niebuhr’s observation that large religious groups have a tendency (in modern terms) to embrace identity politics to the detriment of their own values and credibility in the public square.

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Historic Parallel

Perennial Evangelical antipathy toward Muslims is not a foregone conclusion. Some influential Christian leaders discourage stereotyping and activism against American Muslims, including Rick Warren and Texas megachurch pastor Bob Roberts. Internal evangelical debates over the movement’s stance with respect to American Muslims has some parallels with the debates within the movement over Roman Catholics in the mid-20th century. A brief look at one slice of evangelical history helps illustrate this. In the 1950s, Billy Graham was a rising star within the evangelical movement and pioneered an open attitude toward American Catholics. For this (along with his partnerships with mainline denominations), he was criticized by many fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals.89

At the same time, popular suspicion against Catholics ran high among many Protestants. This suspicion played a role in the formation of the early evangelical movement. One year before Graham’s 1957 watershed revival in New York, the head of the National Association of Evangelicals, James D. Murch, published a history of the National Association of Evangelicals. A recurring theme in the book was the suspicion of Catholicism. This included the fear that Catholicism was working to destroy the “distinctive testimony of Protestantism,” effect a religious takeover of the U.S. government by the Catholic church, and promote a Catholic presence at state and local

government levels. Murch cites these fears as a leading factor in the formation of the National Association of Evangelicals as a counter-organization to efforts backed by the Vatican: “Either Christians who love the Lord are going to take Christ into the political life of the nation or the increasing infiltration of Roman Catholic power will take over.”

A generation later, prominent evangelicals such as Chuck Colson and Richard Land joined prominent Catholics, including Avery Dulles and Richard John Neuhaus, in signing a document known as *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*. Even as some evangelicals criticized the document as flawed in its theology and outlook, the document marked a turning point in the relationship between prominent evangelicals and Catholics in public life. This included an intent to cooperate on common policy interests, such as abortion, family stability, the religious role in civil society, parental choice in education, and the defense of religious freedom abroad (among other issues).

In doing so, the document reflects an understanding that the common threats perceived in both communities, coupled with a thread of theological commonality, compelled evangelicals and Catholics to set aside many differences for their mutual vision of the common good: “The love of Christ compels us and we are therefore resolved to avoid such conflict between our communities and, where such conflict exists, to do what we can to reduce and eliminate it. Beyond that, we are called and we are

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90 Murch, *Cooperation Without Compromise*, 47, 137.
91 Ibid., 140.


It remains to be seen whether evangelicals will recognize common cause with American Muslims when it comes to public policies that may run against values that the two communities hold in common. Even so, advocating for the freedoms enjoyed by American Christians should be accompanied by advocacy to extend those freedoms to Muslims and those of other faiths and no faith. To do so demonstrates a consistent expression of belief in evangelicals’ own rhetoric regarding the universality of religious freedom and builds the community’s credibility as a consistent advocate for the common good.
**Principle Three**: Religious freedom advocacy should emphasize the role of faith groups serving the common good through participation in civil society.

The arc of the drafting and passage of IRFA is a successful example of an area of concern that gained the most traction with a particular faith group, American evangelicals, but drew upon a coalition of partners to become successful. This coalition included a range of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant groups working together to increase the common good through the legislation. Evangelicals formed the core of the constituency that brought the related bills to the foreground, but it was a cadre of faith groups, concerned about the fate of their coreligionists abroad that provided the most effective catalyst to make the bills behind IRFA into law.

The anti-Sharia campaigns, and the 2016 presidential elections show the ongoing strength of rank and file evangelicals in national politics. However, evangelicals as a group seem to have embraced partisan polarization, and as a result have lost a great deal of credibility among those outside of their own constituency. By increasing their ability to work across religious and social lines, this religious group could help reinvigorate the national conversation over the common good, and move its members away from the identity politics that have become the norm. When the political opportunity again arises in the realm of legislation related to religious freedom advocacy, gains are made in cooperation with a broad group of religious and nonreligious participants (as in the case

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97 Ibid.
of IRFA). This stands in contrast to unilateral legislation formed that, in a highly partisan environment, would be more susceptible to later legislative reversals or court challenges.

**Principle Four**: Religious freedom advocacy groups should work across religious and social identity lines.

A few years after the signing of Evangelical and Catholics Together, evangelicals took the lead in mobilizing in favor of legislation that eventually became the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, evangelicals joined with a host of others across political and religious lines to ensure passage of the Act. At first, the legislation was primarily directed at addressing religious persecution of Christians abroad. As the Monica Lewinsky scandal was increasing pressure on Bill Clinton’s presidency, evangelicals recognized the political opportunity to work for legislation that would please their constituency and provide an olive branch to a constituency that constituted some of Clinton’s harshest critics.

The success of the initial legislation, the “Wolf-Specter bill,” was hampered in the Senate because of its specific focus on Christians and persecution. Rival legislation, the “Nickels-Lieberman bill,” also experienced a similar problematic outlook for passage, until evangelicals widened their alliance and the scope of the bill to have a more universal outreach. Allan Hertzke credited grassroots evangelical support for the legislative success of what became the International Religious Freedom Act. This mobilization included the zeal of mobilized American evangelicals who identified with

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those facing religious persecution and could put into play a well-formed religious
network.  

But all the social movement resources at the disposal of the evangelical leaders
were not enough to ensure the passage of IRFA, particularly when support split between
the two bills. Success depended upon reaching across ideological and religious lines,
including an alliance among Episcopal, Jewish, evangelical, Catholic and adherents of
other faiths, in crafting a bill that would address the broader issue of religious freedom
and the concerns of a wider set of constituencies.  

The pluralistic approach inherent in these principles helps mitigate the totalizing
impulses of movements that would otherwise adopt an identity-centered posture in the
public square. At the same time, if the traction of Christian ideas in the marketplace is
damaged through inconsistency in their public message, then Christians are in danger of
losing credible public engagement. Yet, political mobilization may still retain a role in a
framework for constructive, pluralistic engagement by Christian groups seeking greater
religious freedom. Mobilization itself is a tool which can be used in a variety of ways.
The next chapter will examine how Coptic evangelicals struggling for greater religious
freedom in Egypt employ rights-based mobilization to secure their place in civil and
political society.


100 Ibid.
This chapter will explore an evangelical social service organization in Egypt that
has marshalled the tools of both theology and political mobilization in forming an ethic of
effective engagement. This chapter delves into what religious freedom means in practice
for a Christian group living as a minority in an environment unfriendly to full religious
freedom. While Egypt continues to experience inter-religious violence and social
hostilities to Christians, and Egyptian politics and law favor the Muslim majority, Coptic
evangelicals have attained a growing presence in civil society that aligns with their core
religious values of loving their neighbor and helping those in need. Through the Coptic
Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS), these Protestant Christians have
found a voice in civil society that is disproportionally larger than the size of their
population. At the heart of their faith-informed mobilization efforts are strategies that
contribute to the common good.

Coptic evangelicals and the CEOSS organization were chosen for this case study
for several reasons. CEOSS is a Protestant/evangelical organization that has a strong and
lasting public presence in developing countries. As pointed out by Philip Jenkins, the
demographic center of gravity for the global Christian community is in the process of
moving from Western countries to the Global South.1 Developing a broadly-applicable

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set of principles regarding religious freedom advocacy requires taking stock of groups operating in this region. At the same time, there are lessons learned about public engagement, particularly in a country with a difficult record of religious oppression, that speak directly to the challenges involved in crafting a public response to political pressures. The work of CEOSS and its internal debates also shed light on some of the solutions found in the normative debates over Christian public engagement.

CEOSS has operated for decades in a political and social environment that is often hostile to their home community of Protestant Christians. This case tests the hypothesis put forth by Niebuhr that the larger the religious organization, the more likely it is to veer from the Christian mission as it participates in the power dynamics characteristic of political engagement. In short, can a Christian group retain a religiously-grounded focus on the common good in a political and civil environment hostile to their faith and even their presence? If so, what implications does the Christian model of service to others have for a pluralistic society? If not, do larger Christian communities need to turn inward for their own group protection, abandoning their role in building a society where groups may learn to live with their deepest differences?

Amid profound social and political hostilities, CEOSS leaders have refined what it means to be an effective Christian presence in a Muslim-majority country. In the process, they have defined the kinds of freedoms they can expect to secure in this context. At the core of CEOSS’s programs and initiatives is a mission akin to Lesslie Newbigin’s idea that the Church should “recognize that they exist for the sake of those who are not members, as sign, instrument, and foretaste of God’s redeeming grace for the
whole life of society.” The following study will show how this outward focus on the common good as a Christian ethic has helped preserve CEOSS’s ability to remain engaged in Egyptian public life well beyond individual efforts or congregational life.

**Methodology**

This study examines how CEOSS cultivated its public engagement as a religious organization through its civil society initiatives. It delves into the connection between the in-group religious values that drive Coptic evangelical engagement with Egyptian society, and the public arguments it has made that have led to its continuing growth and success.

In terms of mobilization, the model CEOSS offers has two prongs: mobilization among its Christian supporters in Egypt and abroad, and the pluralistic secular mobilization of the vulnerable groups it assists irrespective of religious affiliation. The development organization’s full-time staff is drawn from the Coptic evangelical community. The mission and practice of CEOSS also relies on the Coptic evangelical community for financial support, in addition to funds received through international grant-making organizations. At less than 20,000 adherents, the population of Coptic evangelicals in Egypt is tiny in comparison to the larger Coptic Orthodox population in

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2 Ibid.

3 Aziza Hussein, "NGOs And Development Challenges Of The 21St Century", in *Egypt In The Twenty First Century: Challenges For Development*, M. Riad El-Ghonemyed. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 211. In addition to the full-time Christian staff, CEOSS employs about 6,000 Muslim part-time staff members. Also, 70 percent of about 3,000 volunteers working with CEOSS are Muslim.

Egypt, which itself represents a roughly 10 percent minority of the Muslim-majority population of Egypt. Over the past few decades debates within the Coptic evangelical family, as well as in the leadership of CEOSS, has continually refined the values behind the religious group’s public engagement. At the same time, development strategies adopted by CEOSS have included certain political attributes designed to deepen the impact of their programs on Egyptian society.

To assess CEOSS’s values-based mobilization efforts, this chapter will look at the expressed theological and political perspectives of its leaders, from its founder Samuel Habib, to its current president, Andrea Zaki. These writings reveal how Coptic evangelicals have defined themselves and their role as Protestant Christians in a Muslim-majority country. Emphasis will be placed on the theo-political approach of Zaki that underpins the current approach CEOSS takes for extending religious freedom through civil-society engagement. It will also take into account the competing ideas of Zaki’s predecessor, Rafiq Habib, who expressed socio-political ideas in chorus with those of the Muslim Brotherhood prior to the Arab Spring, and whose leadership was ultimately rejected by Coptic evangelicals. This will demonstrate the connection between religio-political ideas and mobilization within the group.

CEOSS also has a program for public mobilization based on human rights articulated in Egyptian law and expressed in international convention. This study will also examine how the CEOSS expresses its religious mission through civil and political

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participation. It relies on field research done in Egypt, including interviews with members of CEOSS staff as well as beneficiaries of the group’s programs. These include small-scale farmers in the rural governorate of Qalubiya, working children in a poor urban district of Cairo, advocates for the disabled in Upper Egypt, and women living in one of Egypt’s poorest villages. The religious profiles of those I spoke to include both Muslims and Coptic Christians, as well as ministers and lay people. Most meetings with these groups were done in the context of focus groups on-site in various places where CEOSS is mobilizing rights-based development programs.

Through an examination of the ideas in contention within the Coptic evangelical community, in conjunction with how mobilization is taking place within this community, I present evidence of the close link between the ideas and values formed by the community, and how they affect their public engagement.

**Coptic Orthodox: Church and State**

The story of Egypt’s Coptic community over the past 125 years can be described as the migration of a community that never left home. That is, a migration second-class status in the 19th century, to the Egyptian business and cultural mainstream in the 1920’s, and then to the margins less than a century later. Until the mid-19th century, Coptic Christians were treated as *dhimmis*, People of the Book living in an Islamic nation. That is, they were taxed for their exemption from the military, and were excluded from full participation in some areas of (Muslim) public life. The dramatic geo-political realignments that occurred after World War I allowed Copts to move into a position of nation-building alongside their Muslim neighbors. Both Muslim and Christian Egyptians
stood together in resistance of British control of their country, embodying the slogan “Religion for God, and the motherland for everyone.” In the aftermath of the 1919 uprising, feeling of common Egyptian citizenship ran high among Muslims and Christians, particularly in the Wafd party, during what is referred to as the “liberal period” in modern Egyptian history. Al-Azhar mosque hosted a sermon by the Coptic priest Qummus Sargiyus, and Imams spoke in Coptic churches in the name of Egyptian solidarity. Coptic Egyptians and their Muslim Wafd party compatriots resisted British proposals to distinguish parliamentary representation according to religion, which Copts viewed as enshrining their political status as a permanent minority. Instead, they evoked a common Pharonic past among Egyptians of all faiths as a ground for solidarity and full citizenship regardless of religion.6

Wafd’s rivals disdained the party’s inclusive attitudes, accusing it of diluting the Muslim character of Egypt. This attitude prevailed in later decades. It was during this period that the Muslim Brotherhood was formed (1928). Copts viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a direct threat to their empowerment as full civil and political members of Egyptian society. 7

The Coptic community flourished up until the mid-20th century, and Coptic individuals held cabinet and prominent seats in parliament. The status of Coptic Christians shifted dramatically in the 1950s. In the fallout of the revolution of 1952, the

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6 Ibid.

7 Oddbjørn Leirvik., *Human Conscience and Muslim-Christian Relations: Modern Egyptian Thinkers On Al-Damir* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 204.
pluralistic atmosphere in which Copts thrived was destroyed through a process of inequitable secularization. Prior to the revolution, Muslim family and personal status law was arbitrated by sharia courts, and Christian families relied on Christian courts. Egyptian secularization abolished the religious courts, and placed Coptic and Muslims alike under a common legal system that drew from sharia as its foundation for civil affairs. In addition, the abolition of political parties hampered their ability to participate in political life, and the nationalization of many Coptic businesses further set Egypt’s Coptic community on the road to decades of marginalization.8

Yet, as the Coptic community was marginalized from civic and political life, development organizations began to emerge. CEOSS founder Samuel Habib had launched literacy programs in Egyptian communities in the mid-1950s, and registered the name “Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services” with the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1960.9 Over the next two decades, religious revivals invigorated the Egypt’s Christian communities.10 A by-product of this revival was the strengthening of Coptic religious identity, and the rise of their distinction from Egyptian Muslims with respect to political and civil life in Egypt.

8 Ami Ayalon, “Egypt’s Coptic Pandora’s Box”, in Minorities and The State In The Arab World, Ofra Bengioed. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 55.


Deprived of secular party affiliation, Coptic Christianity encompassed both a political and a religious identity, a marked contrast to the trans-religious Egyptian solidarity prior to World War II. Pope Shenouda III used his religious position as the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church to speak for the rights of his flock, affirming the Church hierarchy as the political voice of Egypt’s Coptic community. The growing influence of Islamists within the Egyptian political and legal structure during the 1970s and 1980s, and the increasingly political language of Coptic Orthodox leaders set the government and the Coptic Church on a course toward further polarization, and outbreaks of violence against the Copts.

During this period, Coptic Egyptians became increasingly subject to sharia implemented in Egyptian civil law. Article Two of the 1971 Egyptian Constitution affirmed the majority presence of Islam in Egyptian society and its laws: “Islam is the religion of the State and Arabic its official language. Islamic law (Sharia) is the principal source of legislation.” In 1979, the national Court of Cassation (similar to a Supreme Court) attempted to reconcile the secular nature of Egyptian law with the presence of sharia in the legal system:

> The concept [of public policy] is based on a purely secular doctrine that is to be applied as a general doctrine ("madhhab'cmn") to which society in its entirety can adhere and which must not be linked to any provision of religious laws.”

However, this does not exclude that [public policy] is sometimes based on a

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11 Ibid., 72.


principle related to religious doctrine, in the case when such a doctrine has become intimately linked with the legal and social order, deep-rooted in the conscience of society (damir al-mujtama'), in the sense that the general feelings (al-shuc'\textit{r} al-'amm) are hurt if it is not adhered to. This means that these principles [of public policy] by necessity extend to all citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, irrespective of their religions. This is because the notion of public policy cannot be divided in such a manner that some principles apply to the Christians, and others to Muslims, nor can public policy apply only to a person or a religious community. The definition (\textit{taqdir}) [of public policy] is characterized by objectivity, in accordance with what the general majority (aghlaba'amm) of individuals of the community believes … Islamic law is considered an [inalienable] right of the Muslims (\textit{fi haqqal-muslimin}), and is therefore part of public policy, due to its strong link to the legal and social foundations which are deep-rooted in the conscience of society.  

In practice, non-Islamic law was most often used in cases of marriage and divorce only when the husband and wife were of precisely the same non-Muslim sect. In all other cases, Islamic law (as it is enshrined in Egypt’s “general law”) was applied by default. This places many legal issues that were once handled in Christian courts, ranging from personal status (including religious conversion) to inheritance in the jurisdiction of sharia for non-Muslim Egyptians. This created a host of complications. For example, a spouse could convert to Islam or a different form of Christianity to have the case moved out of a Christian court, where divorce is difficult, to the sharia court, where divorce is much easier to obtain. This particularly favored those converting to Islam. Those converting from one type of Christianity to another must have done so before beginning litigation, but one party could convert to Islam at any time in the process to move the case to a

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sharia court. Additionally, conversion to Islam is allowed, but conversion away from Islam (considered apostasy) is not. Conversion from Islam, though not criminally punishable, nullifies marriages, prevents the convert from getting married in the future, bars inheritance, among other legal repercussions.\(^\text{16}\)

The use of sharia in secular law, and the growing issue of Islamism in Egyptian society further alienated the Coptic community, and deprived Coptic Orthodox Christians of a political and legal voice. Their only recourse was to draw closer to the Church as a source of solidarity, and the church hierarchy as their chief voice in public affairs. Pope Shenouda had been a vocal opponent of Article 2 of the 1971 constitution, and had a series of conflicts with President Sadat, particularly over the Camp David accords and the growing presence of Islamism in Egypt. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s violence erupted with increasing frequency between Copts and Muslims. It boiled over in June 1981, when Copts and Muslims clashed for several days over a plot of land in Cairo where Copts intended to build a church. The conflict left five Copts and four Muslims dead. Coptic leaders, including Pope Shenouda, complained that security forces stood by without interfering in the conflict as a punishment for Shenouda’s rejectionist stance toward Egyptian policies.\(^\text{17}\)

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 99.

Shenouda was sent into in-country exile one month before Sadat was assassinated by Islamists in October 1981. He remained in exile until released by President Mubarak in 1985. Upon returning to public life, Shenouda shifted from a vocal opponent of the regime’s national policies, to one of its most prominent supporters. This left many Copts dissatisfied. He also used his authority to dissuade Copts from retaliating against sectarian strife that was seen by Copts as being stirred up by members of Mubarak’s government.18

Shenouda made a strong appeal for justice following the New Year’s midnight prayer service bombing at the Two Saints Church in Alexandria. Twenty-three Copts were killed and 97 injured by the bombing. Some Copts blamed the government for providing inadequate security.19 Others placed the bombing’s organization and execution within the Egyptian interior ministry itself. The attack was followed by a series of violent clashes between Copts and security forces. The Tahrir Square protests that led to the 2011 revolution a few weeks later upturned the process of legally identifying and prosecuting those responsible for the bombing, despite periodic protests in the years since the bombing. (Shenouda had discouraged Copts from joining the protests in Tahrir Square.)20 Unarmed Coptic Christians clashed with Egyptian security forces in October


20 Ibid.
2011. During the demonstration, Egyptian security fired live ammunition into the crowd, and ran over Coptic protesters with military vehicles. Two dozen Copts were killed.²¹

After Shenouda’s death in 2012, the new pope, Tawadros II, vowed to reform the way Copts engaged in public life. This included shifting the role of political leadership back to lay members of the community, rather than have the pope continue the role of both the religious and political leader of the Egypt’s Coptic Orthodox citizens “The most important thing,” he said, “is for the church to go back and live consistently within the spiritual boundaries because this is its main work, spiritual work.”²²

In terms of Social Movement theory, the response formulated by the Coptic Orthodox Church in response to increased marginalization follows the rights-grievance model of political mobilization. Their specific grievances are linked to an overall complaint that their religious rights and their abilities to participate freely in public life were eroded over the past six decades due to the religious stance taken by the Egyptian government with respect to pressure from Islamist groups. Integral with their overall grievance are the ongoing social hostilities against Copts, including rioting, arson, kidnappings and other violence against the Coptic community.

To pursue a remedy to these grievances, the Coptic community relied on certain resources. This included solidarity among the significantly-sized minority. Also of great

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importance was the voice of the church in the person of Pope Shenouda. For a time, his voice carried the grievances of Coptic community to both the Egyptian government and the international stage. However, Shenouda’s post-exile shift to government support marked a loss for the Coptic Orthodox Church’s ability to address the group’s grievances, much to the dissatisfaction of his community. Upon his death, the new head of the Coptic Orthodox Church devolved this role to lower levels of the Church hierarchy to help address the deficit in citizen-level engagement. This major adjustment in public engagement could also mitigate the government’s ability to tame the opposition through, for example, the exile of its leader. Today, the community remains under heavy pressure from the Egyptian government and is frequently a target for violent social hostilities.23

When it comes to the formation and protection of identity, mobilization among the Coptic Orthodox members is a tricky prospect. Asserting grievances through an emphasis on their status as a minority, a strategy often used in the West, places them in danger of being identified further as de facto *dhimmis* by the opponents. That is, attempting to leverage their minority identity may further entrench the idea that they are second-class citizens. Rather, their rhetoric focusses on their place as full citizens that deserve equal protection under the law, and relief from the social hostilities that have plagued the community for decades.24


**Coptic Evangelicals: Pursuing an Alternative Path**

The Protestant community in Egypt, and Coptic Evangelicals in particular, have pursued a markedly different course than the Coptic Orthodox Church and Pope Shenouda. Coptic evangelicals have carried out alternative approaches than their Orthodox compatriots. For this group, identity still takes a central role in political participation. However, their use of the rights-grievance model, their cultivation of resources for mobilization, and how they manage areas where they lack resources, speaks to a model of engagement that is both innovative and an effective method to achieve many of their stated goals.

Coptic Evangelicals have their roots in the 19th century Presbyterian missionary movement. In 1854 a group of missionaries from the Midwestern United States arrived in Egypt. They were part of a large movement of American and British evangelicals fanning out across the globe with the hope of spreading the Christian Gospel to every country. The missionaries who came to Egypt in the 1850’s were members of the United Presbyterian Church of North America. The denomination, based in Pittsburgh, had roots among descendants of Scottish immigrants to the United States. It was staunchly abolitionist during the American Civil War and worked with freed slaves afterward. In the United States their work with "freedmen's missions” helped diversify the movement beyond its rural Scottish roots.25 In Egypt, the lasting institutions of the Presbyterian

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missionary efforts are seen today in the Coptic Evangelical Church, CEOSS, as well as the American University in Cairo.\textsuperscript{26}

In Egypt, Presbyterian missionaries experienced a period of adjustment in finding a receptive audience for their call to conversion. Upon arriving in Egypt, they found that the lower Nile region, including the city centers of Cairo and Alexandria, were nearly completely Muslim. Social, legal and religious restrictions made proselytizing among Muslims particularly difficult. There were many Coptic Orthodox Christians in this area, but they were mostly well-educated government workers with little interest in switching their religious affiliation.\textsuperscript{27}

The missionaries then directed their resources to Upper Egypt, with its larger population of rural \textit{fellahin} Coptic Christians. The missionaries travelled up and down in the Nile in riverboats, and became known as “Riverboat Missionaries” to the locals.\textsuperscript{28} By the turn of the century, the Presbyterian missionaries had established fifty congregations serving more than 6,500 Coptic evangelicals, and had begun moving the care of the Egyptian church to local leaders.\textsuperscript{29} This degree of missionary success early in the history of the Coptic Evangelical community is reflected in the high level of interest and activity CEOSS continues today in the region.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
By the end of the Suez crisis in 1956, most foreign missionaries had left the country. Two years later, the Coptic Evangelical church was recognized as an independent Presbyterian synod. One former missionary defined the new, more equal relationship between the American and the Egyptian church: “They are not now our children. They are our sister churches in Christ and join us in being witnesses to the whole world.”

The Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services had its roots in the late 1940’s as a village literacy program run by Presbyterian missionaries. Rev. Samuel Habib established CEOSS in 1952. Its services soon expanded to include a variety of programs. These early development efforts ranged from agricultural education to small business development. Today, CEOSS has grown into a large and influential NGO with a wide array of services that serve about 2.5 million poor in 12 of the country’s 27 governorates.

Among their biggest projects is the Horus Eye Hospital in Minia, Upper Egypt. The hospital was established in 2010 to address the high rates of cataracts and other treatable eye diseases in a region of Egypt that does has few advanced medical facilities. In 2011, the hospital examined more than 2,000 patients, and performed more than 300 surgeries. CEOSS also addresses the concerns of women and girls, promoting the

30 Sharkey, American Evangelicals in Egypt, 202.
32 Horus Hospital مستشفى حورس, video (Cairo, Egypt: Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services, 2013).
education of girls through scholarships and by providing transportation. This is a concern in Upper Egypt where roughly 50 percent of girls ages 10 to 14 cannot read and write.

CEOSS has been noted as a particularly effective advocate for women. The organization takes a holistic approach to the welfare of women and girls in rural areas by engaging a number of issues with local authorities and community leaders. This includes discouraging early and forced marriages, female genital cutting and other practices. Several observers have praised CEOSS for helping resolve issues of Female Genital Cutting/FGM and other practices through their participatory approach. According to one independent report, five communities voluntarily stopped FGC through initiatives organized by CEOSS.

In terms of economic development, CEOSS works in urban areas, such as Cairo, as well as rural regions to improve the livelihoods of the population it serves. Programs include establishing job-seekers database, vocational training, interviewing and resume writing, and help to young entrepreneurs in starting businesses. CEOSS has an active


35 Ibid.


38 Ibid.

micro-credit program. In 2011, they disbursed nearly 57,000 small loans to nearly 40,000 active clients. Sixty-four percent of the loans were to poor women and households headed by women. CEOSS claims a repayment rate of 98.7 percent.40

These are just a few examples of development programs that CEOSS is using to improve the lives of the poor and disadvantaged in Egypt. By all accounts, the organization has a solid reputation for delivering the services they promise. For example, Habitat for Humanity celebrated the completion of a large housing project in cooperation with CEOSS, praising the organization in its press release about the successful partnership: “CEOSS is an experienced and effective development organization. In both Christian and Muslim communities, CEOSS staff work to develop local leadership, determine needs and facilitate programs that lead to better health, education and economic development.”41

Method

CEOSS’s key point of public engagement has been through development programs aimed at Egypt’s poor and disadvantaged since its inception in the 1950s. The organization reviews their overall development strategies every five years. Since the 1990s this has led CEOSS to evolve their approach to helping Egypt’s poor and vulnerable from institutional support, to fostering self-dependence, to a participatory strategy. In 2005, CEOSS adopted a rights-based development approach to help increase

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40 Ibid., 24-25.
the scalability of its development projects and deepen the ownership of its development programs among beneficiaries.42

Rights-based development has a variety of definitions among development organizations around the world. For CEOSS, it involves working with small local NGOs and associations to educate those in need of help about what they can do to better their lives through both public resources and self-determination. CEOSS conducts programs that help the poor and vulnerable write proposals, communicate effectively, conduct local elections, and establish long term public engagement.43

In terms of Social Movement Theory, CEOSS employs a modified version of the rights-grievance approach that shifts the emphasis away from the protection of their personal identity to solutions for grievances held among other vulnerable groups. Rights-based development is the largest among a portfolio of CEOSS’s public engagement initiatives. The majority of CEOSS human and capital resources are focused on these programs, and it forms the core of their outreach beyond the Coptic Evangelical community.44

In contrast to the Coptic Orthodox Church, which historically has used the rights-grievance approach to highlight its own plight in the face of government restrictions and social hostilities, CEOSS has prioritized the needs of the many vulnerable groups over pressing their own complaints about social hostilities and government treatment of their

42 Rafik Nagy and Suzanne Fouad, interview by Walter Ratliff, in person (Cairo, Egypt, 2015).
43 Ibid.
home community. As noted below, Coptic Evangelicals have common experience with other Christian minority communities who have experienced violence and persecution in Egypt. However, they have also continually worked to resolve problems that cut across cultural and religious lines in their country. Through rights-based development they have been able to dramatically increase their freedom to exercise what is defined within their group as a Christian calling to help their neighbor. Religious freedom in this context, where it is intertwined with the ability to increase the common good, is strengthened as their capacity to address the common good in grows. In this case, closely defining the form of religious public engagement is critical to their success in securing the freedom to exercise this engagement.

The rights-based framework contains several components. First, the poor often need immediate help that cannot wait for a long process of establishing committees and securing rights. This includes addressing issues of dangerous or inadequate housing, safe drinking water or another issue that directly affects health and safety of the group involved. Second, as local committees outline their priorities, CEOSS uses their long experience and deep connections with leaders at all levels of government to help create a relationship between the rights-owners and those who bear the duty of meeting those rights (i.e. government entities). Developing a mechanism for open communication between the rights holders and sponsors is critical for CEOSS’s overall approach to creating productive relationships between citizens and those in government. Through elected committees and local nonprofit associations, rights owners move into a position where they hold duty-bearers accountable for their rights. In this way, CEOSS continues
to foster dialogue and development between vulnerable communities and various levels of the Egyptian government.

**Development of Small-Scale Farming**

This structure manifests itself in different ways. For example, CEOSS sought to engage poor, small-scale farmers in the Qalyubia governorate, just north of Cairo. (CEOSS currently help about 13,000 farmers across three governorates, including about 4,200 women farmers).\(^{45}\) The majority of Egyptian crops are grown by farmers who cultivate a few acres. Historically, these farmers lost much of their income to middle-men who would purchase their products in order to resell them to the general public. These intermediaries were dictating the types of crops the farmers would grow (primarily grains) and facilitated the use of expensive artificial fertilizers.\(^{46}\) As CEOSS began the process of rights-based development, they tended to many of these immediate needs. This included instructing the farmers in the use of composted fertilizer, rather than burning or discarding manure and other organic waste. They also provided contacts with public distributors who would buy their products and educated farmers in how to become more strategic in the types of crops they grew. The farmers interviewed in this study indicated that they doubled their income in within a few years as a result of these efforts.\(^{47}\) At the same time, they improved their farming practices overall by shifting from grains to


\(^{46}\) Ibid., 19.

\(^{47}\) Walter Ratliff, Interviews with Egyptian farmers and local government officials, in person (Qalyubia, Egypt, 2018).
potatoes, onions and peanuts, and by dealing directly with companies distributing their produce.\textsuperscript{48}

During this process, CEOSS trained farmers in forming local committees of elected representatives. These committees set priorities and pursued these priorities with representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture. For the Qalyubia farmers, this included pursuing the right to government assistance clear irrigation canals that were in disrepair and improve the overall irrigation infrastructure. Through the rights-based approach, the farmers were able to organize themselves, set their own priorities and pursue those priorities with respect to the local government. The approach has proven popular with both the farmers and local government representatives tasked with looking after agricultural improvement in the area. The levels of involvement increased as the agricultural committees learned more about the process of engagement. As the CEOSS-trained committees and organizations matured, these groups were able to contribute their own preferred language to Article 29 of the 2014 Egyptian Constitution. These articles are designed to establish and protect the rights of farmers and agricultural workers.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Constitution Of The Arab Republic Of Egypt 2014, ebook (Cairo: Arab Republic of Egypt, 2014), accessed February 12, 2018, http://www.sis.gov.eg/Newvr/Dustor-en001.pdf. Text: “Article (29): Agriculture is a basic component of the economy. The State shall protect and expand agricultural land, and shall criminalize encroachments thereon. It shall develop rural areas; raise the standard of living of their population and protect them from environmental risks; and shall strive to on develop agricultural and animal production and encourage industries based thereon. The State shall provide agricultural and animal production requirements, and shall buy basic agricultural crops at suitable prices generating profit margins for farmers in agreement with agricultural unions, syndicates and associations. The State shall also allocate a percentage of reclaimed lands to small farmers and youth graduates, and protect farmers and agricultural workers against exploitation. All the foregoing shall be as regulated by Law.”
“This was the first democracy that we practiced in our life,” said one farmer, “and we feel successful.”50

Services to At-Risk Youth

A similar structure is involved for other poor and vulnerable groups. For example, children in the El Salam neighborhood of Cairo often began work at a very young age, sometimes as early as six years old. The working children commonly experienced various forms of abuse by their employers and missed educational opportunities.51

One boy, 17-year-old Hamed, worked as an assistant in a pharmaceutical factory. He said that his regular shift was twelve hours, and if the next boy didn’t show up for his shift, he would work another twelve hours without relief. He said he regularly endured physical and verbal abuse by his overseers at the company. Yet, he needed to work in order to help sustain his family in one of Cairo’s poorest neighborhoods. Hamed stumbled upon a small neighborhood association that was trying to help working children like him. The program offered by this small charity was funded, and the staffed trained, by CEOSS. Their strategy for helping thousands of children like Hamed in this area involved educating working children about their rights and helping them secure those rights from the companies and government agencies bearing a duty to uphold those rights.

50 Walter Ratliff, Interviews with Egyptian farmers and local government officials.

Hamed felt empowered. He no longer had to suffer long hours and abuse. The first thing he did was stand up to his bosses at the company. As a result, he lost his job. Still a young teen, he began driving a tuk-tuk to earn money and kept working various jobs while deepening his involvement with the local children’s organization. With the help of CEOSS and the neighborhood association, he soon moved from Cairo’s child workforce to its student population. Growing up, he did not see much opportunity, or use, for education. Now, he says he enjoys learning. He still works, now at a restaurant with better hours and working conditions. He also has time for his studies. Through the training he received from CEOSS and their affiliated local association, Hamed is also helping improve the lives of other working children here. The rights-based program advanced by CEOSS enabled Hamed and his peers to advocate for the rights of hundreds of their peers in this neighborhood.

Ayman Ali Maher, a local committee leader, said that he has seen many improvements among children like Hamed. This includes increased morale among working youth, and more widespread relief from abuse. The children have also been steered away from dangerous work and have learned negotiation and cooperation. Children’s committees, including Hamed’s, have been able to develop their ability to articulate their needs and grievances, and pursue their rights to education and a better livelihood. Though many children aged thirteen and older still work, their lives have improved. They have also been able to participate in advising the constitutional

52 A tuk-tuk is a small, three-wheeled vehicle used as a taxi.
53 Ibid.
committee about enshrining the rights of children in national law. In this case, the children from CEOSS-sponsored development groups helped construct Article 80 in the 2014 Constitution, which helps protect the employment and education rights of minors.

Similar stories are found in the other domains CEOSS has engaged, including the disabled looking for employment and women in need of better health care. In each case, immediate needs are coupled with organizing efforts among those seeking a remedy to their grievances as a means to a better life. In their training and organizing efforts, CEOSS points to both Egyptian law and international human rights conventions as tools for those seeking to improve their situation.

Their ethic of engagement and method of mobilization is borne out of a dynamic based on their identification as members of multiple communities: as Christians, as members of a small religious minority, and as Egyptian citizens. Through this multi-dimensional perspective, CEOSS has been able to weather multiple regime changes, frequent social hostilities, and hostile government officials on its way to become one of

54 Walter Ratliff, Interview with children and child rights advocates, in person (Cairo, Egypt, 7 September 2015).

Text: “Article (80) Anyone under the age of 18 shall be considered a child. Each child shall have the right to a name, identity documents, free compulsory vaccination, health and family or alternative care, basic nutrition, safe shelter, religious education, and emotional and cognitive development. The State shall ensure the rights of children with disabilities, their rehabilitation and their integration in the society. The State shall provide children with care and protection from all forms of violence, abuse, mistreatment and commercial and sexual exploitation. Every child shall be entitled to acquire early education in a childhood center until the age of six. It is prohibited to employ children before the age of completing their preparatory education (six years of primary and three years of preparatory) or in jobs which subject them to danger. The State shall also develop a judicial system for children that have been victims and or are witnesses. Children may not be held criminally accountable or detained save as provided in the Law and for the period of time specified therein. In such a case, they shall be provided with legal assistance and detained in appropriate locations separate from those allocated for the detention of adults. The State shall endeavor to achieve the best interest of children in all measures taken against them.”
Egypt’s largest and most-respected development organizations. For CEOSS, the pursuit of greater religious freedom includes the freedom to serve their neighbors, Christian, Muslim, and secular alike.

**Ethics of Engagement**

The work CEOSS is doing among Egypt’s most vulnerable is an example of using social movement organization by a religious organization to pursue secular human rights in a manner that engenders broad appeal. It presents an important counterpoint to other Christian movements and organizations that are directly engaging the political process to secure rights for their own community, exclusive of those beyond their in-group. CEOSS is looking after the rights, and therefore the justice and quality of life issues, of a plurality of demographics that make up Egyptian society, transcending religion or subculture. Behind their decade-long project in rights-based development are nearly seven decades providing social services. During this time, CEOSS’s presence in Egyptian civil society has continued to grow in size and reputation, even as Egypt has undergone dramatic political, social and economic upheavals. Their footprint as one of Egypt’s pre-eminent non-governmental organizations stands in sharp contrast to the small population of their home community of Coptic evangelicals.

Since the Arab Spring, Coptic Christians in Egypt have suffered increasing persecution and violent social hostilities. This includes blasphemy charges, religious attacks, arrests, and kidnappings. They have also seen their churches and homes destroyed by arson and mob violence. Coptic evangelicals are a small minority in Egypt’s historic Christian community. Yet, they have suffered similar violence and persecution as
their Coptic Orthodox brethren. In 2015, this has included arrests of evangelical youth for on charges of insulting Islam, mob attacks on Coptic evangelicals meeting in homes, and gunfire directed at Coptic evangelical churches.56

CEOSS is also involved in a wide variety of civil society initiatives typical of development organizations (micro-loans, poverty eradication, vocational training, etc.) Their rights-based approach, in conjunction with their other initiatives and partnerships with Islamic and secular NGOs, has created a deep civil society presence for CEOSS. This presence has provided a buffer against opposition the group has received with respect to their religious identity. Their emphasis on looking after the needs of a cross-section of Egyptian society, and not limiting themselves to the unique concerns of their own religious group, has proven an effective strategy in strengthening their survival in an otherwise hostile environment.

CEOSS’s civil society efforts are part of a twin strategy for governmental and societal engagement. First, the leaders of the organization believe that violent extremism can be reduced by addressing needs related to poverty, disenfranchisement, unemployment and other pressing social issues. They believe that actively helping to

relieve these pressures will prevent some Egyptians from falling into extremism.\textsuperscript{57} Second, CEOSS remains closely engaged across different strata of government, from local councils to national leaders. By establishing relationships and keeping open communication channels, they make a strong case for their unity with other Egyptians across demographic lines, alongside a conduit for communicating their own community’s concerns among government leaders.

For example, prior to the Arab Spring, the head of CEOSS would meet regularly with President Mubarak to inform him personally of the group’s activities. These meetings served to counteract the negative reports from security services that would otherwise threaten the organization’s ability to remain active.\textsuperscript{58} After the 2011 revolution, President Morsi expressed his appreciation of CEOSS during an Egyptian NGO forum.\textsuperscript{59} Top-level support continues under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who recently included CEOSS among nine of Egypt’s largest organizations addressing Egyptian development issues.\textsuperscript{60}


Opponents of Egypt’s Coptic Christians can be found in government and among certain religious and political groups. These opponents attempt to perpetuate *de facto* dhimmitude for the Coptic community, which the Christians experience as second-class status. This manifests itself in a variety of ways, including employment and educational discrimination, and restrictions on church construction and maintenance. CEOSS combats this by making a public case for the national Egyptian character of their community and organization. They reinforce this by developing economically sustainable initiatives that improve the lives of vulnerable Egyptians, regardless of religion, gender or social class, while avoiding proselytism. Their style of engagement includes communicating the Christian nature of their activities (i.e. the church’s concern and obligation to the poor), as well as their beneficial role they play in protecting the rights in of those across Egyptian society.

Though persecution, discrimination and occasional violence toward Egypt’s Coptic citizens persist, CEOSS has been successful in gaining the support of each successive regime. Though persecution and social hostilities are a constant pressure on Coptic evangelicals, CEOSS’s national profile as contributor to the common good continues to grow. Their rights-based development work across a range of vulnerable

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Egyptian groups help make the case to their compatriots and government leaders that the Coptic evangelical community is interested in improving the lives of every suffering Egyptian, regardless of faith. Their historical success may point to a horizon where they may one day achieve greater religious freedom and relief from the social hostilities and political oppression.

A rights-based approach recognizes that many, if not all, development goals are intertwined with a human right, such as those defined in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* For example, improving education goes hand in hand with a right to education, improved health services are a manifestation of a right to adequate health and well-being, etc.

CEOSS identifies rights-based outcomes as “participation in decision-making, providing better opportunities for developing human capabilities, and releasing humanity from confining boundaries and increasing community self-reliance.” In addition to programs that, for example, improve education itself or provide better medical care, CEOSS also engages elected local governing bodies, public ministries, private companies, and Egyptian media to help secure the rights to the service area they pursue. In each program, they work to train leaders and organize self-sustaining committees and organizations capable of continuing their pursuit of rights beyond the direct assistance of

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CEOSS. Rights-based development not only alleviates poverty or resolves an issue such as illiteracy or poor health care. It also entails empowering those benefiting from the program to have a greater say in their own affairs. This includes participation in local government as citizens, better governance, improved laws that promote development and human rights, and so on.

**Modes of Engagement**

The process of setting forth an alternative path to public engagement has generated some contention among Coptic Evangelicals. In recent decades, the two chief contenders over the driving narrative behind Coptic Evangelical engagement were CEOSS directors Rafik Habib and his successor Andrea Zaki. Both stand in contrast to the isolative and marginal approach that was manifested in the Coptic Orthodox Church. Yet, one has found greater success in meeting its goals for long-term engagement, and the other with what appears to be scuttled efforts for a close relationship with Egypt’s power holders.

**Rafiq Habib**

Rafiq Habib is the son of CEOSS founder Samuel Habib, and a former director of the organization. During his tenure, he developed increasingly closer ties to the Muslim Brotherhood via the al-Wasat party and subsequently the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) associated with the group. Habib was influenced by anti-Orientalist literature, including

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66 Ibid.
Edward Said, who spoke to a deep dissatisfaction among many Arabs with the culture and forms of government formed in the West and in place across the region.

For Habib, the overarching grievance held by his community has common cause with Arab cultures across the region suffering from colonialism, Western hegemony, and the influx of non-Islamic foreign culture. According to Habib, the proper form of resistance to Westernization and domination is to construct a Christian narrative that resembles in many respects the Muslim Brotherhood’s resistance to the West. This narrative rejects foreign religious and political elements in favor of a native Arab/Islamic approach, including the acceptance of Islamic culture as the dominant character of Arab culture and society.

In a nutshell, Habib envisions the Christian community in Egypt as existing within a communal Islamic state. The structure of this society relies heavily on non-governmental groups (like CEOSS and the Muslim Brotherhood) to provide most social support, which in effect limits the direct role of government in the lives of citizens. Habib saw the Egyptian government as deeply exploitive of its citizens, and the nationalization of institutions such as health care, education, and welfare as how the government has bankrupted the Egyptian community. 67 He blamed the large, intrusive government structure on the influence of Western colonialism. Influenced by Edward Said, he located the source of his society’s ills in Western interference in Arab-Islamic culture. The remedy Habib saw was a return to a model of society found in the Islamic civilization,

while stopping short of advocating Islam itself as a religion. “Umma [Islamic communal society] is for us as civil society is for the West,” Habib wrote, “We believe that the umma has a very important role to play in bringing about our renaissance. The umma, not the state, will be the catalyst of progress. The functions of the state must be restricted, while civil society must play a much more important role.”68 He rejected both the Western model of a democratic nation state, as well as an Islamist religious state in favor of a middle ground that rejects the role of government in the society’s cultural institutions.69

Habib’s model differs from the Western approach to democracy, individual rights and freedom of conscience in three essential aspects: First, it elevates the interest of the group over that of the individual to foster “social altruism.” Second, it calls for supervision over “intellectual conduct” to prevent deviation from the sacred values of the nation or causing offense to the religious and cultural sensitivities. Third, it rejects the notion of a global melting pot of cultural interactions, particularly with the foreign and corrupt West. As Habib put it, “Different cultures should be open in different ways. You can have scientific, economic and diplomatic cooperation. You can exchange ideas. But you cannot exchange values.”70


69 Ibid.

70 Ibid., 57.
His ideas and political affinities helped place Habib in a leadership position in Muslim Brotherhood political parties. The short-lived Muslim Brotherhood government created a high watermark for Habib influence on the Egyptian national stage. He ascended to prominent leadership positions in Muslim Brotherhood parties, particularly the FSJ. But this period also marked a nadir for him among his fellow Coptic Evangelicals. He retained a directorship at CEOSS, but his ideas and political roles were roundly condemned by Coptic evangelicals. This includes his father and founder of CEOSS, Samuel Habib, who condemned his son’s views in the *Cairo Times*. Other Coptic evangelicals sought his banishment from their community, arguing that his ideas gave ammunition to their Islamist opponents and caused greater strife between Coptic Orthodox and evangelicals as well as between Copts and Egyptian Muslims.

**Andrea Zaki**

For the current director of CEOSS, the role of the Christian in addressing grievances and seeking public influence goes far beyond the confines of protecting one’s own religious identity group. Andrea Zaki has outlined an ethic of engagement he calls “Dynamic Citizenship.” He defines this as: “an inclusive process that reaches beyond equality to justice by relating political rights to economic, social and cultural realities. Dynamic Citizenship promotes pluralism via multiple commitments and

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71 Ibid., 62.
institutionalisations of identity. Being democratic in nature, it transcends religious, ethnic and gender loyalties. It is connected to the nation-state but also transcends borders.”

In the language of Social Movement Theory, Dynamic Citizenship frames grievances in terms of the vulnerabilities a group experiences in pluralistic society. In this way, behavior to other groups transcends ideological and religious boundaries.

CEOSS has many resources at its disposal to address these grievances. This includes decades of accrued social capital in Egyptian political and civil society, as well as a human and material infrastructure in place to conduct their programs. Along with resources traditionally associated with social movement organizations, are resources internal to the group that provide the engine for continued engagement. These resources flow from the theology of the proper role of the Christian in public life, and a focus on the role of believer to address societal problems they see beyond the walls of their own community. Zaki sees the civil society role of CEOSS as consistent with an understanding of Christianity that seeks to address poverty, oppression, injustice and other causes of distress found among their neighbors. If the dynamic citizenship of CEOSS has a precedent, Zaki argues, it is found in the cooperation between Egyptian Christians and Muslims in the 1930s, where the reigning ethos of Egyptian citizenship was common struggle. Over the decades, consistent government support was often

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72 Andrea Zaki Stephanous, Political Islam, Citizenship, And Minorities (Lanham: University Press of America, 2012), Kindle Location 4631.

73 Ibid.

hard-won from regime to regime, and occurred despite social and government pressures on minority religious communities, particularly Coptic Christians.

At the heart of Zaki’s approach is fostering pluralism in a manner that steers away from direct religious or ideological conflicts. Zaki argues that polemics against other belief systems often slide into contempt for the believers of a competing faith, which often leads to violence.75 “All of this leads to rejection of ‘the other’, provoking sectarian strife and creating a huge gap in the community, isolating and confining some Christians in the Middle East to their own communities, rather than being open and integrating into society. This in return leads to intensified violent sectarianism, as experienced during the past year.”76

Zaki refers to rioting in 2013, when Muslim Brotherhood supporters left Coptic churches and properties destroyed across Egypt, including property owned by CEOSS in the city of Minya. Yet, for CEOSS, the answer was not retreat. Instead, Zaki outlines an incarnational approach to continued engagement in the face of religious and political opposition. This approach he takes seeks to break with both the Coptic monasticism and to some degree the Presbyterian missionary heritages of his community. He observes that ideas that seek to remove the spiritual community from the larger society as a poor example for today’s Christian communities that have a divine calling to preserving and

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76 Ibid.
transform society. He also sees the evangelical missionary perspective as teaching a form of puritanism that also sets Christians on a trajectory of isolation: “When evangelicals escape from their social role, they escape from their role as light and salt of the world as God desired.”

Zaki envisions a form of partnership between God and humanity in the Incarnation, which is in turn manifested in society as partnership between Christians and those outside the Church. That is, just as God entered the world as Christ in order to establish a church to accomplish his purposes, so too are Christians called to enter society as representatives of Christ to further the objectives laid out in scripture: “Spirituality, represented in a clear relationship between God and the community, is reflected in creative actions that seek development of the group’s mission and vision,” he argued. “The establishment of schools and hospitals, community development, the realization of human dignity and improvement of the standard of living, are matters not less spiritual than worship, but instead are within the mission and calling of the church of God.”

The idea that public engagement brings the presence of God into the world resembles ideas found in the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century. However, Zaki sets his vision apart from the Social Gospel by tying his core idea to the Arab cultural context, and a setting forth a specifically 21st century concept of inter-

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79 Ibid., 336.

religious pluralism. He sees Arab identity as inherently pluralistic in terms of religious affiliation. He also sees a focus on the common good of fellow Arabs as driving the Christian community to an incarnational engagement. This stands in contrast to the Social Gospel movement, which has its roots in the Protestant response to Western secularism. That is, its context that was not religiously pluralistic on the same order as the Arab world: “As I argue that the idea of pluralistic history is crucial; it introduces a new element to the concept of Arabism. Arabism is not limited only to Islam; it includes other religions and cultures in the Middle East as each one contributed to Arabism as we see it today. Pluralism in terms of history, culture and religion could lead us to new concepts for identity formation in the Arab world.”

Though Zaki sees a common Arab identity as a catalyst for Christian engagement across religious lines, he is careful to distinguish this idea from the historical development of Pan-Arabism, and its successor pan-Islamism. He observes these historical movements as devastating for Christians in the Middle East:

Pan-Arabism, its Islamic undertones undeniable despite its professedly secular call, was highly problematic for the Christians as a frame of reference. The confiscation of extensive Coptic property and the nationalization of Christian-controlled businesses deprived the Coptic elite of its public influence, as did the abolition of political parties, the main avenue of political participation. Prior to 1952, Copts occupied posts in major ministries in the prime-minister’s office, and as the head of the Parliament … A collision could have been avoided had the Egyptian political leadership perceived the danger of using religious symbols, language and concepts to deal with national problems.

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81 Stephanous, *Political Islam, Citizenship and Minorities*, Kindle Location 3810.

82 Ibid., Kindle Location 3013.
He argues that the government’s use of religion, specifically Islam, as a tool of legitimization led to the current environment of disunity among Egyptians. Zaki argues that this environment hampers the kind of broad Dynamic Citizenship critical for religious adherents of a variety of faiths to feel a common identity with those outside their group. Instead, religious groups become political havens for those of a similar faith, and the locus of identity group mobilization: “Thus, religious belonging increasingly becomes the unique or principal means of defining oneself, i.e. something that divides citizens rather than something that unites them.”\(^8^3\) Defiantly asserting an alternative to trend recovers the dynamic aspect of citizenship and offers hope for national unity amid pluralism.

Zaki says that any defensible political theology outlines a strong social role for the church. This role recognizes the equal citizenship of those from all religious persuasions. This religious approach to public life can also help strengthen solidarity across faith traditions and social demographics through robust participation in civil society. In this way, religion lends strength to the unity of a pluralistic state. The alternative is politics rooted in identity struggle, in which the state will be ripped apart over religious and ideological differences (as seen in Egypt since the 1970s): “The ultimate goal of the Church is that people will live in peace with God and with others. To achieve this goal, the Church must have relationships with individuals as well as an established role in society. This does not mean that the Church approaches public life

\(^8^3\) Ibid., Kindle Location 3051.
with the idea that it will use ideology and the tools of mobilization to increase its own power. Rather, it has a social role and it should understand the boundary between the political role and the social one. The Church must not extend the social role into the political one.”\textsuperscript{84}

**Conclusion**

In the case of CEOSS, there is a clear connection between the theology and values expressed within the organization and the ability to mobilize for public change across a variety of constituencies. To be sure, Christians of all kinds face steep hurdles when it comes to full religious freedom. For example, changing one’s legal status from Muslim to Christian in Egypt is effectively impossible. Coptic Christians experience violence, and the Egyptian court system favors Islam over Christianity.\textsuperscript{85} Even so, through CEOSS, Coptic evangelicals have found an avenue for their public religious expression through mobilization of the poor and vulnerable. Here are three key points to this approach.

First, Coptic evangelical political independence has been a critical factor in maintaining a relationship with those at the highest levels of political power. From the Mubarak regime, to the 2011 Muslim Brotherhood government, to the current government, CEOSS has been able to assure those holding office that they are working toward the common good and are not part of a political opposition. A notable exception to this is the political aspirations of Rafiq Habib, who sought a solution for the plight of

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., Kindle Location 3295.

his community that was tightly woven into the politics of religious identity.\textsuperscript{86} However, he was roundly criticized across the Coptic evangelical community for his political ideas and his association with the Muslim Brotherhood. After the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood government, it is likely that the status and credibility of CEOSS as a politically independent NGO depended upon the distance the Coptic evangelical community placed between itself and Habib’s political activities.

Today, CEOSS continues to grow as one of Egypt’s most prominent development organizations, perhaps due largely to its concentration on service to the public. In cases where their work has crossed over into Egyptian public policy, they have acted as a catalyst for obtaining the rights among a variety of vulnerable groups, rather than placing most of their resources into strengthening the political position of those within their own identity group. In this way, they have also maintained a form of religious independence. That is, by working for the common good of all Egyptians, regardless of religious affiliation, they have avoided the pitfalls of identity politics. The grievances framed by CEOSS in their mobilization efforts are those representing a spectrum of vulnerable communities, from small-scale farmers to the disabled children. In contrast, the Coptic Orthodox community has seen a historical arc of combining their religious, ethnic and political identity, and pursuing their grievances through politics, only to see their freedom and influence weakened by the majority opposition.

Second, Coptic Evangelicals have bolstered their ability to mobilize within their community by internally framing their work in civil society as a theological imperative to help those in need. Andrea Zaki’s concept of “Dynamic Citizenship” embodies the idea that the Christian maintains a complex set of identities, including that of believer, citizen, neighbor, and family member. Their identity as a believer directly influences how they behave as members of the public. Through the work of CEOSS, they can express their role as Christians publicly through acts of service to those who need help around the country.

Third, CEOSS’s mobilization efforts address secular needs in a manner that gazes outward to the common good of all Egyptians vs. gaining converts or strengthening the political power of their own community. Among those outside their community, their work is seen as a critical exercise in improving the lives of those who would otherwise have little public voice. The rights-based development approach also creates a manner of engagement that creates self-reliance among the communities they assist. This mitigates any criticism that CEOSS coalesces power by creating a system of dependence. On the contrary, their training and advocacy agenda is directed toward having vulnerable communities create and pursue their own priorities related to obtaining their rights.

Though Coptic evangelicals are a very small minority within a minority in Egypt, CEOSS is a one of Egypt’s largest development organizations. Its reach goes far beyond the congregational level, where Newbigin and perhaps Niebuhr saw the greatest possibility for public Christian behavior that could remain faithful to Christian principles. Instead, through focused leadership and community participation, CEOSS has retained its
outward emphasis toward the good of their neighbor through civil society projects. At the same time, they have engaged the political process by developing relationships with those in the highest levels of government, while being careful not to seek political office or overt power for themselves.

The case of Rafiq Habib is the exception that proves the rule. His embrace of politics, particularly that of the ascendant Muslim Brotherhood, was roundly condemned by his home community. The fall of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egyptian halls of power strengthened the argument against Coptic evangelicals seeking political power. Rather, CEOSS’s most effective engagement with the political sphere has through open communication channels with political leaders of across a succession of regimes in combination with their effort to secure the rights of the vulnerable communities they serve. In this case, CEOSS seems to have mitigated Niebuhr’s concern that as a Christian group grows, the more likely it is to veer into the quest for power way from its mission and principles. In doing so, they have preserved their ability to remain and even thrive in a national context that otherwise presents high barriers to religious freedom.

**Principles of Engagement**

Several principles emerge from CEOSS’s experience with rights-based development and their overall role as a Coptic evangelical organization. Working in concert with the lessons learned from the other case studies, they offer evidence for a type of public engagement couples the religious freedom of this minority group with their ability to contribute to the common good.
Principle One: Christian leaders should emphasize within their own communities the central role of the universal free conscience that appears in scripture, theology, and tradition, and the implication that has in a pluralistic context.

CEOSS draws heavily from the Coptic evangelicals for its own staff and emphasizes within its own literature the dignity of each individual, regardless of their religion, gender, disability or class. Simultaneously, they avoid proselytization in favor of building relationships in a pluralistic context in which they are a small minority. There is a close connection between the ideas taught by CEOSS leaders regarding the free conscience and the moral agency of each individual, and the rights-based development.

A central feature of CEOSS’s ethos is the biblical principle of loving one’s neighbor. CEOSS animates this principle through their right-based development approach that seeks to build up their most vulnerable neighbors within the framework of universal human rights norms. At the same time, Coptic evangelicals working within CEOSS have a strong sense that the work they are doing has a deeply spiritual component: they are loving God and keeping his commandments through their work rights-based development.

Principle Two: Christian public engagement in defense of religious liberty should be consistent in its emphasis on freedom and justice for all religious and nonreligious groups in society.
CEOSS provides an exemplary case of a Christian group working across many strata of Egyptian society for greater freedoms and lasting social justice for many of the most vulnerable in their society. Though greater religious freedom and reduced social hostilities are often elusive in this country and the region, their work has given them a voice for religious freedom that is backed up by decades of concern for their neighbors, regardless of faith or social station.

**Principle Three:** Religious freedom advocacy should emphasize the role of faith groups serving the common good through participation in civil society.

The bottom-up approach illustrates the importance of civil society engagement for increasing the common good as well as its importance regarding the long-term prospects of religious liberty. In this respect, the efforts of Coptic evangelicals in Egyptian society that might prove instructive for Protestant advocates in the United States and other countries.

**Principle Four:** Religious freedom advocacy groups should work across religious and social identity lines.

One of the remarkable aspects of Coptic Evangelical social engagement is their central focus on the role they can play in civil society. Their rights-based approach has given them the ability to organize groups across a broad spectrum of Egyptian society. In this approach, their concerns run much deeper than the immediate religious concerns of their community. Rather, they are advocates of farmers, rural women, people with disabilities and others. This is in conjunction with their own call for fewer government restrictions and an easing of social hostilities. Their attention is focused on organizing
civil groups that endeavor to clearly identify the rights issues, elect representatives, and foster the development of programs that help the vulnerable groups become better educated about how to improve their circumstances. This includes everything from better crop management to techniques that help improve women’s health. Through this process, the local groups, aided by the educational experience and facilitation efforts of CEOSS, these small civil society groups identify the rights they should be entitled to by international convention or by Egyptian law. At the later stages or civil activism, they have also helped contribute to the rights enshrined in the new Egyptian constitution. Through these efforts, they have facilitated tangible improvements in the lives of the people they work with. As a result, they have been able to cultivate relationships at all levels of Egyptian society and offer a clear counterpoint to those who would argue that greater religious involvement in the nation’s public life necessarily means greater conflict.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Institute for Global Engagement and Vietnam

Religious non-governmental organizations have undergone significant changes over the past few decades. This includes the rise of international faith-based NGOs that project significant influence in the areas of development and human rights advocacy. Religious freedom advocacy is part of this wave. The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) is an important example of an international religious NGO that is attempting to make a global impact. This chapter delves into how the dynamic between IGE’s stated values and plans for action have shaped the organization’s approach and effectiveness.

All three cases studies in this project examine the relationship between the rhetoric and political behavior of religious organizations. A common thread running through each case study is the importance of leadership in shaping the rhetoric and vision of an organization. The Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) was chosen for this project in part because it continues this thread into the domain of transnational engagement by a Protestant/evangelical group. IGE is an example of a parachurch organization acting across national borders helping to shape the relationship between religious communities and the state. IGE’s leadership describes their organization as a “think-and-do” tank that pays close attention to the cultural and political contexts in
which it operates, while pressing for full citizenship and freedom of conscience for people of all faiths.¹

Situating IGE within the evangelical movement and its associated organizations reveals how the contours of engagement have changed in the 21st century. In the middle of the last century, evangelical missions working internationally concentrated on conversion, exemplified by the work of Billy Graham and other evangelists. This emphasis on conversion reflected the divergent trajectories taken by fundamentalist and modernist churches in the West during the 20th century. Fundamentalism, the parent movement of today’s evangelicalism rejected the “Social Gospel” that emerged as the focus of modernist Christian organizations and largely focused on preaching, church planting, and discipleship.² They saw their task as re-orienting society to a right relationship with God, one individual at a time. Evangelicals rejected “statecraft as soulcraft.”³ This fell in line with the historical evangelical attitude that considered the role of the church, independent of the state and operating free of government interference, as responsible for the formation of a virtuous citizenry. It was a counterpoint to the idea that the state was the primary agent for the formation of character in its citizens.


² Chan Woong Shin, ”America’s New Internationalists? Evangelical Transnational Activism And U.S. Foreign Policy” (Ph.D., Syracuse University, 2014).

³ Timothy S Shah, ”For the Sake Of Conscience: Some Evangelical Views Of The Church”, in Church, State, And Citizen: Christian Approaches To Political Engagement, Sandra F Joireman, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 136-137.
This early focus on conversion by mostly western evangelicals was succinctly described by James Murch in 1956: “Evangelicals are, therefore, convinced that the preaching of the Gospel is the essential task of missions and must always remain so. They do not object to programs for the solution of agricultural, social, political and industrial problems, but they believe that each country, race and generation must solve its own problems in the light of God’s Word through the native churches. Their chief aim is the personal conversion of men to a new life in Christ, to complete surrender to God’s will as revealed in His Word and to new relations of love to their fellowman.”

As the decades progressed, a debate emerged among evangelicals about the need for denominational and parachurch organizations to expand beyond conversion efforts to the social issues that affected their international audiences. In 1974, the watershed International Conference of World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland emphasized the primary place for evangelism, but addressed the need for greater attention to the social needs of those being evangelized: “We express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.”

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One attribute of modern evangelicalism is its variety of expression and presence of internal debate. This includes debate over the role of proselytism, particularly when it is emphasized to the exclusion of social change as an expression of Christian love for one’s neighbor. While many large and influential evangelical organizations continued to focus on evangelism, there emerged a sub-movement rooted in evangelical identity that sought change through addressing social structures of injustice and political reform, particularly on the international stage. Perhaps the largest organization in this sub-movement is World Vision. The organization’s president, Richard Stearns, wrote in his book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*: “This gospel – the whole Gospel – means much more than the personal salvation of individuals. It means a social revolution.”6 [emphasis in original]

The Institute for Global Engagement falls squarely into this sub-movement. True to the larger historical evangelical movement, IGE emphasizes the role of religious freedom in allowing faith to form good citizens. At the same time, it defends its lack of emphasis on conversion while remaining within the larger, highly conversion-oriented, evangelical movement.

Chris Seiple was IGE’s president from 2003 until 2015.7 During his tenure, Seiple was the driving force behind IGE’s advocacy initiatives. He was also its chief

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intellectual, forming the theological and political ideas that would undergird IGE’s strategy to increase religious freedom around the world. Seiple outlined this position in *Christianity Today*:

CT: *What is IGE about biblically?* It is trying to promote and protect a freedom that is given by the Author of life. You can think about it as pre-evangelization, but I see us as a non-proselytizing, evangelical organization. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul asks us to be ambassadors. An ambassador is someone who has been trained to engage a culture and its politics to advance the interests of his state. Well, our state is the kingdom. And you advance or build that kingdom by loving people in a language and logic they understand. The local church cannot create discipled ambassadors, cannot serve society as salt across all sectors, unless it is free to do so.8

**Identifying and Framing the Grievance**

In the first decade of the 21st century, the Vietnam’s hope for greater international integration was hindered somewhat by domestic crackdowns on its minority religious populations.9 The government of this Southeast Asian nation had set a trajectory leading to normalized trade with the United States. However, Vietnam’s treatment of its Protestant and Catholic groups alarmed the U.S. government and the American co-religionists of those facing harsh treatment at the hands of security forces. The conflicts had a long history. The region’s rulers have experienced tensions with Christian minorities living in the country for centuries.10 In the first decade of the new millennium,

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the country’s economic future relied in part on resolving this deeply-rooted cycle of suspicion and violence.

However, the Vietnamese campaign to quell domestic religious dissent came into direct conflict with its push to strengthen international trade. Members of the U.S. Congress sought improvements in Vietnam’s human rights record before granting the Communist country normalized trade status.11 At the same time, the newly-founded Institute for Global Engagement stepped in as an advocate and guide to help Vietnam resolve the entrenched conflict between Vietnam’s religious communities and its government.12

IGE drew intellectual resources from a nexus of its founders’ evangelical faith, experience in American international affairs, and a history of the organization’s founders in work with poor and oppressed communities. By their own account, IGE needed to speak the language of all three of these domains to effectively pursue of religious freedom for Vietnam’s Christians.13 How these strands were pulled together speaks to how the organization articulated its religious and humanitarian values. In terms of Social


Movement analysis, IGE’s efforts (a) involved identifying a central grievance: violence and mistreatment of religious communities by the Vietnamese government. They also needed to frame the grievance for their audience. This entailed arguing for their style of engagement, dubbed “relational diplomacy” in terms that resonated with an evangelical constituency. Prior to launching their mobilization initiatives, they needed to marshal resources to address the grievance. This includes raising funds for travel and other programmatic activities, as well as developing a network of contacts in both the Vietnamese government as well as in religious communities. They mobilized these resources in a multi-faceted campaign to bring about a positive change in how Vietnamese minorities fared with respect to the communist government.14

As an evangelical organization venturing into diplomatic waters, framing the issue was a complex task. They had to simultaneously articulate an identity that resonated with their core religious constituency and form an approach that would also defuse suspicions within the Vietnamese government. Mobilization entailed marshalling the human and fiscal resources necessary for education and outreach between IGE and the Vietnamese government. To accomplish this, IGE’s leadership counted the “top-down, bottom-up” approach as a central resource in their ability to frame the rights issues they attempted to address. Though concerns about Vietnam’s treatment of its religious

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minorities continue, IGE counts their efforts in that country as one of its leading successful and ongoing initiatives.15

Seiple argued that a free religious citizenry was good for Vietnam’s stability and prosperity, and that IGE held a vision of how to bring this about. Christianity Today highlighted this vision and IGE’s role in making a change for the betterment of Vietnam’s Christians:

For a Communist country that five years ago was breaking up prayer meetings and shooting into crowds, this is extraordinary. The freedom of people "to choose or not choose their religion" has been a part of the Vietnamese Constitution for some time, but the government is only now getting around to enforcing that ideal—thanks to forceful op-eds, government sanctions, and the patient, relational work of IGE…”It has two dimensions," [Seiple] said. "One, religious freedom is legally protected. Two, it is culturally owned. Culturally owned means the people who live there understand that this is in their self-interest, and they contextualize the principle [of religious freedom] to a pre-existing principle that's already in their culture...Seiple gave an example from Vietnam. Government officials have been reluctant to allow seminaries to be built. His response to them has been, "Seminary is security." He argues that if they don't encourage the church to have theologically trained Christians who can educate their flocks, those flocks are open to being hijacked by extremists who can create social unrest. The argument makes sense to officials and allows churches to work their spiritually liberating influence on society quietly…The Cold War model of many organizations has been covert support for oppressed Christians combined with outsider advocacy. In the early years of the 21st century, IGE is flipping this model on its head: open support for Christians and insider advocacy.16

One Vietnamese leader, Professor Do Quang Hung, described his perspective about IGE’s role as a “think and do” organization:

Over time, I realized two critical features of IGE. First, IGE is not an ordinary institution in both status and prestige in the sense that it not only serves as a scholarly linkage among research institutions, but I found IGE’ status to be truly


global and in possession of rich experience that they work very effectively and efficiently… The second feature that impressed me greatly and increasingly helped strengthen our cooperation with IGE is that they appear to be highly pragmatic and have a thorough understanding of Vietnam. I believe this is very important. In my work, I have collaborated with many institutions in various countries around the world, and some among those may not understand Vietnam well enough. These organizations may propose plans or projects that are not practical. This is not the case with IGE. IGE is unique in that it both has high status and effective operation, which I admire.17

**Backdrop for Engagement**

The United States responded to Vietnam’s pattern of religious oppression through diplomatic tools. This includes assigning Vietnam the status of “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) in 2004.18 These and other tools tying international relations and trade agreements to human rights improvements placed Vietnam in a difficult position. They needed to either effectively (or even ostensibly) make progress on entrenched conflicts between the state and the country’s religious groups or lose out on economic opportunities critical to the Vietnam’s prosperity.19

At the same time these issues crystalized for the Vietnamese government, the newly founded Institute for Global Engagement was seeking ways to engage Vietnam regarding its religious freedom concerns. Immediately prior to IGE’s founding, Robert

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19 Ibid.
Seiple had been the first U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom. 20 Prior to his diplomatic post, Robert Seiple had been president of World Vision, which itself was preceded by his tenure as president of Eastern College and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania. 21 Robert Seiple had an interest in Vietnam. He flew 300 combat missions as a bombardier in an A-6 Intruder during the Vietnam war between 1966 and 1969. 22 His experience in Vietnam stuck with him throughout his career as an educator, humanitarian executive and as a diplomat. Among the first initiatives he launched after leaving the State Department in 2000 was founding IGE with an initial and primary outreach to Vietnam.

In the earliest days of the organization, IGE was run from World Vision’s offices in Washington, DC. It later moved to Eastern College, and then to its present home in Arlington, Virginia. 23 Though IGE has programs around the world that cover a number of areas of emphasis, the religious freedom program in Vietnam emerged as a premiere program for the organization.

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Although the officially-atheist Vietnamese form of government has its roots in the communist ideologies of its Soviet and Chinese counterparts, the country is made up of a plurality of religious communities and the country’s range of ethnic groups. This includes Mahayana Buddhists, Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants and even a small Muslim community. The story of how Vietnam’s Communist government has evolved over the past four decades is tied closely to how the government has dealt with its religious and ethnic minorities. This includes phases of accommodation and control, integration and suppression.  

There are certain themes that recur in the history of Christianity in Vietnam. First, the adoption of Christianity challenged the traditional practices tied to the veneration of ancestors, even in cases where the new faith did not always demand the believers cease civic rituals respecting ancestors. Second, Christianity offered, and continues to offer, a number of avenues for engaging modernity in a way acceptable to Christian believers. Third, the centuries-long track record of religious freedom for Christians in the region is one of suppression and persecution, marked by instances of relative religious freedom.

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Fourth, periods of religious tolerance for Vietnamese Christians seem to be tied directly to practical, economic and political concerns of the country’s rulers. These themes remained in effect over the past few decades. For about a decade after the turn of the millennium, trade relations with the West, particularly the United States, came with stipulation from the West to reduce religious restrictions and violations of human rights. These could only be resolved by easing of religious oppression against Vietnamese religious minorities.

Roman Catholicism has a long history in Vietnam. Catholic missionaries first entered the region of what is today the country of Vietnam in the early 1500s. By 1600, a permanent mission had been established in Đại Việt. Jesuit missionaries continued to expand their efforts in the area, establishing churches, school and relationships with local rulers. The Jesuits entered a religious milieu accustomed to a variety of faiths existing alongside each other. These included traditional folk beliefs, Confucianism, Daoism, and Mahayana Buddhism. In this context, Christianity was not seen as a threat, initially. As in many missionary contexts, Christianity was most readily adopted by those as the economic and social margins of society.

29 Dutton, Tây Sơn Uprising, 178.
30 Keith, Catholic Vietnam, 248.
31 Dutton, Tây Sơn Uprising, 176.
32 Ibid., 173.
Over the next few centuries, and through individuals like Alexandre De Rhodes and organizations such as the *Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris* (SMEP), Christianity continued to grow in Vietnam, despite occasional crackdowns by hostile governments.  

A 1784 census placed the Christian population of the area around 350,000 to 400,000 among a population of 5.5 to 10 million. As the population of Christianity increased it increasingly came into conflict with traditional practices. During this period, Christians were ordered by their missionary and local church leaders to tear down altars to their ancestors and discontinue giving money to support festivals and community rituals associated with ancestor worship and folk beliefs.

From the 17th to the 19th century, Đạ Việ́t was not a politically stable and unified region. Rather, it was marked by political rivalries across the northern and southern regions. Uprisings, such as the Tây Sơn rebellion in the late 18th century, saw alternating periods of persecution and religious freedom as juntas displaced regimes, and were subsequently repulsed. In the early 1800s, the Christian population was sufficiently large, and its legitimacy was strengthened through a multi-generational heritage of their faith in the region. Area rulers found it increasingly difficult to alienate them through techniques of suppression. Also, Christian missionaries were also seen as a vital connection to the

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33 Keith, *Catholic Vietnam*, 41.


35 Ibid., 186.

outside world, which competing forces used at times for access to arms and economic opportunities. At other times, the loyalty of the Christian population was questioned due to their disavowal of traditional beliefs regarding a spiritual connection to their ancestors and the king.\textsuperscript{37}

By the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the established Catholic population constituted a formidable subgroup with important ties to French missionaries and burgeoning colonial powers. Life for Vietnamese Christians became worse under the Nguyen dynasty, which wrested power from the Tây Sơn rebellion.\textsuperscript{38} Intensified pressure boiled over in 1830s and 1840s, when tensions between the northern and southern areas of Vietnam, as well as cultural and ethnic strains on the kingdom erupted into violence. Between 1833 and 1838, hundreds of local Catholics, seven missionaries and 20 priests were executed by the Vietnamese king Minh Mang. The king had engaged in a campaign to homogenize the religion and culture under his rule. Christians were seen as an impediment to this program, compounded by the sense they were loyal to a growing imperial power.\textsuperscript{39}

Reports of the execution of missionaries and the widespread violence against the local Christian community outraged French citizens. As a result, French support of missionary work was strengthened, manifested in a stronger naval presence in the area. These events helped precipitate a full invasion of Vietnam by French imperial forces in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[37] Ibid., 315.
\item[38] Keith, \textit{Catholic Vietnam}, 4.
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1858.\textsuperscript{40} It is notable that the persecution of Christians in this period by the regime in power was in part a function of French imperial influence and money flowing through the Catholic missions, as opposed to a unilateral suspicion of Christian beliefs by the ruling regime.

In 1862, Vietnamese Catholics celebrated the Treaty of Saigon, which guaranteed them freedom from official harassment. However, social hostilities remained high against Christian communities and leaders. Catholics experienced frequent rioting and plundering of their villages toward the end of Nguyen rule of the region. Catholic leaders complained to Western sources that government officials tasked with protecting them were often complicit in the rioting or did nothing to stop the violence.\textsuperscript{41} Article Nine of the Second Treaty of Saigon (1874), which included reinforced commitments to religious freedom and government protection under the threat of French imperial power, provided further relief for Vietnam’s Catholic community.\textsuperscript{42} Subsequent agreements followed as France strengthened its imperial control over the region in the following decades.\textsuperscript{43} Yet, treaties did not resolve the tensions between Vietnam’s Catholic and non-Catholic populations.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 312.


\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 428.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 420.
During World War I, new rifts emerged between priests and French imperial officials over the recall of missionaries and pullback of resources. This pitted the missionary effort in Southeast Asia against the war effort in Europe.\footnote{Keith, \textit{Catholic Vietnam}, 5.} Prior to the war, another rift had emerged between Vietnamese priests and the French missionaries and government. Many Vietnamese priests were arrested for their participation in anti-French resistance movements planning to overthrow imperial rule.\footnote{Ibid., 12.}

In the 1920s and 30s, the Vatican responded to calls for reform away from the mission-centered Catholic life in Vietnam by supporting an independent national church.\footnote{Ibid., 12.} This was accompanied by a renewed enthusiasm for Vietnam’s political independence from France. The effort to create an entirely Vietnamese Catholic Church hierarchy during the First Indochina War (1946-54), which followed closely on the heels of World War II.\footnote{Ibid., 13.}

During the French Indochina War, several Catholic bishops organized their own militias to provide a defense against both French and Communist forces.\footnote{Ronald H Spector, "Phat Diem: Nationalism, Religion, And Identity In The Franco–Viet Minh War", \textit{Journal of Cold War Studies} 15, no. 3 (2013): 44.} For example, in the southern Ben Tre province a French army officer named Captain Leroy organized a group of “Catholic brigades.” These became the Unified Mobile Christian Defense Units,
a paramilitary force that eventually controlled the whole province following the departure of French forces. In the central region of Annam, the area’s bishop gained both spiritual and political authority in the region from the king of Annam. Catholics tended to cluster in their own villages, and the “prince-bishop” raised his own taxes and formed his own militias in the area. These autonomous bishops initially cooperated with the communist Viet Minh forces in a common effort to resist a return of French control after World War II. This alliance eventually failed, and Catholic regions led by the bishop remained autonomous Catholics pockets that resisted both French and Communist control.

After the Geneva Accords of 1954, more than 600 thousand Vietnamese Catholics (roughly half of the North’s Catholic population) fled to the South, and the church was stripped of its autonomy and ability to control geographic areas.⁴⁹ Catholics were told that they could continue to worship as they please, as long as they did not criticize socialism, refuse manual labor or threaten the state in any way. By the mid-1960s, southern Vietnam’s population was approximately 10 percent Catholic (about 1.6 million people).⁵⁰

Protestantism in Vietnam is a much more recent phenomenon in Vietnam. One of the most significant developments came in 1911, when the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination launched an effort to evangelize the region. Today, roughly one-quarter of Vietnam’s 400 thousand Protestants (or Tin Lành) come from this

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⁵⁰ Ibid.
denomination. Baptist and other missionary groups became more active in the subsequent decades until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{51} Most Protestants are found among the ethnic minorities on the central Highlands. These Montagnard believers are generally very conservative theologically, and often experience friction from their neighbors over their rejection of ritual altars and community ceremonies honoring the dead., etc.\textsuperscript{52} The term “Montagnard,” or Degar, refers to a variety of tribes that live in Vietnam’s south and central Highlands. Like the Hmong, many of the Degar are Christian, a result of missionary efforts during the first six decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Because of their ethnic distinction and their Christian faith, they are often looked upon with suspicion by the government and their majority Kinh neighbors. As a result, they have experienced persecutions, social hostilities and religious restrictions up to the present.\textsuperscript{53}

Living alongside the Montagnard communities are Hmong Christians. Many of Vietnam’s approximately one million Hmong live in the country’s Central Highlands. Linguistic analysis seems to indicate that the Hmong ethnic group has lived in southern China and Southeast Asia for about two thousand years, with more recent migrations into Thailand, Vietnam and Laos.\textsuperscript{54} Traditional Hmong religion can be categorized as a form


\textsuperscript{52} Ng, \textit{The New Way}, 51.


\textsuperscript{54} Ratliff, Martha. "Vocabulary of Environment and Subsistence in Proto-language," p. 160
of animism. This includes beliefs in the spirit world, mediated by the rituals and activities of shamans. Their traditional beliefs place an emphasis on ritual respect for ancestors, reincarnation, and the connection of all things in the material world to an underlying spiritual fabric.

Hmong beliefs include eschatological hopes for the return of a mythical king that will lead to a spiritual and earthly restoration of power to the Hmong people. This eschatological expectation has played a role in the conversion of many Hmong to Protestant Christianity. Parallels between eschatological Christian teachings and the expectations of a restored Hmong monarchy, as well as a non-communist means of adapting to modernity, have contributed to the adoption Christianity by many in this group.

The introduction of Protestant, evangelical Christianity to the Hmong began with the radio broadcasts of the missionary organization, Far East Broadcasting Company. FEBC programming targeted refugee communities in the South, delivering sermons in the Hmong language. The sermons included evangelical millenarian expectations of the Second Coming of Christ. These radio broadcasts were picked up by Hmong living in the Central Highlands, who listened with interest to the broadcasts delivered in their own


56 Ibid., 279.

57 Ibid., 280.

58 Ng, *The New Way*, Kindle Location 1761.
language, rather than the Kinh Vietnamese language that dominated official government radio broadcasts.⁵⁹

The dynamics involved in the Hmong adoption of Christianity depended on several factors. First, the parallels between evangelical eschatology regarding the Second Coming and Hmong legend provided an avenue for traditional believers to consider the newly-introduced faith. Second, Protestant evangelical Christianity offered an avenue to modernity for the Hmong. That is, the religion provided an alternative to the assimilationist program of the Vietnamese government. Christianity allowed Hmong adherents to join a modern global community without losing their identity to neighboring majority ethnic groups or the secular Communist government. Among other things, the Hmong found in Christianity a competing narrative to Vietnamese Communism that tied them into a global community of fellow believers.

There were many government initiatives designed to assimilate the ethnic group into national culture. This including promoting everything from the cultivation of crops to primary education the “Vietnamese Way.” One aspect of Hmong lived culture is its ongoing distinction from the majority Vietnamese (Kinh) ethnic group. The Hmong are considered by the government and Vietnamese majority to be a backward people. They point to the animistic beliefs as well as their agriculture techniques as a lack of cultural sophistication. The drive to sway Hmong to the “Vietnamese Way” however was an effort to convince an ethnic group with a strong sense of identity and a tradition of self-

⁵⁹ Ibid.
preservation to forsake their culture and the ways of their ancestors in favor of their “cultured despisers.”\textsuperscript{60} Those who adopted Christianity were able to accomplish a modern adaptation to a world system that could compete with Communism ideologically, as well as plug them into a network of religious denominations and organizations beyond the borders of Vietnam.\textsuperscript{61}

The Vietnamese government reaction to Hmong Christian activity has often been harsh. In February 2003, the Vietnamese government launched a suppression campaign. During this period, the government shut down of 354 out of 412 house churches, and “disappeared” 56 pastors.\textsuperscript{62} Among those caught in the campaign were four Hmong Christians operating a house church. They were sentenced to 24 to 36 months in prison for “disturbing public order.” According to Freedom House, interviews with their families revealed that government officials also threatened heavy fines unless they abandoned Christianity and rebuilt shrines to their ancestors.\textsuperscript{63} In another case that year, an ethnic Hmong Communist party member named Vang Seo Giao, who had converted


\textsuperscript{61} Ngo, “Protestant Conversion and Social Conflict,” 292.


to Christianity, was beaten to death and his body thrown in a river after he refused to renounce Christianity and rebuild an ancestral altar.64

In June 2012, two Hmong churches were destroyed by government officials.65 In March 2013, the Hmong deacon of a legally-registered evangelical church died in police custody. Officials said he had committed suicide by putting his hand in an electrical socket. However, family members released photos of his body, which displayed evidence of beatings and torture.66

Resources & Political Opportunity

In 2003, Robert Seiple’s son, Chris, took over as president of IGE, and served as its leader until 2015. Chris Seiple (hereafter “Seiple”) is a former Marine infantry officer. He holds a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.67 Under his leadership, IGE expanded its portfolio of issues and greatly increased its staff and its reputation, growing contributions to the organization from less than $900 thousand dollars per year to more than $4.5 million.68

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67 "Chris Seiple, President Emeritus,” Institute for Global Engagement.

68 Form 990: Institute for Global Engagement, ebook (Arlington, Virginia: Internal Revenue Service, 2003), accessed February 13, 2018,
When IGE began reaching out to Vietnam two years prior to Seiple’s tenure, its government was attempting to quell rising protests among the country’s Catholics and Protestants. This entailed heavy-handed tactics, including arrests, church burnings and beatings. These crackdowns were among a number of factors that generated opposition to greater economic cooperation between Vietnam and the United States, even as the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement was signed in December 2001 by President Bush. For example, according to the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of 1974, non-market countries with a record of human rights abuses (particularly on emigration) would be denied most-favored-nation trading status with the United States. Also, religious abuses in Vietnam were frequently tracked and reported on by human rights groups and major religious media outlets, such as Christianity Today.

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Vietnam initially denied entry for Robert Seiple in 2001. However, as that country sought closer economic ties with the U.S., IGE was granted increasing access to government officials dealing with religious communities in Vietnam, as well as the religious communities themselves. It was a sign that Vietnam was interested in addressing the human rights issues that could jeopardize trade agreements with the U.S. IGE attempted to make the most of this political opportunity, utilizing the “top-down, bottom-up” mobilization approach to religious freedom advocacy. As a result, IGE was able to build capacity among government officials to understand and implement better policies toward Vietnam’s religious minorities. Also, IGE was able to listen to the perspectives of Vietnam’s Christians, help them develop their own theological and political understanding, and provide opportunities to for them to make their case to the government in an irenic manner.\footnote{"Vietnamese Delegation Visits U.S. To Build Friendships, Engage Religious Freedom Issues", Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), last modified 2006, accessed February 13, 2018, https://globalengage.org/news-media/press-release/vietnamese-delegation-visits-u.s.-to-build-friendships-engage-religious-fre.}

\textbf{IGE’s Resources}

One of the most important resources for IGE, and any religious NGO, is its recognizable identification with its core faith group, and the resources that flow from their group identity. This identification speaks to the group ability to raise funds from members of the group, tap into the network of contacts across the group’s churches and organizations, and focus their message on a set of values and rhetorical themes that
resonate with that group.\textsuperscript{73} From the outset, IGE has identified itself as an evangelical organization. There are a host of criteria suggested by social scientists as to a definition “evangelical,” and there is an ongoing conversation over whether the word is still an adequate umbrella term for a variety of groups within the broadening religious movement.\textsuperscript{74} Among those definitions, the criteria suggested by David W. Bebbington offers simplicity and universality among those individuals, denominations and organizations that self-identify as “evangelical.”\textsuperscript{75} According to Bebbington these criteria are as follows.

- **Biblicism:** The Bible is the authoritative source about God’s relationship with humanity and provides guidelines about living in the world.

- **Crucicentrism:** Christ’s death on the cross is the central moment in history, where humanity’s original sin is atoned for by God’s only son.

- **Conversionism:** Human beings need to accept the basic premises of the Gospel to achieve salvation.

\textsuperscript{73} Jo Anne Schneider, "Comparing Stewardship Across Faith-Based Organizations", \textit{Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly} 42, no. 3 (2012): 521.


\textsuperscript{75} David W. Bebbington, \textit{Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History From The 1730S To The 1980S} (New York: Routledge, 1988), 4-17.
• Activism: Christians should engage the world beyond their own community to bring more followers to salvation and act as Christ’s representative on earth.76

What is commonly regarded as the “evangelical movement” involves many groups with a variety of agendas, and millions of individuals. Like others in this wide-ranging movement, certain aspects of Bebbington’s criteria are emphasized more than others in actual practice.

For example, in the organization’s early days, IGE founder Robert Seiple outlined a set of Christian characteristics and principles that would shape how IGE engages their mission. This early example of rhetorical framing by IGE reflects many aspects of the Bebbington’s criteria for “evangelical,” particularly as it relates to the dynamic between biblicism and activism:

1. Know Him: “Know you maker...Know your faith at its richest and deepest best, and enough about your neighbor’s faith to respect it.
2. Know Yourself: “Understand your strengths and weaknesses...Cultivate the characteristics of the biblical metaphors for global engagement: the streetwise common sense of the snake, the gentle humility of the dove, the wise statesmanship of the ambassador...Act incarnationally and establish the worth of the gospel so that the truth might be revealed.
3. Know His World: This is God’s world...We ‘plant and water; ‘he brings the increase...
4. Know history--political and cultural, your and theirs. Know all the questions, not just the answers. Understand geographical complexity and local nuance.
5. Pray over the land: Pray for discernment to take place, for wisdom to reveal itself...

76 Ibid.
6. Find partners: Who has been trustworthy, credible, persevering and relevant? Build relationships that endure...

7. Act comprehensively: Put yourself in everybody else’s shoes. Develop a policy and a supporting strategy around objectives formed in faith. And remember: global engagement has a face. A difference is made, a plan is enacted, a transformation takes place one life at a time...a life already made in the image of God.77

IGE leadership has closely associated its mission with spiritual principles. A hallmark of evangelical NGOs is their inclination to frame their purposes for action around biblical themes and historic Christian ideals.78 IGE resembles other theologically-conservative Christian organizations in this respect. IGE also employs robust secular arguments for religious freedom and other issues in order to mobilize support and convince secular leaders to adjust their policies toward religious minorities (including non-Christian minorities).

As president of IGE, Chris Seiple set forth a vision for IGE that combined an inward spiritual perspective with an assessment of the outward Christian role in post-modern society. He has stated that the central purpose of IGE is: “To make Christ visible and Christians relevant on the cruel edges of the world.”79 Central to this vision were several key starting points, not all of them necessarily theological. Seiple’s secular and religious arguments are woven together in a seamless perspective that seeks to improve

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78 Jo Anne Schneider, “Comparing Stewardship Across Faith-Based Organizations,” 517–539.

the lives in a practical sense, as well as honor what they see as the Christian’s spiritual role in the world.

An overarching theme of Seiple’s vision sought to be both evangelical and pluralistic, emphasizing the crucial role of religious freedom for all faiths in building a just and peaceful society. From a religious standpoint, Seiple argues that “We as Christians are called to love our neighbor, to love them in a language and logic that they understand, or it's not love. And to show up and to shut up and listen, and to discern how God is moving in that context.”

Seiple argued that, “our century’s biggest problem is how we are going to live with our deepest differences.” He saw religious freedom advocacy and partnerships as a means to address this problem. According to Seiple, a strong thread of religious freedom in public life strengthens both religious and secular goals that cannot be unraveled from each other. That is, religious freedom helps reduce sectarian strife. It also speaks to a strong sense of human dignity at the core of a flourishing, free society. Seiple argued that freedom of conscience is an intrinsic good in that it is a gift from God and is the means by which human beings may encounter God of their own free will. The two sides of the argument are integral with his secular defense and definition of religious freedom:

We believe that humans, as a function of their innate dignity, possess the inherent freedom to believe in whatever they want, religious or otherwise, as well as practice and share those beliefs in private and public settings. Humans should experience this freedom as equal citizens under the rule of law, where

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81 Ibid.
governments also ensure that this freedom is not used to harm fellow citizens. They have the right to bring those beliefs respectfully to the discussion of society’s governance, and global affairs. Put differently, sustainable religious freedom is the legally-protected and culturally-accepted opportunity to choose, change, share, or reject beliefs of any kind, including religious ones, and to bring those beliefs to public discussions.82

Through this values-laden structure, IGE leaders framed the organization’s mission within an evangelical understanding of Christian theology and the pragmatic needs served by a society that observes the rights of a free conscience. Frequent use of scriptural references and biblical illustrations to convey their sense of mission is a hallmark of evangelical NGOs (in contrast to the toned-down religious language of Christian organizations associated with mainline Protestant denominations.)83 It is also a feature of the rhetoric Seiple and IGE deploys to justify their programs and inspire their constituents.

Yet, IGE differs in one important respect with respect to the primary mission associated with many other nonprofit evangelical organizations: they leave conversionism aside in favor of building relationships with those of another faith. Here: Seiple outlines the limits of their evangelism efforts as working to expand global religious freedom to allow citizens to decide their faith for themselves:

We love our fellow Christians by helping to inspire and equip them to understand and engage this world strategically — with shrewdness and without guile — so that they themselves reveal the love of Jesus Christ. We also love them and our

82 Ibid.

non-Christian brothers and sisters by helping to develop environments in which they can seek truth freely and without coercion. In short, the Institute is an evangelical — but non-proselytizing — organization. It is our great hope that our non-Christian friends worldwide, given the true opportunity for religious freedom, will choose and experience the transformative power of Christ's love. Achieving that end, we confess with gratitude and awe, is His job, not ours. Our task is to love God by loving His people and working to build healthy societies in which they are liberated and empowered to respond to Him.84

Articulating the mission of IGE as an evangelical, but non-proselytizing, organization is an important stage of the mobilization process. For organizations such as IGE, expressing the organization’s message in a way that elicits action operates on two fronts. First, organizations rely on a core constituency where various forms of support and mobilization occur.85 For IGE, this includes a certain level of reliance upon fellow evangelicals for approval of its mission to help mobilize fundraising, recruitment of staff and volunteers, as well as partnerships in other initiatives. Like other faith-based advocacy and development organizations, they need to cultivate the arguments for their existence within their core base of support.86 They use scripture and biblical illustrations to frame the vision of IGE and legitimize the mission of IGE to its constituency. This lends credibility to their stewardship of evangelical ideals among others in that


85 Jo Anne Schneider, “Comparing Stewardship Across Faith-Based Organizations,” 517–539.

community. In the case of the religious communities it hopes to serve, articulating a spiritual core may also provide passport to engagement.\textsuperscript{87}

Second, IGE’s mission relies upon its ability to speak to the secular needs of the government it wishes to persuade, as well as the governmental and non-governmental organizations it hopes to work with. Secular arguments for action and mission framing are critical to IGE’s success in achieving aims associated with these non-religious entities. At times, tensions between religious belief and secular action can threaten the character of a religious NGO. A classic example of this can be seen in the case of World Vision and same sex marriage. On March 24, 2014, the large evangelical relief organization announced that it had decided to allow its managers to hire Christians in legal same-sex marriages. They offered that the allowance was done in the name of unity among Christians who had varying perspectives on the issue.\textsuperscript{88} Two days later, World Vision reversed that decision in the face of severe criticism from the evangelical community.\textsuperscript{89} The issue over stewardship of evangelical identity vs. broad secular engagement was a critical factor. World Vision’s stance on this issue, however

\textsuperscript{87} Kniss and Campbell, “The Effect of Religious Orientation on International Relief and Development Organizations,” 108.


temporary, threatened the legitimacy of World Vision as an evangelical organization, and thus jeopardized their ability to mobilize their core constituency (American evangelicals) with respect to fundraising and program participation. "We listened to [our] friends, we listened to their counsel," World Vision President Richard Stearns told Christianity Today, “They tried to point out in loving ways that the conduct policy change was simply not consistent…with the authority of Scripture and how we apply Scripture to our lives. We did inadequate consultation with our supporters. If I could have a do-over on one thing, I would have done much more consultation with Christian leaders."\(^90\)

Another case somewhat closer to IGE is the criticism directed at Bob Roberts, Jr. pastor of Northwood Church in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Roberts has a close relationship with the Institute for Global Engagement, including his time as chairman of IGE’s board. They have worked together on the Vietnam projects that are the focus of this case study, as well as projects across the Muslim world.\(^91\) Roberts’ and IGE’s common approach to religious freedom advocacy in predominantly-Muslim countries has focused on peacemaking between Muslims and Christians.\(^92\) However, Roberts has been a frequent target of evangelicals warning against Sharia law in American courts, particularly for his church-sponsored interfaith peacemaking events that include members

\(^{90}\) Ibid.


of local mosques.\textsuperscript{93} Even so, Roberts’ base of support among like-minded evangelicals appears strong, revealing the non-monolithic nature of the American evangelical movement.\textsuperscript{94}

Chris Seiple and IGE have largely avoided popular evangelical criticism regarding their work in Muslim-majority countries, perhaps due to the specialized nature of their work overseas and an international focus on religious freedom that enjoys broad support among evangelicals. However, their religious framing directed at home constituents, and their secular arguments for religious freedom directed at governments such as Vietnam’s, appear as two rhetorical species sprouting from the single root. This does not necessarily indicate a disparity between the secular and religious arguments made by IGE. Rather, it is a product of the dynamic relationship between inwardly focused definitions and outwardly focused actions toward the goal of increased global religious freedom.

**IGE’s Mission**

Framing a non-religious mission was an important component of IGE’s work with the Vietnamese government. Vietnam’s religious history, particularly regarding the country’s Christian communities, is a story of centuries-old tensions between rulers and adherents who claim a loyalty beyond the state. Christian communities have at times been


\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
disruptive to local Vietnamese customs and culture regarding traditional community religious life.\(^9^5\) Prior to Vietnamese independence, Roman Catholic Christian communities have been linked with European imperial control.\(^9^6\) In the modern era, forms of Protestant Christianity have been attractive to minority groups seeking to modernize their way of life even as they resist government’s cultural assimilation efforts.\(^9^7\)

**Mobilization and Engagement**

IGE characterizes their approach to religious freedom advocacy in countries such as Vietnam as a “Top Down, Bottom Up,” holistic model of engagement. That is, they build relationships with government officials, deepening their understanding the core concerns of government leaders, and collaborating on solutions that address those concerns. At the same time, they work directly with the religious communities to garner a better understanding of their situation and offer support in areas (such as education) that may help relieve the tensions with the government and neighbors.

A critical gateway for IGE’s engagement with Vietnam has been that government’s effort to join the international trading community. Since mid-1980s, Vietnam has moved from a Soviet-style economy to a form of market economy.\(^9^8\) Ties

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\(^{9^5}\) Ng, *The New Way*, Kindle Location 3515.


\(^{9^7}\) Ng, *The New Way*, Kindle Location 138.

with the West have been an important component of this shift, and human rights concerns are often bundled with economic agreements.99 For example, Vietnam’s effort to join the World Trade Organization began in 1995 and continued until their acceptance in 2007. IGE engaged the Vietnam government to alleviate religious freedom concerns during the last four years of the twelve-year process (after initially being denied entry). Their efforts were a component of the process that led to Vietnam’s acceptance into the WTO.100 Membership in the global organization includes a host of benefits that facilitate trade between countries and reduce economic volatility. This includes reduced tariffs, peaceful dispute resolution, and free trade agreements between members among other benefits.101

The following timeline offers a look at the interplay between the Vietnamese government’s behaviors toward its religious minorities, its diplomatic outreach outside the country, and the efforts of IGE to improve religious freedom. It shows the relationship between the political opportunities that arose with respect to Vietnam’s rising international economic interests, ongoing oppression of Vietnam’s religious minorities, and IGE’s initiatives in favor of greater religious freedom the country.

99 Ibid., 216.
Mobilization Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>IGE Engagement in Vietnam(^{102})</th>
<th>U.S. government and diplomatic developments</th>
<th>Events in Vietnam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>IGE applies for a Visa request to visit Vietnam during a crackdown on Christian communities in the Central Highlands.</td>
<td>The United States Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommends that the State Department designate Vietnam as a “Country of Particular Concern.” The State Department catalogues abuses in Vietnam in its annual report on international religious freedom, but redesignates only Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Sudan with CPC status.(^{103})</td>
<td>Vietnam conducts a six-month crackdown against Christian communities in the Central Highlands, closing and burning churches, arresting and torturing leaders, and killing Christian villagers.(^{105})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>IGE’s request for visa is denied.</td>
<td>USCIRF recommends “country of particular concern” status for</td>
<td>Vietnam renews crackdown on Montagnard</td>
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\(^{102}\) From: Chris Seiple, “IGE in Vietnam 2001-2006,” unless otherwise noted.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>IGE founder Robert Seiple granted visa request, meets with government religious affairs official regarding religious freedom issues.</td>
<td>November: The first U.S. naval vessel to visit Vietnam since 1975, the USS Vandergrift, makes a port call in Ho Chi Minh City. December: Protestant Christians are arrested and beaten by Vietnamese security officers for distributing religious leaflets in Ho Chih Minh City.</td>
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<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>November: Vietnam remains listed as a Country of Particular Concern” in the State Department’s International Religious Freedom Report.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>February: IGE sponsors exchange of pastors, scholars and government leaders between Washington and Hanoi, facilitating off-the-record discussions.</td>
<td>The State Department removes Vietnam from its CPC lists shortly before President Bush’s visit to the APEC summit in Hanoi. U.S. Congress approves “Permanent Normal Trade Relations” (PNTR) with Vietnam.</td>
<td>Vietnam pushes for greater integration with the global economic community. A party congress emphasizes economic reforms. Hanoi hosts APEC summit, which includes President Bush. Efforts are aimed at lowering tariffs, normalizing trade and increasing employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July: Seiple advocates before the Senate Finance committee that Vietnam should be removed from the State Dept.’s CPC list, and U.S. should establish of permanent normal trade relations with Vietnam (PNTR) as an integral part of a plan to address religious freedom and human rights concerns.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Events</th>
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</table>
| 2007 | September: IGE hosts a conference focusing on Religion and the Rule of Law, and signs a memorandum of understanding regarding ongoing initiatives between Vietnamese government and religious leaders.  
June: President Nguyen Minh Triet visits the United States, the first official visit in more than 30 years. U.S. signs agreements that will help pave the way to more free trade between the countries.  
May 2007: Nine Buddhist monks from a banned sect are sentenced from two to six years in prison for peacefully protesting their community’s treatment by the Vietnamese government.  
November: Several pro-democracy activists are jailed, including two American citizens. They later charged with terrorism. |
|      | January: Vietnam joins the World Trade Organization (WTO)  
May 2007: Nine Buddhist monks from a banned sect are sentenced from two to six years in prison for peacefully protesting their community’s treatment by the Vietnamese government.  
November: Several pro-democracy activists are jailed, including two American citizens. They later charged with terrorism. |

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Note 1</th>
<th>Note 2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Vietnam’s Prime Minister visits the United States, IGE hosts a meeting with American religious leaders. IGE also sponsors the attendance of a group of Vietnamese government leaders at a conference in Beijing on religion and rule of law.</td>
<td><a href="#">115</a></td>
<td><a href="#">116</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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118 Ibid.
surpasses $100 million.\textsuperscript{119}

2010 IGE aids in the effort to have Vietnamese churches communicate with each other more effectively. IGE staff appears in interviews on VTV4, highlighting IGE’s work and the importance of religious freedom. IGE inaugurates a "Protestantism Roundtable" with government officials and Protestant leaders. The roundtable discussed Vietnamese Protestant churches from 1911-1975. It also delved into government efforts to train officials and religious leaders on Vietnam's religious freedom legal framework.\textsuperscript{121}

Vietnam chairs the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The Obama administration indicates it wants to take the U.S. relationship with the country to the “next level” in terms of diplomatic cooperation in the region. U.S. criticizes Vietnam for continued human rights abuses in the wake of some improvements with respect to dissent and religious freedom.\textsuperscript{122}

The government to allows a large public Christmas celebration. Religious oppression steps up as government propaganda campaigns and “public criticism” ceremonies launched against Catholic and Montagnard Protestants, which includes coerced official denunciations of Christianity among hundreds of households representing thousands of adherents.\textsuperscript{123}


\textsuperscript{122} Manyin, “U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2010,” 3.

Conclusion

The case of IGE’s engagement in religious freedom advocacy demonstrates the need for interdisciplinary models of engagement that reach beyond the standard social movement theory model. That is, IGE’s strategies parallel the processes outlined in the mobilization theories but seem to transcend the rights-grievance model in other ways. Their top-down, bottom-up approach, and their programmatic strategies to address the concerns of both the oppressors and the oppressed departs from the classic social movement narrative. In doing so, they sought a path forward that seeks to address the plight of Vietnamese Christians by also addressing the suspicions and concerns of the government, and how free religious communities can contribute to the common good. This involved constructing an approach that involved a more holistic assessment of the factors at work in Vietnam. IGE’s continual engagement over nearly two decades has not stopped centuries-long friction between the oppressors and the oppressed. Even so, the continual engagement beyond the narrative of political framing and mobilization has shown some fruit.

In his book, the Art of Not Being Governed, James Scott argued that the rugged mountainous country that stretches from Vietnam’s Central Highlands to Burma (and beyond) is peopled by a cornucopia of ethnic groups that have spent generations evading subjugation by the state, retaining self-governance, their own language and customs, and an identity distinct from those living in the lowlands. It is the ethnic Kinh that hold the reins of government, and the compulsive powers that come with the political power and military force. These state-resistant groups, exemplified in the Hmong of Vietnam’s
Central Highlands, are now experiencing a clear trajectory that will result in the end of their multi-generational resistance to rule by the state. Advancements in logistics and communications technology are allowing the state to project power and retain clear lines of control. Yet, as practical resistance to rule diminishes, these groups are finding ways to insulate their identities and ideologies from identity and ideology of the state. Christianity has been a key component of this continued resistance.

Historically, fears about the loss of identity all that goes with it have been well founded. The case of Christianity among the Hmong indicates that the resistance to the state is not the same thing as resistance to modernity. Christianity has a growing track record of being an avenue to modernity for believers in these groups – an avenue that runs as a parallel path that does not include assimilation into what the state (with its own customs and culture) requires of the highland minority.

A major feature of the vision that IGE sees is the nature of the relationship between the power-consolidating state and traditionally state resistant Christian groups, from the rural Hmong to urban Catholics. The argument for religious freedom for these groups in this context is that the centuries-long record of religion-state conflict can be broken, that the choice between anarchy and state hegemony is a false dilemma. Rather, they argued that minority communities free to pursue their faith without state interference
will aid in their country’s stability and productivity. In this way, they transcend the Social Movement model of framing a grievance and applying pressure for a political change.\footnote{124}{Brian J Grim and Roger Finke, \textit{The Price of Freedom Denied} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Kindle Location 4999.}

In this respect, IGE’s work in Vietnam and other countries has several layers. First, they are attempting to make the case in countries that are far from representative democracies that they should respect the freedoms of minority religious groups as a pragmatic strategy. Second, they are forming their own method of mobilization that not only respects their own religious identity, but seeks to understand all the factors involved, including an open understanding of the concerns of the government involved in the oppression.

Harassment of Christians in Vietnam continues to this day.\footnote{125}{Shaun Turton and Phak Seangly, “Montagnards Flee to Thailand, Fearing Return To Persecution In Vietnam”, \textit{Phnom Penh Post}, last modified 2017, accessed February 13, 2018, http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/montagnards-flee-thailand-fearing-return-persecution-vietnam.} Seiple argued that IGE played an important role in moving the persecution of Christians from a form of government policy to isolated incidents of harassment, particularly through its relationship with Vietnamese leaders.\footnote{126}{Chris Seiple to Walter Ratliff, email, 2 March 2017.} Even so, the question remains open as to the resolution of what the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
identified as “systematic, egregious and ongoing” persecution of Christians in Vietnam by the state in the first decade of the new millennium.127

The ability to promote religious freedom in restrictive environments, such as Vietnam, is based on a theory of change that is still being worked about by those continuing work like that of the IGE staff in Vietnam. This theory of change is based upon an organization’s ability to build trust and working relationships across sectors of the government and within a plural society.128

Seiple tied the pragmatic effort to build trust within the Vietnamese government with the principle of honesty, citing in Christian scripture (i.e. Matthew 5:37).129 The Vietnamese were sometimes disappointed that other US visitors would say one thing, mostly positive, to them in Vietnam, and then say something else, mostly negative, in DC."130 “It is the only way to build trust, in any culture,” Seiple said, “Perhaps more importantly, we said the same things back in Washington, D.C [to American officials and policy makers].

Building trust was central among Seiple’s goals at all points of engagement: “Every trip, every activity was something that was closely coordinated with the

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129 Matt. 5:37 “All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.” NIV

130 Chris Seiple to Walter Ratliff, email, 2 March 2017.
Vietnamese as a function of trust. And each time we achieved something, [Hien Vu, IGE’s Vietnam program manager] and I would intentionally think through what is the next envelope to press.”

IGE’s evangelical identity “was a point of suspicion for everyone,” Seiple said of their dealing with the Vietnamese government, State Department diplomats or partners in non-religious partner organizations. There were several ways IGE addressed this challenge. An attitude of honesty and consistency in their rhetoric was a big part of this, he said. Another component of transcending suspicions associated with their identity entailed a holistic understanding of the issues surrounding the lived experiences of religious minorities in Vietnam. “No one actually lives in the development of human rights ‘sectors’ assigned by western academics,” Seiple observed. He emphasized need for a strong sense of identity as an important part of developing relationships in a “top down/bottom up” strategy: “Sociologically and secularly, if you do not know who you are, you don’t know where you are going, people in other cultures pick up on that right away. Because we were so clear in our point of moral departure, and resulting love for the Vietnamese, and because we kept our word, we were trusted…accelerating our work in practical ways, cutting much red tape” Seiple said. As a result, IGE was able to help establish greater communications and monitoring of religious harassment, “There’s no issue we can’t talk about. We even established a “hotline” to the ministry of Public

131 Ibid.
132 Ibid.
Security, which controls everything, to ensure a dialogue where both sides were being heard, even if we disagreed.”

He said a solid understanding of the economic and geo-political forces that place smaller nations like Vietnam under pressure helped create a convincing case for greater religious freedom: “There has always been a China camp and an American camp among Vietnamese elites. It was harder to make the case to the China camp in a purely economic context, but it has been easier when you add the geo-political dimension. No one in Vietnam wants to be invaded for an 18th time.”

IGE’s example confirms in part the facet of Niebuhr’s argument that it is easier for smaller religious organizations to articulate an ethical, orthodox vision for political action that avoids the ills that come with large-scale mobilization. A critical component of this is the ability of the organization’s leadership to form a distinct theological and practical approach without the pressures and compromises that come with mobilizing large numbers for a mass political cause. IGE was able to remain agile in its approaches and form personal relationships with a relatively small team of people and see effective results that stem of their vision and agility.

There is, however, the other side of the coin. Their argument is for religious freedom for millions of, primarily Christian, believers in Vietnam. This requires changing the minds and actions of large numbers of private citizens and government actors. The

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133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
top-down/bottom up approach attempts to instill a certain degree of durability of vision across the private and public sectors where they are building relationships. If successful in the long-term, this could demonstrate the strengths that theologically and ethically grounded leadership can have in political mobilization. This would qualify Niebuhr’s argument that as the group grows from “community” to “society,” so the inevitability of immorality grows within the mass movement of the religious group. A companion to this observation is the argument presented to the Vietnamese government (and others around the world) by Chris Seiple, Brian Grim and other leading advocates for religious freedom on the international stage. That argument states that the masses of religious believers in a country are not inherently inclined to rebellion, sectarianism and violence. Rather, their argument states that religious freedom liberates the ethical and contributory aspects of the mass religious groups within a society.\textsuperscript{135} This in turn creates greater stability and productivity for the nation. In this respect, the argument for religious freedom perhaps stands as a counterargument to the blanket pessimism for large group behavior expressed by Niebuhr.

**Principles of Engagement**

IGE’s unique and persistent approach in Vietnam provides a clear example of a faith-centered NGO engaging in religious freedom advocacy across national, ideological

and cultural lines. Their example helps inform the set of principles of engagement that can provide a template for future advocacy efforts by other organizations. What follows is a set of examples of how these principles are illustrated by IGE’s approach.

**Principle One:** Christian leaders should emphasize within their own communities the central role of the universal free conscience that appears in scripture, theology, and tradition, and the implication that has in a pluralistic context.

During his tenure at IGE, Chris Seiple used his platform in the domain of international religious freedom advocacy to outline an ethic of engagement that fit within the evangelical tradition he identified with. This included a theological grounding in the role of a free conscience, and the Christian’s role in working toward a world of greater religious freedom. As an evangelical organization, IGE developed a scripture-based theological outlook that reinforced its placement within the movement. At the same time, this outlook has a distinctive approach designed to make room for dialogue and practical cooperation with other those of religious traditions.¹³⁶

This approach is set within the context of the “lessons learned” by IGE in its role as an international NGO advocating for religious freedom around the world. These lessons include the idea that building relations across the spectrum of authorities and communities helps bring the players in to a space where practical solutions can be crafted

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to reduce conflict and build respect. Seiple also argued that NGOs can help contribute to a common moral framework agreed upon by those at the negotiating table – a framework that respects the identities of those involved, but also recognizes the legitimacy and value of those who hold a different identity or ideology. IGE also counts among its lessons learned that it is not enough to point out the Western notions of the freedom of conscience and religious liberty as a philosophical truth, and a right outside the purview of the state. Rather, IGE asserts that part of being a wise advocate and religious representative is to also speak to the concerns of the authorities you are addressing. In this way, appeals to evidence that religious liberty pays valuable dividends in the economic health, internal and external security, and role on the world’s stage can be more persuasive than philosophical appeals or a rights-grievance approach taken by an identity group. As Seiple notes:

In places like Dien Bien and Xinjiang, we have suggested that religious freedom is the best counterterrorism strategy, that seminary is security, that religious freedom—when properly rooted at the intersection of culture and the transparent rule of law—is pre-emptive peace. The premise is simple: if religion has been a part of the problem—if religion has been used to organize and rebel against the state, and/or used for terrorism—then it has to be a part of the solution. The best of faith can defeat the worst of religion, if given the chance. The more religious leaders who know how to live out the best of their faith, the more likely it will be that their congregations will seek to serve the local community by living out the Golden Rule. More theologically sound leaders mean better citizens, and better citizens mean more stability and prosperity.  

**Principle Two:** Christian public engagement in defense of religious liberty should be consistent in its emphasis on freedom and justice for all religious and nonreligious groups in society.

In the case of Vietnam, IGE’s top-down, bottom-up approach entailed building an ongoing working relationship with government leaders. This yielded a greater understanding of the precise concerns of government leaders about the populations they were seeking to manage. In many cases, IGEs high-level relationships also revealed both a lack of understanding of international human rights norms when it comes to universal religious freedom and human rights. This has led to continuing dialogue on this issue as well as regular training sessions to help government and academic leaders better understand the issues, and how to resolve them. Catholic and Protestant Vietnamese Christians have a long history in Vietnam, and other religious minorities have also experienced oppression by the Vietnamese government.

IGE’s commitment to religious freedom in Vietnam has shown how an evangelical organization can learn sophisticated diplomatic language, conflict resolution skills, and policy development techniques that help address issues in a given country. Engaging Vietnam’s communist government, as well as the variety of religious groups in the country, has also expanded their capacity to identify underlying issues that may aggravate local circumstances that lead to oppression. In doing so, they demonstrate how a religious organization rooted in a particular tradition can play a role in advocating for universal rights of conscience.
Principle Three: Religious freedom advocacy should emphasize the role of faith groups serving the common good through participation in civil society.

The Institute for Global Engagement emphasizes the civil society role through their top-down, bottom-up approach. The group recognized the recurring oppression of the Vietnamese government against religious groups, including both Protestant and Catholic ethnic groups that had a long history in the region. For IGE, the task involved working with government officials as well as the religious community-level to foster greater trust between religious groups and political leaders. They also continue to educate government officials on international norms regarding human rights (as well as rights of religious freedom already enshrined in Vietnamese law). IGE came to occupy a position as mediator between the Vietnamese government and its sizable Christian religious minority, as well holding a diplomatic advisory role between the Vietnamese and U.S. governments.

Seiple noted that prior to their involvement, religious organizations had not emphasized direct engagement with the Vietnamese government, which would prove important for any practical improvements for Vietnam’s oppressed religious minorities. Seiple emphasized the need to listen to the government’s concerns about with the country’s religious communities. This included fears of violent extremism. The government was also concerned about the need for some religious populations to modernize their agricultural practices and other factors to improve their economic prospects.
IGE engaged in conferences and educational programs designed to build the capacity for the respect of human rights within the Vietnamese government. These efforts were tied to Vietnam’s economic and diplomatic interests in resolving the human rights concerns of those in the United States and the international community, particularly as they related to the prospects of a normalized trade status with the U.S. From the bottom-up, IGE listened and catalogued the accounts of government oppression and social hostilities experienced by Vietnam’s Christian communities. They also worked with government and religious groups in the country to allow for the construction of seminaries and trained them in making their own case for human rights, including religious freedom.

Religious freedom advocates can point to the ample evidence that they have much to contribute toward the common good through a role in civil society. This includes building peaceful relationships across religious and identity lines and reducing social instability. They also have the ability to address issues across a range of domains in a holistic manner that is sometimes lost in top-down, secular intervention initiatives. The track record of a host of both Protestant and Catholic organizations, including World Vision, the Community of Sant’Egidio, the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services demonstrates this.

**Principle Four:** Religious freedom advocacy groups should work across religious and social identity lines.

As in the case of what became the International Religious Freedom Act, a political opportunity presented itself to an evangelical group that was searching for a
solution they observed on the international stage. In this case, the country of Vietnam was hoping to solve a series of economic issues by pursuing normalized trading status with the United States. The challenge for the communist government included the painful memory regarding the American experience in the Vietnam War, the ongoing record of religious persecution by the Vietnamese government, and the antipathy among Vietnamese communists in the government to address the concerns of the country’s religious communities in a compassionate and effective way.

IGE adopted a unique strategy that departed from the “name and shame” tactics utilized by other organizations and enshrined into U.S. diplomatic practice under the International Religious Freedom Act. Instead, IGE worked to develop a relationship with Vietnam’s communist government to seek innovative solutions to the country’s religious freedom problems.
CHAPTER SIX
Principles of Religious Freedom Advocacy

Christian communities have a deep history in the formation of the functional norms that underlie universal human rights.¹ Yet, some American Christian groups have also become entrenched in perennial culture wars, a symptom of ever-thinning consensus and damaged civil discourse. Today, Christian denominations, NGOS and parachurch organizations find themselves at a juncture as to what path they will take with respect to the state and to other groups in society. Within this context, the case studies presented in this project examined how religious networks and organizations approach issues related to religious freedom advocacy.

The history of religious groups and their engagement with the political arena shows that commitments to protect their community do not always align with a concern for the common good. However, some religious freedom advocates highlighted in this project are working toward the horizon of a more just and equitable social order. Leaders of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services and the Institute for Global Engagement argue that the freedom to continue their faith-driven efforts is linked to the well-being of all in society. They also argue that greater religious freedom helps disrupt cycles of conflict, rather than exacerbate the divisions attendant with identity politics.²


² Grim and Finke, The Price of Freedom Denied,” 205.
Certain principles have emerged in this project that speak to the faithfulness of advocacy efforts to ideals formed in the Christian tradition, as well as efforts that demonstrate their effectiveness in the marketplace of ideas. These principles can be thought of as contributing to the conversation about the possibility of Christian or Protestant engagement in public life, as well as the pragmatic concerns that would accompany this engagement.

Coupling Christian ideals with what it takes to remain effectively engaged from a practical standpoint may, on its face, seem to correspond to the 20th century Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and others. However, there are certain aspects of the insights gained in this study that depart of classical (or Niebuhrian) Christian Realism. First, Niebuhr and the Christian Realists of the last century assumed a continued dominant role of the white mainline Protestant church in American society, which doesn’t reflect the current pluralistic context. Second, the type of globalization that has occurred in the past few decades, catalyzed by the rise of the internet and the information revolution could not have been fully anticipated in the early to mid-20th century. The disestablishment of white Protestant Christianity in American public life and the new forms of communication that shaped in the age of globalization have generated different challenges for those who wish to retain their religious distinctiveness while remained engaged with the issues of the day.³

In the old scenario, the Church sometimes acted as the chief endorser or chief critic of the state and those in power. In the theology of John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, Christian Realism came uncomfortably close to the “Constantinianism” they identify as tearing away the faithfulness of the church in exchange for proximity to power. The Constantinianism that Yoder, Hauerwas and others warned against included the Church’s validation of the State’s use of coercive force, as well as the Church’s role in bolstering the secular authority of the state.4

The current political and social climate has changed dramatically over the decades since the death of Reinhold Niebuhr in 1971. White mainline Protestantism has faced a continual decline in numbers and influence over the past sixty years.5 Evangelicals have largely retained their numerical strength, but with some significant social and demographic challenges ahead. The relationship with the Trump presidency notwithstanding, evangelicals have not obtained the political and cultural clout once held by their mainline Protestant siblings. Rather, legal and social developments have fractured the American moral consensus, producing a variety of visions in the public square about the role of government and the nature of public policy. At the moment, these visions are often aligned along deeply partisan political and religious lines.6 This points to the Peter Berger’s insight that secularism doesn’t lead to a new consensus based


5 Ibid., 36.

on Reason, but rather to a plurality of religious and non-religious voices in the public square that compete for power and influence. The new world order is a chorus, but with its members often simultaneously singing very different tunes.

In this present state, the Christian Realists no longer have the platform as the conscience of the state ostensibly enjoyed by Niebuhr and his peers. As a result, the Constantinianism prophetically preached against by Hauerwas and others is mitigated the white Protestants’ loss of establishment in the American public square. At the same time, Christians in the United States and around the world fear the effects of a rising tide of religious restrictions, and the effects that might result from their disengagement from public life.

The case studies found in this project reveal a set of principles that recognize the plurality that exists within Protestantism itself, as well as address their ethic of engagement. The observations and recommendations are meant to be ecumenical, in the sense that they do not offer an endorsement of theological perspectives that range from pacifism to just war theory, or from Calvinism to Arminianism, etc. Rather, they offer perspectives that can be used across the theological spectrum. The principles derived from these studies are designed to aid faithful engagement across a range of groups that adopt them.

Though some contemporary debates might seem exotic to Reinhold Niebuhr if he were here today, his observations about human nature and religious group behavior

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remain salient. Niebuhr’s argument in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* can be expressed as saying (in part) that the larger a Christian organization grows beyond the congregational level, the more likely it is to foster injustices that often accompany the will to power associated with identity group conflicts. He considers group behavior, including (and perhaps especially) Christian group behavior susceptible to the “natural impulse” of consolidating power unto itself as a form of group protection and advancement.8

At the individual level up to small groups, Niebuhr argued that selfish impulses are mitigated by the human conscience, which can transcend one’s own pursuit of well-being in favor of the well-being of others. Yet, the transcendent concern for those outside one’s own group diminishes the larger the group gets and is placed in political competition with other large groups. In his estimation, the selfish impulses will win out as the group become larger. Christian groups that profess an interest in the common good of society are not immune from this phenomenon.9 In part, this study examines whether this is true, or whether the cultivation of a certain outlook in a movement’s leadership could mitigate the risk of Christian mobilization devolving into a mere power struggle with other identity groups.

Niebuhr’s arguments ring true in some cases. For example, legal campaigns stemming from anti-Sharia mobilization have increased social hostilities for Muslims in the United States, threatening religious liberty for a broad set of American religious

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9 Ibid., 25
groups. Yet, Niebuhr’s sociological effect does not seem to be universal, as seen among Coptic evangelicals in Egypt. Granted, some Coptic evangelicals and orthodox leaders, including Rafiq Habib, modelled their response to Political Islam along the same rhetorical contours as the Muslim Brotherhood. This led to a stronger sense of disempowerment and alienation among their people. Later Coptic evangelical leaders, such as Andrea Zaki, have worked to overcome this.

Yet, the drive for universality and inclusiveness found in many efforts. This includes the drive to pass the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act as well as rights-based programs of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services. These and other examples run counter to Niebuhr’s pessimism. The Coptic evangelical ability to advocate for the rights and freedoms of their group in concert with their efforts to look after the right and freedoms of other groups points to a form of engagement that strengthens the common good and produces a strong argument for religious freedom in civil society.

In developing a set of principles for engagement, it is helpful to take stock of the current social and political contexts. American Protestants live in a highly polarized political environment, with greater polarization on the horizon. There are also relevant social and economic trends at work. Income inequality is growing both nationally and on

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10 See Chapter Two.

the world’s stage.\textsuperscript{12} Also, the center of gravity for the religious world is shifting from Europe and the United States to the Global south. The “Next Christendom,” as Philip Jenkins calls it, will be made up of a wide variety of cultures and ethnicities around the world, with their own sets of local concerns and theological nuances.\textsuperscript{13}

As seen in this project’s case studies there is a correlation between institutional effectiveness and the ability to engage those outside of one’s religious, cultural or ethnic group. It seems to follow that effective engagement in the public square would require skills and understandings that address this need. The current mechanism outlined in Social Movement Theory presents an inward-focused path that demonstrates how a group identifies an injustice, frames their grievance in a way that resonates with their primary constituency, identifies a political opportunity, and mobilizes members of the larger movement to affect a political change.\textsuperscript{14} For Christian religious liberty practitioners, there is something missing from this arc of activism: engagement across ideological boundaries that has proved useful for reducing polarization and addressing unjust circumstances in a holistic fashion.

There are several fields that address factors that have arisen from the evidence presented in this project, including social psychology, organizational and communications theory. For example, one factor relevant to this project, employed in the


\textsuperscript{13} Philip Jenkins, \textit{The Next Christendom}.

\textsuperscript{14} Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, And Movement Participation", \textit{American Sociological Review} 51, no. 4 (1986): 464.
field of social psychology, is “epistemic motivation.” This is defined as the willingness of an individual or group to use their analytical and emotional resources to find and hold well-informed conclusions about the world, particularly observations that reach beyond their own cultural or ideological context. Research into epistemic motivation has shown that a high degree of willingness for one or both parties to know the concerns, values and norms of those across the negotiating table increases the chances that a productive agreement can be formed between the parties. High epistemic motivation corresponds to better chances of developing a win-win conclusion to a negotiation. This is particularly true when those engaged in a complex intercultural negotiation effectively communicate their own preferences and priorities across party and cultural lines, as well as have a clear understanding of (and willingness to understand) the factors influencing their counterparts across the table. If the understandings gained through this pluralistic approach are effectively communicated to other members in the movement, it may reduce the negative effects of “cognitive encumbrance” by introducing adaptability into the movement’s defining narratives.

According to Job van der Schalk, et al., high epistemic motivation can lead to a greater overall understanding of how a variety of cultures operate, and how to process new information related to the intercultural understanding among experienced

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 362.
practitioners. This contributes to a higher cultural intelligence, which in turn facilitates
greater effectiveness in a cross-cultural or cross-political context.\textsuperscript{18} In a world that is
becoming more globalized, the shift of Christian demographics to the Global South, and
the rise of competing religious and nonreligious groups in the West, it would follow that
Western Christian organizations might feel compelled to cultivate the kind of cultural
intelligence and orientation toward epistemic motivation that will help them meet the
challenges ahead. It is important to note that the psychological propensity toward
epistemic motivation is not the domain of one party or political inclination. Epistemic
motivation is no more likely to be associated with those who consider themselves
politically liberal than conservative.\textsuperscript{19}

One result of increased cultural intelligence driven by the engine of epistemic
motivation is that those engaged in cross-cultural negotiations, which includes policy
issues such as including religious freedom advocacy, is that the parties involved have
greater motivation to reach creative, integrated solutions that have a wide benefit.\textsuperscript{20} The
research in this area indicates that those who actively seek out information about their

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Christopher M. Federico, Grace Deason and Emily L. Fisher, "Ideological Asymmetry In The
Relationship Between Epistemic Motivation And Political Attitudes.", \textit{Journal of Personality and Social
Psychology} 103, no. 3 (2012): 381-398.
\textsuperscript{20} Lynn Imai and Michele J. Gelfand, "The Culturally Intelligent Negotiator: The Impact Of
Cultural Intelligence (CQ) On Negotiation Sequences And Outcomes", \textit{Organizational Behavior and
partners and adversaries from other cultures build their capacity for effectively engaging new cultures and contexts.\textsuperscript{21}

Naturally following epistemic motivation and cultural intelligence is the ability to communicate strategically across cultural and political contexts. Effective dialogue (vs. a monologic approach) among the players has been an important component in successful cases cited in this project, ranging from the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act, to rights-based development in Egypt, to religious freedom advocacy in Vietnam. Engagement across cultural and political boundaries, and the creative solutions that can flow from this engagement, expands the horizon beyond the capacities of a classical rights-grievance approach that focuses on mobilization of an identity base.

This has important implications for Christian groups seeking to advance the cause of religious liberty in a pluralistic context. The following principles draw upon the evidence presented in this project’s case studies, as well as the interdisciplinary theories that come to bear on the successes and failures experienced by the subjects in these cases.

**Principles of Engagement**

The following principles of engagement were constructed in light of the evidence gathered in each of the case studies presented in this project, and as interpreted through an interdisciplinary lens employing social movement theory, social psychology as well as theological philosophical perspectives presented by thought leaders such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Stanley Hauerwas. A close look at how organizations form their programs of

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
action, craft messages to their constituents, and mobilize their resources to affect change reveals mechanisms behind the behaviors of social movement organizations (both large and small). In the case of advocacy campaigns, including religious freedom advocacy, both Hauerwas and Niebuhr have been generally critical of Protestant social movements in the public square, albeit in different ways. For Hauerwas, getting too close to secular power structures endangers an authentic Christian witness due to the irreconcilable differences between the nonviolent, non-coercive nature of the Gospel, and political participation that legitimates ways of life “made possible by violence and sustained by coercion.” On the other hand, Niebuhr has observed that the larger a Christian organization or social movement it becomes, the more likely it is to demonstrate a will toward self-preservation at the expense of others.

These case studies and the social science research analysis that accompanies them reveals a more nuanced picture than those presented by Niebuhr and Hauerwas. Though the behaviors outlined, for example, in the section on evangelical anti-Sharia mobilization seems to confirm Niebuhr and Hauerwas’ suspicions, a closer look shows the important role top leadership plays in how believers are mobilized. That is, the framing of messages and the choice of partnerships among those with influential platforms can have a decisive impact on whether Christian groups can remain consistent in their witness and effectually advocate for religious liberty. The following principles articulate some of the lessons learned in this analysis:

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22 Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*, Kindle Location 1066.

• **Principle One:** Christian leaders should emphasize within their own communities the central role of the universal free conscience that appears in scripture, theology, and tradition, and the implication that has in a pluralistic context.

• **Principle Two:** Christian public engagement in defense of religious liberty should be consistent in its emphasis on freedom and justice for all religious and nonreligious groups in society.

• **Principle Three:** Religious freedom advocacy should emphasize the role of faith groups serving the common good through participation in civil society.

• **Principle Four:** Religious freedom advocacy groups should work with others across religious and social identity lines.

Principle One: Christian leaders should emphasize within their own communities the central role of the universal free conscience that appears in scripture, theology, and tradition, and the implication that has in a pluralistic context.

This principle provides a justification within the Christian community for universal religious freedom to those outside of the tradition (set against the tendency to defend merely one’s own group). It also provides an authentic vision of the Protestant/Christian justification for conscience rights and religious freedom in the public square. It prepares the ground for public arguments regarding for conscience rights and
religious liberty using the functionally normative tools such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Evangelicals place a premium on scriptural resources that tie into the pressing questions of the day. In this case, there are ample scriptural justifications for a universal free conscience and religious freedom. However, as seen in the case of anti-Sharia and anti-Muslim mobilization among evangelicals, religious principles rooted in scriptures rarely make an appearance in their efforts to stigmatize and thwart the religious liberties of those of other faiths. Rather, as the case study on these efforts have documented, evangelical mobilization was rooted in generating suspicion of American Muslims, portraying their religion as violent, and their place in society as anti-American. This contrasts with biblical principles outlined in the Old and New Testaments. For example, the fundamental idea behind a free of conscience is found in the Book of Job, in which the story hinges on Job’s ability to rise above blessings or punishments in freely choosing to respect God and resist evil. It also stands in contrast to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus’ listeners are exhorted to look after their own conscience and examine their own failings before condemning others. Early church teachers such as Tertullian, reinforced similar ideas regarding the freedom of conscience in Christian tradition: “It is a fundamental right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his


25 Job 1:11-12, 27:5-6.
own convictions: one man’s religion neither harms nor helps another man. It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion – to which free will and not force should lead us.”

From 1960s onward, the leaders of CEOSS have utilized scripture to develop the foundation of their work in the areas of human rights and development. The organization’s founder, Samuel Habib, drew from biblical sources including Jesus’s parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37, with a parallel Old Testament story in 2 Chronicles 28:8-15), in which a foreigner with a foreign religion is held up as an exemplar of good ethics, along with the story of Jesus’s encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4), in cultivating human rights and development work across religious lines.

These and other examples in scripture and history lay the groundwork for a more tolerant and welcoming approach with respect to other groups. Beyond pragmatic concerns, this pluralistic understanding of a free conscience helps maintain a moral and theological consistency among Christians in the public square. As seen in the case studies and supporting examples, a firm understanding of the role a free conscience plays in Christian ideals coupled with the relational passport to work with other across religious and ideological lines, aids in reducing conflict and increasing influence in the public field and helps maintain a public square that respects the free individual conscience. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized this principle in a message titled “Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace:”

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In a globalized world marked by increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, the great religions can serve as an important factor of unity and peace for the human family. On the basis of their religious convictions and their reasoned pursuit of the common good, their followers are called to give responsible expression to their commitment within a context of religious freedom. Amid the variety of religious cultures, there is a need to value those elements which foster civil coexistence, while rejecting whatever is contrary to the dignity of men and women.... The path to take is not the way of relativism or religious syncretism. The Church, in fact, “proclaims, and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life (John 14:6); in Christ, in whom God reconciled all things to himself, people find the fullness of the religious life.” Yet this in no way excludes dialogue and the common pursuit of truth in different areas of life, since, as Saint Thomas Aquinas would say, “every truth, whoever utters it, comes from the Holy Spirit.”

**Principle Two:** Christian public engagement should be consistent in its emphasis on freedom and justice for all in society.

Religious liberty advocates can strengthen the case within their own constituency by showcasing the strong tradition of a free conscience within their own community as well as make the public case that they are consistent in the promotion of these rights for all. This includes rhetoric in the public square that includes the fundamental role of a free conscience that emerges from their own faith tradition, but their knowledge and interest of universal rights of conscience and freedom of religion that are found in the functional norms of the secular public square.

As seen in the study of American evangelical mobilization against Muslims, the track record for the promotion of universal religious freedom in the United States needs improvement. Evangelical mobilization against the construction of mosques, for example,

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as well as the push for anti-Sharia legislation stands in contrast to the rhetoric demanding religious freedom for Christians in the United States and abroad. Articulating the theological importance of a universal rights of conscience, American evangelical religious freedom advocates can help remedy the dissonance between their calls for greater freedom for one group, and greater restrictions for another. If they do so, they have an opportunity to counter the pessimistic prediction by Niebuhr’s that the larger the religious groups, them more likely it is to engage in (using a contemporary term) identity politics, which is to the detriment of their own values and their own credibility in the public square.

Antipathy toward Muslims is not a foregone conclusion. There are some influential evangelical leaders who discourage anti-Muslim bias. Leaders such as Rick Warren and Bob Roberts do not seem to have the ear of the larger evangelical community to the degree of others who have stoked anti-Muslim sentiment, such as Robert Jeffress and Jerry Falwell, Jr. Even so, there is some historic precedent for a shift in evangelical conflict with those outside their faith to one of cooperation, albeit the shift could take more than a generation.

For example, evangelical suspicion of Roman Catholicism ran high in the 1950s during the birth of the neo-evangelical movement. The formation of the movement itself was tied to a conservative Protestant desire to counter Catholic influence in the public square.29 Some founding leaders in the evangelical movement, such as James Murch, saw

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29 Murch, *Cooperation Without Compromise*, 47, 137.
evangelical political mobilization as a way to resist a Catholic “takeover” of the United States, a sentiment in the same genus as the contemporary evangelical fear of a Muslim takeover via Sharia law. At the same time, evangelist Billy Graham developed relationships with Catholics, as well as mainline Protestants. However, it wasn’t until the 1990s that the evangelical movement’s relationship with the Catholic church has shifted to one of mutual support and cooperation, with the solidification of this relationship in the document, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*. Though some evangelicals criticized the document as flawed, it delivered evidence of how the movement was able to self-correct in moving from an oppositional stance to one of partnership on public issues that they hold in common. Meanwhile, even as anti-Muslim sentiment remains at a fever pitch among many evangelicals, some continue to seek productive relationships and plant the seeds of future cooperation.

An ethically consistent approach to advocating for the freedoms enjoyed by American Christians includes advocacy to extending those freedoms to Muslims, those of other faiths and no faith. To do so demonstrates belief in evangelicals’ own rhetoric

30 Ibid., 140.
regarding the universality of religious freedom. It also builds the community’s credibility as a consistent advocate for the common good.

**Principle Three:** Religious freedom advocacy should emphasize the role of faith groups serving the common good through participation in civil society.

One of the strongest arguments for religious freedom revolves around the role religious groups play in the domain of civil society. This principle highlights the level of influence that independent religious groups may have when they are unencumbered and independent from the state. It also highlights the unique role religious groups play in creating a more just and peaceful pluralistic society when they put into practical application theological resources pertaining to reconciliation, human rights, and restorative justice. As the case studies in this project and other examples demonstrate, comprehensive approaches to poverty and conflict exercised by religious groups in a wide range of contexts have proven their value helping societies emerge from violence and oppression and help prevent its recurrence. The wide range of civil society services, and engagement at deep levels of society speak to the potential for free religious groups to enhance the common good in a pluralistic context.

Christian groups have a long track record of participation in initiatives that intersect with human rights, health and welfare, and economic development. The evangelical organization World Vision is one of the world’s largest charities with an annual budget in excess of one billion dollars.  

program is its child sponsorship program. It also delivers services in the areas of
development, humanitarian relief, and human rights advocacy. Their work, which does
not include proselytization, is recognized by some developed countries as effective in
providing a holistic approach to humanitarian and rights development. For example, the
Canadian government’s International Development Agency endorsed the role of religious
NGOs in relief and development based in part on the World Vision’s track record of
effectiveness in areas not addressed by secular NGOs: “Christian NGOs believe that
spirituality, belief systems, values and religion play an important role in the development
process. CIDA also recognises that there is a spiritual dimension to the development
process and accepts that Christian NGOs and their southern partners often integrate this
dimension into their relief and development programming.”35

According research by Dan Philpott, religious NGOs possess a unique set of
resources when it comes to advocating for the common good. Among Abrahamic
organizations, this includes a recurring regarding the value of “truth recovery” when it
comes to past government abuses or sectarian conflict, as well as articulating a theology
of reconciliation and an emphasis on human rights. Philpott argues that the more
independent the religious groups in civil society are from the state, the greater influence
they have in this domain. Philpott argues their autonomy is particularly effective in
transitional justice contexts where societies are emerging from a period of oppression and
human rights abuses. This contrasts with government entities or secular organizations that

35 Linda Tripp, "Gender and Development From A Christian Perspective: Experience From World
may focus instead of retribution, or a top-down political role in preventing future conflict.36

There are many examples where the bottom-up approach combined with a faith-based perspective has proved effective in aiding a move from entrenched social conflict to a period of transitional justice, and eventually to peaceful inter-group relationships. For example, the Mennonite Central Committee has put into practice their theologically-based perspective regarding healing between social groups and the elimination of social and economic equality in programs ranging from Central America to Northern Ireland. These programs are designed to consider the religious, social and economic frameworks of a given area of conflict. They promote new contextual frameworks that establish relationships between groups and foster alternatives to violent conflict. The Mennonites’ comprehensive approach complemented, for example, United Nations initiatives that focused on senior leaders and legal accountability. Similar examples arose in other contexts. During the Somali Civil War, the Mennonite group worried that the U.N.’s armed humanitarian assistance focus on warlords would not provide the lasting peace and improved human rights that more irenic initiatives offered.37 There are many other examples across a host of religious NGOs, including Catholic and Protestant religious organizations. Some concentrate on grassroots reconciliation and human rights


development, and others (such as the community of Sant’ Egidio) engage actors at all levels of government and society to mediate conflict and build trust between communities.  

The cases presented in this project also exemplify the unique role of religious groups as sources of societal norms in favor of peace and reconciliation, and a well of ideas regarding the dignity of the human being and the importance of protecting human rights. It has been noted that these ideas, which help create and reinforce functional norms of peace and reconciliation in the societies they engage, are sometimes at odds with governments that wish for greater control of their citizens, and even secular rights organizations that may have a greater focus retributive justice. 

CEOSS provides a prime example of a group working toward greater religious liberty within the context of promoting the role of civil society in a country that has seen a long series of upheavals. Through their deep civil involvement, they advocate for farmers, rural women, people with disabilities and others, in conjunction with their own call for fewer government restrictions and an easing of social hostilities. CEOSS also increases the presence of civil society organizations Egypt by sponsoring, training and launching smaller groups focused on a particular need and location. Through their efforts, they are deepening the role of civil organizations as both a support for vulnerable groups

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38 Ibid., 355.

in the absence of government programs and creating a mechanism for vulnerable groups to address their own grievances and concerns. In doing so, they are helping make the participation of religious and non-religious civil society organizations an integral part of Egypt’s public life and providing the social and political infrastructure to address religious freedom concerns.

IGE emphasizes their top-down, bottom-up approach in showing the value of civil society organizations in the countries where they work. In the case of Vietnam, they have long-standing consultative and educational programs for government officials. These help Vietnamese officials gain a greater understanding of international norms regarding human rights, including religious liberty, with respect to their country’s religious minorities. These efforts also reinforce the understanding of Vietnam’s own laws and international commitments in this domain. IGE also works at the community level to gain a greater understanding of the social and governmental challenges faced by these communities. In doing so, they build the capacity to foster trust and facilitate real-world solutions that lead to greater stability.

IGE President Chris Seiple noted that prior to their involvement, religious organizations had not emphasized direct engagement with the Vietnamese government, which would prove important for any practical improvements for Vietnam’s oppressed religious minorities. Seiple emphasized the need to listen to the government’s concerns about with the country’s religious communities. This included fears of violent extremism. The government was also concerned about the need for some religious populations to
modernize their agricultural practices and other factors to improve their economic prospects.

IGE engaged in conferences and educational programs designed to build the capacity for the respect of human rights within the Vietnamese government. These efforts were tied to Vietnam’s economic and diplomatic interests in resolving the human rights concerns of those in the United States and the international community, particularly as they related to the prospects of a normalized trade status with the U.S. From the bottom-up, IGE listened to and catalogued the accounts of government oppression and social hostilities experienced by Vietnam’s Christian communities. They also worked with government and religious groups in the country to allow for the construction of seminaries and trained them in making their own case for religious freedom and other human rights. IGE is nearing two decades of involvement in Vietnam. Even so, seeking the rights of Catholic, Protestant and other religious minorities in that country remains difficult. Even so, IGE is keeping channels open, and keeping open future possibilities for greater religious freedom, through their ongoing role as an engaged civil society organization. In this way, they display some parallels to CEOSS, who are on a trajectory of deep and long-lasting engagement in as a trusted civil society organization.

Religious freedom advocates can utilize ample evidence that they have much to contribute toward the common good through a role in civil society. This includes building peaceful relationships across religious and identity lines and reducing social instability. They also have the ability to address issues across a range of domains in a holistic

manner that takes into consideration religious and human rights in its work through civil society initiatives.

**Principle Four:** Religious freedom advocacy groups should work across religious and social identity lines.

Evangelicals played a leading role mobilizing popular support for legislation that became the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. Though evangelicals were the key popular force, it’s passage through Congress and signature by the president required cooperation with those beyond their usual political and religious allies.\(^\text{41}\) Episcopal, Jewish, evangelical, Catholic and adherents of other faiths, helped craft a final bill designed to promote religious freedom (vs. the greater focus on fighting Christian persecution in predecessor bills), and also broaden the language to address the universal concerns connected to freedom of conscience worldwide.\(^\text{42}\)

The Institute for Global Engagement’s religious freedom advocacy in Vietnam also demonstrated the efficacy of working across ideological, political, and religious lines. A political opportunity presented itself as Vietnam was searching for a solution to the trade restrictions connected to their human rights record. Vietnam hoped to pursue permanent normalized trade relations (PNTR) with the United States, but the Communist government’s oppression of religious and other minorities was among the obstacles standing in the way of PNTR. IGE worked to develop a relationship with Vietnam’s


\(^{42}\) Ibid.
government to find an innovative path that would serve to ease restrictions and oppression experienced by Vietnam’s Christian communities, and simultaneously assist in giving Vietnam the visible progress in human rights needed to make PNTR more palatable for the American government.

IGE’s form of engagement cultivated an ongoing relationship with government leaders and helped yield a greater understanding of the precise concerns of government leaders about the populations they were using oppression to manage. Their high-level relationships sometimes revealed a lack of understanding among government officials of international human rights norms, particularly on religious freedom and human rights. This led to frequent training sessions to help government and academic leaders better understand the issues, how they are seen with respect to the international community, and how to resolve them.

Though serious issues remain in Vietnam, IGE presence as a mediator and educator have poised the organization to remain an effective influence and conduit of communication across political and ideological lines. This is particularly true when it comes to improving human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam and other countries where they have employed similar strategies.

IGE’s commitment to religious freedom in Vietnam has shown how an evangelical organization can learn sophisticated diplomatic language, conflict resolution skills, and policy development techniques that help address issues on the international stage. Engaging Vietnam’s communist government, as well as the variety of religious
groups in the country, has also expanded their capacity to understand and find ways to identify underlying issues that may aggravate local circumstances that lead to oppression.

This principle is also exemplified by CEOSS. The organization’s approach includes bringing religious leaders to the table for practical, problem solving discussions at a variety of levels. At the same time, the rights-based development approach contributes to the moral underpinnings and functional norms behind the rights that they are seeking. They demonstrate through their actions faith-informed values regarding the human dignity and the need to care for others.

Conclusion
A frequent touchstone in the debates among believers over the role of the faith community in secular society are Augustine’s observations in the *City of God*, and other works. The principles derived from the case studies, as well as supporting examples in the broader field of Christian advocacy and social action find a relevant standing in the realism that Augustine offers as well. Augustine recognized that a temporal City of God (a regime fully aligned with God’s standards of love and justice) is never fully achievable on earth. The City of God’s relationship with the Earthly City is complex. Those whose passions are tied to the Earthly City are sometimes within the church itself. Conversely, those who seek the goods of the City of God are sometimes outside the Christian faith. Despite (or because) of this, it is possible to have a republic “of a certain kind” that respects justice and has a place for Christians to pursue the common good.43

43 Augustine, *City of God*, 50.
Those whose allegiance is to the City of God have a life that exists on two axes: that they have a vertical relationship devoted to God, and a horizontal relationship that compels them to love their neighbor. In this framework, loving one’s neighbor means seeking their welfare, which includes a free pursuit of spiritual matters. It also means working with them to derive practical solutions that help alleviate commonly-held problems, as well as increase the societal goods that those across society have identified as desirable and beneficial.44

To be fair, Augustine also expressed in *City of God* that only Christians should hold civil power, since they were most likely to hold virtues that aligned with the City of God (which Peter Brown described as unconvincing and constituted “some of the most shoddy passages” in the book).45 We are living in much different times than Augustine, Luther and Niebuhr. As seen in this discussion, Hauerwas presents strong arguments against continuing the assumption that Christians may still act as the go-to moral authority when governments seek to legitimize their actions.

A contemporary perspective takes into account the lack of moral consensus and a disestablished church. The principles outlined here endeavor to not make the points of conflict and disagreement with other groups the starting points of engagement. Rather, they attempt to offer an alternative to the rights-grievance approach that seems to institutionalize Augustine’s chief complaint of human self-centeredness at the core the

44 Ibid.

Earthly City. Alisdair MacIntyre warns against the propensity among citizens of the contemporary world to view themselves as merely autonomous moral agents seeking to exert their will upon the world. He argues that this outlook trades genuine interdependence among people for a system where one seeks to manipulate others for their own benefit, while fighting off manipulation by others.46

Religious freedom advocacy is sometimes seen by those outside the American evangelical movement as a means of manipulation by the Christian Right to exercise political dominion over other segments of a post-modern and post-Christian society.47 Countering this assumption is the argument that religious freedom frees religious groups to act independently for the common good. This includes expanding the secular/pluralistic imagination about what is possible when it comes to interactions between otherwise competing groups. By working across ideological lines, resisting the temptation to restrict the freedoms of outside groups, and solving problems via civil initiatives, the Church can seize the opportunity to demonstrate an alternative to the cultural warfare that dominates today’s political climate.

Niebuhr observed that large group mobilization within the Christian community tends to take the Church away from its moral roots and into a power struggle with others. In light of this, he sought a path forward that would (1) “do justice to the moral resources

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and possibilities in human nature…” and (2) take account of the limitations of human nature, particularly those which manifest themselves in man’s collective behavior. In light of this, there are instances observed in this project where Christian leaders have resisted the political temptations Niebuhr warned against in favor of reconciliation and inter-group cooperation.

Niebuhr’s prescient skepticism condemned mass political campaigns that promote continual conflict and a will to power against competing groups in a common space. Niebuhr’s hypothesis as it relates to seeking the principal justice of religious freedom could be described as follows: Seeking religious freedom for one’s religious community without a concern for all members of a pluralistic society defeats the overall project of creating a better society, and ultimately defeats the quest by the group to look after its own religious self-interest. As a result, society is threatened with perennial conflict and a spiral of immorality and injustice. Christians seeking political self-preservation at the expense of others leads to further sectarian differences and can lead to long-term marginalization.

Yet, the example of CEOSS, IGE and the final efforts to craft the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act demonstrate the ability for Christians to work with and seek the betterment of those outside their group and give some hope for a role in a pluralistic context that seeks the common good. In each these cases, those in leadership played a critical role in how the groups defined their approach to a given situation and

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outlined a path forward that was both commensurable with the beliefs and understandings of their constituents and did not seek to trample the rights of others in the pursuit of their own cause. The implication is that a siege mentality among the players in pluralist society leads to harm for all, whereas constructively strengthening the central concepts of universal freedom and dignity can lead to a pluralism that thickens the consensus about what makes society civil.

Christian groups hoping to secure their place in a pluralistic society are placed in a tough position when it comes to political mobilization. If religious freedom and conscience rights are seen as special permission to oppress another group, or merely consist of the state granting special status for religious groups with respect to taxes, compliance with regulations, etc., then the broad assent needed for its long-term survival is endangered.

A pluralistic approach to the pursuit of the common good intertwined with religious freedom advocacy helps mitigate a group’s totalizing impulses. If the traction of Christian ideas in the marketplace is damaged through partisanship and political polarization, then what Christians claim to offer society is dramatically diminished, and religious freedom is imperiled. Yet, if religious groups frame their messages and calls for action according to these principles, they may help create a larger social framework for constructive engagement and more effective religious freedom advocacy.


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