Is There a Religious Diversity Peace Dividend?

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DAN G. COX, DEC 28 2015

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Several years ago, John Falconer, Brian Stackhouse and I began researching the relationship between democracy, economics, identity and regime stability on the one hand and terrorism on the other. We published a book, *Terrorism, Instability, and Democracy in Asia and Africa*, with the findings of our research in 2009. We found that states containing significant diversity (of ethnicity and religious belief) experienced more stability and fewer acts of terrorism that their more culturally homogenous counterparts. We referred to this as an 'apparent diversity dividend' for those countries called home to three or more significant religious or ethnic groups. This chapter considers some of this evidence and places it into the context of Thomas Farr's theoretical work on the United States' religious freedom policy.[1]

In our research we analysed the effects of regime type, ethnicity, religion, economic stability and political stability against incidents of terrorism in African and Asian states. When compiling our data on religious affiliation and ethnicity, we only coded significantly sized groups for examination. This meant that a group had to comprise 10 per cent or more of the total population to be considered a significant group in our study. While 10 per cent is an admittedly arbitrary barrier for inclusion, it is one of the standard delimiters used in many past scholarly research studies. We also felt the threshold had to be significantly high in order to prevent smaller, less significant religious and ethnic groupings from unfairly biasing the results towards no or spurious correlations.

We were initially surprised to find an apparent peace dividend in states with significant religious diversity. These states showed significantly fewer terrorist incidences compared to more monolithic religious societies. We did not know how to explain this finding theoretically and were forced to speculate as to why this correlation existed. As I explain later, we relied on theories of coalition-building and conciliation to explain what we observed.

In a novel way, this chapter is an attempt to place our empirical findings into a broader body of evidence and theory that has developed or at least gained notoriety since our research was first published. Much of the new thinking on religion and stability is correctly attributed to the work of Thomas Farr, the first director for the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom. Since Farr is at the vanguard of this relatively new theoretical examination of the possible link between religion and stability, it seems appropriate to summarise some of his relevant assertions prior to relating them to what I am now dubbing the 'religious peace dividend'.

Religion and Stability: Thomas Farr and Other Recent Evidence

Thomas Farr is arguably the most notable voice espousing the benefits of a US foreign policy that places primacy on spreading religious freedom. Farr defines religious freedom as the 'right protected in law, to engage in the religious quest, either alone or in community with others, in private and in public'.[2] Citing Samuel Huntington's *Third Wave of Democratization*, Farr notes that in many Catholic colonies and states, the Second Vatican Council's adoption of religious liberty for all triggered a movement towards greater freedoms that eventually cascaded into the expansion of democracy. Further, Farr argues that any state that offers religious liberty necessarily begins to limit its own

authority.[3] This is an important assertion because it relates directly to another recent seminal work on social revolutions by Misagh Parsa. Specifically, Parsa finds that, as authoritarian rulers consolidate power, they intervene in the economic, political and social lives of their citizenry to compensate for the narrowness of their actual base of support. Outside of this base of support, only harsh coercion kept the masses of people from rising up against the ruler and his or her supporters. Eventually, the state oppression tended towards the overly indiscriminate, which Stathis Kalyvas notes is often a driver for insurgency.[4] Such violence also eventually emboldens the masses to build coalitions against the oppressive state and bring about social revolutions.[5] Therefore, it is within this broader theoretical discussion that Farr's assertions are properly and powerfully placed. Expansion of religious freedoms is either an indication of increasing domestic stability or a *driver* of such stability.

Farr tends to embrace the driver thesis and therefore is completely consistent in insisting that conservatives in America are off base in their global condemnation of fomenting religious freedom to its fullest extent, even if this means that some states will produce Sharia-driven or other fundamentalist religious parties. Farr argues that over the long term, allowing 'religious freedom in those [Muslim] countries will reduce violent extremism, including the terrorism that has reached our shores, while also increasing the chances for stable democracy and economic growth'.[6] Farr is quick to note that actual religious extremism should not be tolerated but that since so many peoples and groups are religious, some way to accommodate religion in the political sphere must be found.[7] Further, Farr notes that Muslim minorities are often at risk even in states where Islam, in general, is dominant. In Saudi Arabia, Shiite minorities suffer, while the Ahmadis are bearing the brunt of minority discrimination in Pakistan. These persecuted minorities often serve as fertile ground for recruitment from extremist groups. Farr argues that extending religious freedom to all sects within a society will actually counteract religious extremist tendencies.[8]

Despite these cogent arguments, movement towards a foreign policy that emphasises religious freedom has been slow. Farr notes, 'In 1998, President Bill Clinton signed the International Religious Freedom Act, which mandated that the freedom to practice religion, a founding tenet of the United States, become a foreign-policy priority.'[9] Still, movement to actually embrace such a policy was slow during both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. Worse still, the current president has failed to appoint key foreign policy officials which might help foster a foreign policy emphasising religious freedom despite two high-profile reports—one by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the other by the president's own Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships—which both recommend just such a foreign policy initiative.[10]

In short, the theory and some early evidence suggest that great stability benefits flow from states' embrace of religious tolerance and freedom. Despite presidential rhetoric extolling the virtues of pushing religious freedom abroad, little movement in that direction has actually occurred. What we add to the debate is some deep empirical evidence that corroborates what Thomas Farr and others have been saying for years.

A Religious Diversity Peace Dividend in Asia and Africa

To begin, there are a few caveats regarding the generalisability of our findings. First, we only examined states in Asia and Africa so our findings may not apply to states outside of these areas. This is a particularly important point given the turmoil in the Middle East. Hopefully, this will spur on further research expanding our study to new areas. Second, we focused mainly on terrorism which is a tactical tool used by insurgent groups so our findings may not apply to incidences of violence that are either interstate in nature or non-insurgent-based, such as genocide.

In *Terrorism, Instability, and Democracy in Asia and Africa*, we broke down our examination of terrorist incidences into separate examinations of international and domestic terrorism. In both cases we found a religious diversity peace dividend that supports Farr's contentions, among others. Our examination was exhaustive. Not only did we examine religion and terrorism using advanced statistical techniques aggregating the results across Asia and Africa, we also dived deeper into each major case of a state experiencing terrorism through the use of micro-case study analysis. In this way, we hoped to gain a broad and somewhat deep view of the causes of terrorism.

We were somewhat surprised by our international terrorism results. States containing only one dominant religion experienced the greatest incidence of terrorism. This was not overly surprising as the clash of civilisations between

states, if one existed, might be sharper between mono-religious societies. What was surprising was the precipitous rate at which international terrorist incidences dropped off when there were two or more major religions present within the state boundaries. In fact, international terrorism was almost non-existent in states with three or more major religious groups. We speculated at the time that this finding might be

due to the fact that it becomes more difficult for one religion to seize power and abuse the human or economic rights of the out-group. In other words, when power is distributed such that no single group can exploit its political or economic position in society, a more consociation or conciliatory outcome might be produced.[11]

While this is not an exact duplication of Farr's reasoning, it is very close. What was particularly amazing was that when we added an interactive variable combining religion and ethnicity, the results only increased in favour of a religious diversity peace dividend.

When we examined domestic terrorist incidences, we found a religious diversity peace dividend as well. However, the states with the greatest number of terrorist incidences were ones that comprised both a monolithic religious supermajority and states with two dominant religions. We fully expected states with two dominant religions to experience more terrorism, but again, we were surprised to find that states with one dominant religion experienced such high levels of terrorist violence.[12] Also, states with three or more major religions experienced almost no terrorism. We were again forced into the realm of speculation at this peculiar finding. We noted:

There are several reasons that may explain this finding. First, societies with one dominant religion may be abusing the political and economic rights of very small religious minorities within society that feel their only recourse is to last out with terrorism. Another possibility is that there may be a shared religion in society with two or more dominant ethnic groups and that this religious bond is not enough to stop ethnic conflict manifesting in terrorism.[13]

The first line of reasoning conforms nicely with Thomas Farr's assertion that small minorities are suffering mightily at the hands of central governments in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The second assertion is partially refuted by our own work, as we found no statistical increase in terrorism when we factored in both religion and ethnicity.[14]

Even when we found cases of terrorism in countries with a deep religious split, the case study examination still bore out Farr's central theoretical thesis that extending religious freedoms and perhaps economic freedoms as well, would have gone a long way towards quelling the violence. In the Philippines, for example, a hundreds-of-years-old conflict between the Christian Catholics in the northern islands and the Muslim minority population located mainly on the southern island of Mindanao and the southern Sulu Island archipelago draws its roots from perceived and actual religious intolerance, a lack of meaningful inclusion of the southern Muslims in the political process, and a lack of economic opportunity and development there. So even in a case that seems to at least partially disprove the religious freedoms argument on the surface, ends up supporting the thesis when one examines the situation in more detail.

Bringing It All Together: The Religious Diversity Peace Dividend

Thomas Farr has been arguing coherently for years now for a US foreign policy based at least in part on the premise of extending religious freedoms in as many nations as possible. He argues that religious tolerance leads to an erosion of state monopoly on the means of coercion, empowers people in many different ways, prohibits exclusionary treatment of minority sects and religions, and brings stability and perhaps even economic development in its wake.

Our work provides some empirical evidence to support such assertions. It appears that states which contain three or more dominant religions have to act in a conciliatory manner, are likely sharing power and resources and have developed a consociational form of governance that does not overly favour one group over the other. In retrospect, knowing what Farr and others have asserted, I wish we had added a variable for religious freedom in our statistical analysis. I speculate that societies with three or more major religious groups have been forced to offer more religious and other freedoms than societies with one or two dominant religious groups. This becomes a cogent idea for further research. Additionally, our research did not cover the globe, nor did it examine all forms of violence. This, then, is another avenue of pressing future research.

In the final analysis, we found a religious diversity peace dividend. One cannot force the formation of new religions so the next best thing might be to encourage religious tolerance and respect for religious freedoms which should end up approximating the religious diversity peace dividend we observed. Still, more research is needed to ascertain if there is a religious freedom peace dividend that is as strong as the religious diversity peace dividend we originally observed.

Notes

*Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied in this chapter are solely those of the author, and do not represent the views of the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the U.S. Army, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency.

[1] Dan G. Cox, John Falconer, and Brian Stackhouse, *Terrorism, Instability, and Democracy in Asia and Africa* (Hanover, New England: University Press of New England, 2009).

[2] Thomas Farr, 'Is Religious Freedom Necessary for Other Freedoms to Flourish?' *Big Questions Online* (7 August 2012). First accessed 31 July 2014. http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rfp/essays/is-religious-freedom-necessary-for-other-freedoms-to-flourish.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 151.

[5] Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[6] Thomas F. Farr, 'American Conservatives, Islam, and Religious Realism in U. S. Foreign Policy', *National Review Online* (9 July, 2013). First accessed 31 July 2014, http://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/rfp/essays/american-conservatives-islam-and-religious-realism-in-u-s-policy.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Thomas Farr, 'The Trouble with American Foreign Policy and Islam', *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* (2011), 65.

[9] Thomas F. Farr, 'Undefender of the Faith: After 15 Months in Office, Why Hasn't Obama Even Nominated A Candidate for the Position of Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom?' *Foreign Policy* (5 April 2010). First accessed 14 August 2014 at http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/04/05/undefender-of-the-faith?page=0.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Cox, Falconer, and Stackhouse (2009), 62.

[12] Cox, Falconer, and Stackhouse (2009), 78-9.

[13] Cox, Falconer, and Stackhouse (2009), 80.

[14] Cox, Falconer, and Stackhouse (2009, 81.

About the author:

Dan G. Cox is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.