

## SPECIAL REPORT

# Suzan Johnson Cook's Second Chance

By Doug Bandow on 4.1.11 @ 6:09AM

Americans take religious liberty for granted. It is the first freedom. One's sense of the transcendent underlies all other beliefs and behaviors. A government which refuses to protect the most basic liberty of conscience, the right to worship God, is unlikely respect political and civil freedoms. Indeed, the belief that individuals are made in the image of God is the firmest foundation for any commitment to human rights.

Unfortunately, in most of the world this liberty is at best imperfectly protected. Believers, especially those of minority faiths, face a mix of official persecution, private violence, and social discrimination around the globe. Conditions are particularly difficult in the world's two most populous nations, China and India, and the bulk of the Muslim world. In many of these lands faith in God -- especially for Jews and Christians -- is likely to land a person in prison or get them killed.

While the United States government cannot promote religious faith, it has an interest in promoting religious liberty. Washington long has supported human rights, of which religious liberty is one. Obviously, the U.S. government is an imperfect advocate. Consider how the Obama administration claims that oppression in Libya warrants war while that in Bahrain deserves a yawn. Nevertheless, as the world's sole superpower, American officials enjoy an important global bully pulpit. They should use it to promote basic human liberties, including to live out one's faith.

Unfortunately, religious liberty has tended to receive short shrift in Washington. Most diplomats lack knowledge and experience in dealing with religious matters; many erroneously believe that to even mention God violates the First Amendment. Career Foreign Service officers also often prefer not to disturb relations with other countries. Calling out religious persecutors never enhances a diplomat's popularity.

Congress responded in 1998 with the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). The legislation attempted to make religious liberty an executive priority and established an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. The position carries little inherent authority, but with presidential backing the ambassador could play a lead role in challenging religious persecution around the globe.

Alas, the Bush administration failed to make effective use of the position. Indeed, attacking two Muslim nations triggered a wave of religious repression, especially in Iraq. Still, President Bush

did field an ambassador who spoke out on religious liberty. Only now, more than two years into the Obama administration is a new ambassador about to move into position.

It took President Barack Obama almost 15 months to nominate someone. Then the nominee, who possessed neither qualifications for the position nor strategies to combat religious persecution, failed to win confirmation. When the new Congress arrived in Washington, the administration reportedly considered changing nominees. Some religious liberty advocates welcomed the possibility, while others feared that a substitute would be no better while a new nominee would delay the process further.

The president finally decided to renominate Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook. The choice generated little opposition, but evoked little enthusiasm. However, at her hearing on March 29 she obviously did better than last year. Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC) blocked a vote on her nomination last session, but this time said he will allow the process to move along unhindered.

The problem with Dr. Cook never was a lack of intelligence or ability. Rather, she had not evidenced much interest in applying that intelligence and ability to religious persecution issues. Now she can prove her critics wrong.

Dr. Cook's lack of experience with international diplomacy and religious persecution need not limit her effectiveness if she treats the position as an opportunity to promote freedom and save lives, rather than as a political plum to burnish an already thick résumé. Smart and capable, she needs to immerse herself in not only religious issues, but also the social, economic, and political environments that contribute to persecution. In some nations public pressure may be the best strategy; in others quiet diplomacy may be best. Some governments are vulnerable to international public pressure -- which may threaten tourist flows, for instance. Changing circumstances also may make states amenable to pressure: perhaps a turnover in government, request for aid, or bid for leadership at the United Nations or other international organization.

Her greatest challenge will be to promote religious liberty in a world awash in complex problems including security cooperation, terrorist threats, proliferation fears, economic concerns, humanitarian crises, commercial competition. She will have to constantly battle to raise the issue of religious liberty. For instance, religious persecution is a serious problem in Afghanistan, Burma, Central Asia, China, India, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia. Yet all these nations implicate a range of American interests. To be effective Dr. Cook will need to simultaneously articulate high ideals, acknowledge complicated realities, confront contradictory pressures, and devise practical policies.

The start will be to integrate a commitment to religious liberty into the larger human rights dialogue which the U.S. conducts with most other nations. That requires helping American diplomats better understand what people believe and how those beliefs affect their behavior and their governments' policies. If U.S. foreign policy is to be more effective, it needs to better account for the role of religion around the world.

There is much that Dr. Cook can do to articulate the importance of religious liberty. But it will not be her job alone. President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton should make it clear that religious liberty is a priority *of the U.S. government and not just Ambassador Cook*. The president and secretary should talk about the issue, noting that the opportunities to worship, convert, practice, and evangelize are inherent to being human. As community and political

activists who sought to change American society, they should affirm the proposition that true religious freedom requires being able to transform one's life and community as well.

President Barack Obama's role is particularly important. He has attempted to use his background to improve America's standing abroad. That same background can be used to encourage other societies to accept and even welcome minorities, including in religious faith. As he spoke to Muslims about America's obligations on his visit to Cairo, he should speak to Muslims and others about their obligations to minorities within their midst. There would be no better spokesman on the importance of treating all peoples with dignity and respect.

The president and secretary also must provide the new ambassador with the access and resources necessary to do the job. There has been talk of downgrading her role. Other nations would be quick to see such an action as a lessening of interest in her substantive role. Dr. Cook will need a strong staff under her authority, as well as inclusion in Secretary Clinton's daily briefings and policy meetings. The National Security Council should involve her as it coordinates policy to raise the issue of international religious persecution as it affects everything from development to security policy.

It also is important to keep religious liberty separate from such secular political controversies as abortion, family planning, and gay rights. Dr. Cook's objective must be to encourage foreign governments to allow people to believe freely, not to lobby religious people to accepting changing social mores. It is particularly important, even vital, that those from fundamentalist religious traditions in other nations not perceive that accepting minority religious beliefs requires legislating liberal political policies.

In her work Dr. Cook also will need help from outside government. An important part of her job will be outreach to activists and legislators. She can both learn from them and build support for administration initiatives. Her message will be reinforced if backed by interested citizens and lawmakers. She will be particularly well-positioned to engage churches, NGOs, and other groups in her efforts to combat religious persecution overseas.

Among many such people skepticism towards her remains, but there also is relief that the ambassadorship finally has been filled. She has an opportunity to engage and impress those with the most doubts. The key point is that those most critical of her have the most at stake in her proving them wrong. It is the rare case in Washington where those who most opposed her nomination will be happiest if she succeeds, that is, becomes an effective advocate for religious liberty.

Dr. Cook has no time to enjoy her confirmation victory: Over the last two years religious persecution has worsened in many nations. She must become a voice for the voiceless and an advocate for the oppressed around the world. She must work hard, enlist the aid of the president and secretary, and energize activists and legislators. It will be no easy task, but she has an opportunity to become the U.S. government's most important human rights advocate. That would be a legacy worth fighting for.

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