



The United States’ Greatest “Soft” Power: Religious Freedom

*Reflections on being a US Christian
in a global, pluralistic landscape*

BY CHRIS SEIPLE

As Americans begin to select a new president, they are foremost declaring to the various candidates—and the world—their dissatisfaction with the present state of things. According to recent approval ratings for both the president and Congress, somewhere between 70 and 79 percent of Americans are not happy with the leadership that Washington is providing—especially abroad.¹

While 73 percent of Americans believe the United States should play a “major” to “leading” role in the world, a majority of Americans feel that foreign nations view our country “unfavorably.” In fact, only 37 percent of Americans are comfortable with the “position of the United States in the world today”—the lowest percentage since Gallup started asking this question in 1962.²

In October of 2005, I had the opportunity to be in Peshawar, the capital of Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). During the visit I spent some time with Maulana Khalid Banuri, the leader of Darul Uloom Sarhad, one of the largest madrasahs (institutes of higher education) in Peshawar. Banuri is also a senior provincial leader of the JUI (F) political party, which was elected to power as part of an Islamist coalition in 2002 that was pro-Shari’ah and anti-American.

As we ended a warm and wide-ranging conversation, he remarked that “Americans want respect; we want tenderness.” I hadn’t known that I wanted respect or that he sought tenderness. In May 2007 I was again in the NWFP, and I made a point to go see Banuri, mainly to ask him what he had meant.

“You are a great power,” he told me, “and everyone knows and accepts that. You will have an impact on many issues inside our own country whether you realize it or not, whether we like it or not. We only ask that you be tender, that you treat us with respect while you do it.”

It got me to thinking: What is the essence of American power? And what does it mean, as an American Christian and an advocate for religious freedom, to steward this power? The surprisingly positive reception that the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE)—the American, Christian NGO that I represent—has received in the NWFP (home to 20 million conservative Pashtun Muslims, among whom there is support for the Taliban and Al Qaeda) offers some clues.

IGE’S FRONTIER EXPERIENCE

In coming to Pakistan, I knew that religion was a part of the problem. There were many Pakistani Muslims who viewed Americans as Christians coming to their region with the Bible in one hand and the sword in the other. On the other hand, there were many American Christians who viewed Islam as the problem.

Could religion be a part of the solution, moving us past common stereotypes? Could the best of faith on both sides trump the negative perceptions of religion that each had of the other?

The reason I had gone to Pakistan in the first place is a story worth sharing. In the fall of 2003, IGE was approached



Institute for Global Engagement President Chris Seiple (center) and IGE staff member Josh White (left) met last May with Maulana Khalid Banuri, head of the Darul Uloom Sarhad in Peshawar, a madrassa.

by a Pakistani-American who told us: “I don’t know what you do, but I think you’re bridge-builders. Would you like to work with the NWFP’s Islamist chief minister who was freely elected last year on a pro-Shari’ah and anti-American platform?”

After many months of mutual vetting, our stereotypes of each other softened, and in July 2005, at IGE’s invitation, the chief minister, his two senior aides, and his three sons arrived in the United States. During our first meeting, I asked the chief minister why he was in politics. He told me that one day he would stand before God and would be held accountable for his actions. I told him that I shared the same conviction, and that was all the common ground we needed to begin a relationship.

Over the next 10 days our team and his delegation got to know each other quite well, discussing everything from politics to God. The chief minister invited us to his country, and from that October 2005 visit emerged a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to work together in promoting religious freedom.

We visited again in May 2006, bringing with us a delegation of American leaders who also happened to be devout Christians and Muslims. As the delegation shared its respect for one another’s faith and our love for Pakistan, we found our hosts warm to ideas of continued engagement and partnership. This experience yielded another MOU to fund two cohorts of students at the University of Science and Technology in Bannu (along the Waziristan border).

When we returned for our third visit last May, we were delighted to visit a church that was being refurbished at Peshawar University, a state school. The Christians wanted

to refurbish this existing church because it is illegal to build new churches in Pakistan. But some Muslim students sued the church, claiming that its very presence at a state-run university was “unIslamic,” a serious accusation in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, where 97 percent of the population is Muslim.

On December 19, 2006, while the issue was still tied up in the courts, the chief minister made a public point to help lay the cornerstone of the church. To boot, he committed, on the spot, US\$50,000 from the provincial government to complete the renovation. At the time, Bishop Mano Rumalshah, the bishop of the Christian community in Northwest Frontier Province, called this a “truly miraculous decision, due to the process of reconciliation between the Muslim and Christian communities begun by IGE’s work.”

Later, the Peshawar High Court threw the lawsuit out. The chief justice of the court pointed out: “Why did the head of a religious party’s government allocate funds and attend the reconstruction ceremony as a chief guest if the church’s construction were unIslamic?”³ The court’s basic message: If the Islamists say it’s okay, it must be okay! Bishop Mano told me that this decision is a “historic legal precedent.”

During that same trip, IGE co-sponsored (with the chief minister and a local interfaith group, Faith Friends) the first international “Peace & Religion” conference in the history of the NWFP. This conference marked the first time in NWFP history that there has been a space, literally and spiritually, for Sunni, Shi’a, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh to speak together publicly about how their faiths contribute to each other and to peace. Critically, the audience included student leaders from throughout the NWFP (the next generation of leaders), as well as 40 prominent imams.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND SOFT POWER

One lesson I draw from this experience is that while Americans can summon hard power relatively easily, they will only be genuinely and constructively powerful when they also call upon the best of soft power.

Over 50 years ago Liddell Hart wrote, “It is essential to conduct war with constant regard to the peace you desire ... fighting power is but one of the instruments of grand strategy—which should take account of and apply the power of financial pressure, of diplomatic pressure, of commercial pressure, and, not least, of ethical pressure to weaken the opponent’s will.”⁴



In November 2007, the US Secretary of Defense had these thoughts: “One of the most important lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is that military success is not sufficient to win: Economic development, institution-building and the rule of law, promoting internal reconciliation, good governance, providing basic services to the people, training and equipping indigenous military and police forces, strategic communications, and more—these, along with security, are essential ingredients for long-term success.”⁵

American soft power consists of many things, but in my view the most important and compelling is religious freedom—a freedom defined not as the freedom from religion, nor as the freedom for religious groups to pursue theocratic utopias, but rather as robust and respect-based pluralism.

When the colony of Massachusetts was founded—without the participation or compensation of the local Indians—it was established such that civil and ecclesiastical accountability resided with the same authority. This theocracy was quite intentional and did not allow for deviance (ironically enough, as the colonists had fled persecution to practice their faith freely in the new world).

After living there for four years, Roger Williams decided that a Christian government telling him how to worship was inconsistent with his Christian values—namely, freedom of conscience as a gift from the author of life and thus the capacity to choose or not choose faith freely.

So Roger Williams headed west in the winter of 1635 and took refuge among the Indian friends he had previously made, re-introducing and reconciling the colonists and Christianity to the Indians.

He was truly radical. He paid for the land and established Rhode Island—a place where the call to love one’s neighbor was so great that each individual made in the image of God was afforded true freedom of conscience. America is not a Christian state today, precisely because these Christian values were present at our beginning.

Importantly, Roger Williams viewed religious freedom not only as the cornerstone of civil society but also a bulwark against social instability. In other words, if minorities were not allowed to practice their faith freely, they might agitate and disrupt society, possibly with violence.

It is no surprise that Rhode Island’s 1663 colonial charter linked religious freedom and security, establishing the connection between values and interests. There were never any “Salem witch trials” in Rhode Island, because Indians, Baptists, Quakers, and Jews understood that Rhode Island

valued its community so much that it legalized freedom of conscience, thereby preserving reconciliation among its mutually respectful citizens.

CONCLUSION

Stewarding American soft power requires that all Americans, not just our president, understand that our future runs through the best of our past. If we are to engage the world as it is, then we must use the essence of American power—religious freedom—to engage effectively and with enduring and positive effect.

As Chuck Hagel recently remarked, “Great nations engage. Great nations engage because they believe in who they are. Great nations engage because they are strong. Great nations engage because they are secure in their beliefs.”⁶

It is indeed possible to apply soft-hearted concepts with hard-headed results. But it first requires the rediscovery of our religious freedom roots. As Brown University President Francis Wayland said in 1860, while the Pilgrims sought liberty for themselves, Roger Williams sought “liberty for humanity.”⁷

This comment, made on the eve of the Civil War’s fight to end slavery, is indeed the essence of American power—a humble power rooted in a Christian faith so confident that it dare not impose, only propose. ■

Chris Seiple is president of the Institute for Global Engagement (globalengage.org). This article was adapted from a presentation he gave on January 8, 2008, at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Editor’s note: the endnotes for this article have been posted at esa-online.org/EndNotes.



Chris Seiple speaks with Zari Roothullah Madani, chief khateeb of the government of the North-West Frontier Province.