

Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy

An interview with Dr. Carol Lee Hamrin

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Background: Arol Lee Hamrin is an independent author, speaker and consultant for nonprofit organizations supporting the growth of China's Third Sector. With a Ph.D. in comparative world history, and twenty-five years as a senior Research Specialist at the Department of State, Dr. Hamrin provides a long-term perspective on the remarkable transformation underway in China. Her special expertise is analysis of the way economic dynamics drive changes in society, culture and religion, and the implications for China and the world. Dr. Hamrin earned the Public Justice Leadership Award for outstanding public service in 2003, and the Secretary of State's Career Achievement Award in 2000. She has taught in D.C. - area graduate schools since 1980.

关键词：政治 文化 宗教 美国 中国

背景介绍：Arol lee Hamrin 是一位独立作家，演说家，并为支持中国的第三部门做顾问。Hamrin 教授在世界历史学获得博士学位，并在美国州政府担任资深研究员有 25 年。在中国明显转变的过程中，她提供了一个长远的计划。她的特长是分析经济如何改变社会，文化和宗教对中国以及全世界的影响。Hamrin 教授在 2003 由于她在公共事业的卓越表现，获得公共领袖奖，并且在 2000 获得过杰出州议员奖。她自从 1980 年就一直任华盛顿教研究生。

Q1: How does religion affect Sino-US foreign policy?

From the 1970s to '80s, American foreign policy was shaped by the cold-war mentality, which focused on geo-politics and the military balance of power. Culture and religion were rarely mentioned. In 1976-1980, during President Jimmy Carter's first term, the U.S. government started to pay more attention to human rights issues, and the State Department was required to report annually on conditions around the world. Carter asked Deng Xiaoping to allow printing of the Bible, to re-open churches, and to allow the return of missionaries to China. Deng agreed to the first two requests, but not the third. China's religious toleration thus played an important part in the normalization of relations with America. But in the era of globalization after the cold war, the Sino-US relationship deteriorated on this front.

This had much to do with the growing involvement in global politics in the 1990s by American evangelical Protestants. Whereas they first had focused earlier on domestic political issues, some of those issues became internationalized and evangelicals themselves got more involved in travel, work and missions overseas. IRFA is primarily a product of evangelicals' lobbying. While their concerns were worldwide, China became a target of criticism during the 1992 U.S. election campaign, which raised the question of whether China should maintain MFN status and enter the WTO.

In order to avoid a trade war with China, President Clinton re-named MFN as NTR (normal trade relations) and set up alternative mechanisms to monitor human rights issues in China, including the CECC. By 1997-98, improvements in China and new mechanisms for addressing religious freedom issues eased tensions. Under President Clinton and President Jiang Zemin, the two sides promoted the establishment of Sino-US human rights dialogue, and Jiang Zemin invited the White House to sponsor a visit to China by three prominent religious leaders in early 1998. Clinton and Jiang exchanged state visits, and the Sino-US relationship seemed headed for a brighter future. Unfortunately, China's bans on political dissent and on Falungong and other sects in 1998-99 cast a shadow over cooperation, and the following dialogues on human rights and religion were intermittent and largely ineffectual.

Q2: What is religious freedom? What is the significance for America to promote religious freedom? In China we understand we can worship any god or goddess, but only if this doesn't hinder the social order. This is religious freedom with limits. What is the relationship between religion and human rights?

Religious freedom is closely related to other basic human rights, especially freedom of the press and association. As Secretary Clinton has put it, "it is also about the right of people to think what they want, say what they think, and come together in fellowship without the state looking over their shoulder." I think it is important to use international, not just American or Chinese definitions, such as those spelled out in the "Declaration on the Elimination of all forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief (1981)," which both the U.S. and China have signed. Here, the term used is "freedom of religion and belief" (sometimes called "freedom of conscience"). These terms help us understand that the freedom to believe something in your mind is not enough; only when you can speak or write about it or meet with others to practice your belief do you have freedom. This is why some believe that the manifestation of religious belief should be considered the "first" among the basic human rights.

I think it is unfortunate that when the U.S. and China began official dialogue on these issues, human rights and religion were separated and often IRF was treated as secondary to the others. I think they should be combined so that the indivisible interrelationships are very clear.

Q3: China has been designated as CPC ever since 1999 when the first IRF report was released by DOS. Do Americans know that each year when China is designated as CPC it always arouses the aversion of Chinese people?

I'm very aware that many Chinese people think that the report is aimed at China, and is just one part of a larger U.S. conspiracy against China. In fact, the report is required by law to cover every country using international standards and definitions, not singling China out. China is only one of the 190 countries that the report assesses.

Q4: Each year the IRF report has repeatedly ac-

cused China for its persecution of Falungong, but we understand that Falungong is an evil cult.

I think the problem lies in that Americans see that the Chinese government handles issues like Falungong with administrative rather than legal means, and has suppressed all other “cults” since 1999 as defined by Chinese not international standards. The United States like all countries also has the problem of suspicious spiritual groups that may harm society, but the government tries to address the problem with legal means and is criticized if they don’t. There was widespread national controversy when police suppression of the “Branch Davidians” in Waco Texas in 1993 caused over 80 deaths.

The legal definition of religion in China is quite narrow; only five major global religions have legal status, not even Eastern Orthodoxy, Hinduism or the Mormon faith. Some sects are considered elsewhere to be “New Religious Movements (NRMs),” not necessarily evil cults. As long as they do not violate the law, they are allowed to practice. Since there is no clear-cut world-class definition for religion in China, the police system has strong power to define what is legal and what is illegal, resulting in the abuse of power and religious persecution.

Q5: The IRF report often blames China for abuses of religious freedom in Tibet, but in our mind, Tibet is clearly a political issue, not just a religious issue.

You are right, the Dalai Lama traditionally has been a political as well as religious leader, and that does complicate things far more than most Americans realize. For Tibetans, the Dalai Lama’s spiritual role is central to their local cultural identity and spiritual and emotional wellbeing, and perhaps many Chinese don’t understand how important that is. Meanwhile, he is very popular among young people in the United States, because he preaches a philosophy of love, peace and environmental concern. But most Americans do not know the complicated mixing of religion and politics in Tibet, or the history of CIA secret intervention in Tibet. While the Dalai Lama does not advocate for independence in Tibet, and uses the word “autonomy” instead, there is a huge gap between the two sides over technicalities, including the geographic designation of “Tibet” and legal definitions of autonomy, which require serious dialogue and negotiation.

Q6: Do you think religious freedom in China has improved over the years?

The Chinese government has adjusted its policy on religion several times, shifting from political-ideological suppression to regulation by the government. The narrowly-defined, authorized “patriotic” organizations have gained the most freedom of operation. Through the 1990s, the government regulated appointments of leaders and places for gatherings but didn’t interfere with the content of belief, expecting religion to gradually diminish. But since 2000, the government has been more interventionist, sponsoring “theological reconstruction movements” in each authorized religion, which requires revising doctrines to make religion serve the state, and using police as well as religious affairs channels to enforce the rules against other groups. They also have become more restrictive since 2005 of the foreign ties of religious (and other nonprofit) organizations – contrary to more open trends in the economy or academia. Unregistered groups are labeled as potential threats to state security. So while religious practice continues to grow at the grassroots, and there is less social discrimination against believers, religious policy remains quite restricting.

Q7: Do you know that many Chinese regard the United States promotion of international religious freedom as a kind of cultural imperialism?

I would address accusations of cultural imperialism in this way. America emphasizes individualism. We believe the interests of individuals and minority groups are very important on the assumption that if their interests are protected, then those of the majority automatically would be safe. China tends to stress the interests of the Han majority over those of minorities – ethnic groups and religious believers. So Americans focus on pressing China to allow minorities the right to believe and practice what they like, not on trying to make China into a Christian nation or promoting separatism.

Q8: Why does the religious report assess almost all countries in the world but with the exception of America?

This is because IRFA is mandated by Congress as a foreign policy act, and it is not the duty of the State Department (for foreign, not domestic affairs) to

assess the religious situation in the US. Meanwhile, the format of the report is fixed by law and focuses on details of abuses of human rights. There is little space allowed to address improvements in religious freedom in any detail, only an overview in the preface. This contributes to an impression that the United States believes it is perfect in its religious situation.

Q9: What impact does the 9/11 event have upon US foreign policy?

After 911, it became obvious to the world that religion-based terrorism poses a threat to national and international security. Religious freedom thus became directly connected for the first time with American national security policy. The impression grew that religion is a negative thing, despite some scholars and religious leaders pointing out how freedom of religion can be a positive tool to counter terrorism.

Q10: With the passage of IRFA in 1998, religion was formally institutionalized into American foreign policy, with two agencies established. One is the IRF office in the State Department, the other USCIRF. How do you evaluate their more than 10 years of work?

The act also created an Ambassador-at-Large for IRF, whose work is supported by the office. Because this was so new, many traditional officers in the State Department worried that religious issues might impact adversely on bilateral relations with its allies and trading partners. So the office was put under the control of DRL, rather than directly under the Secretary of State. This has tended to limit the authority and influence of the Ambassador, the office, and the issue itself.

USCIRF is not a government agency and has no real power, with its mandate limited to advising the President, Secretary of State and Congress. But they have a large budget, actually more than IRF office or even the entire DRL bureau. Being a monitoring body, USCIRF tends toward critical thinking; the longer the list of CPC countries, the better. However, the approach hasn't produced much positive effect on the actual behavior of other countries.

Q11: Will the reelection of President Obama affect promotion of religious freedom?

During the election campaign, there was little attention given to religion in general, or IRF in particular, whether by the media or either candidate. I think the background of the candidates had much to do with this. While Obama is a Christian, he was closely associated in his early career with an African-American pastor in Chicago, who is viewed by many as politically radical and even anti-American, so Obama is better off avoiding the issue. Romney also tried to avoid referring to his Mormon identity, so as not to provoke suspicion or dislike from some Christians. Of course, if Romney had been elected, perhaps he might have been more active in promoting religious freedom, as Mormons are quite active in missions around the world. So far, since the election, the signs point to a second Obama term focused on domestic issues, not foreign affairs. I'm not sure what John Kerry's views on IRF may be.

Q12: Thomas Farr at Georgetown University, and former director of the IRFA office, has pointed out that IRFA is a failure as a foreign policy tool. In 2009 he offered his "Future of U.S. International Religious Freedom Policy: Recommendations for the Obama Administration" to adjust implementation of the IRFA. What do you think is the future trend for IRFA?

I agree that advocates for religious freedom need a fresh approach to their engagement of countries like China that have consistent records of abuses. Past efforts to influence such countries have often failed to improve significantly the protection of religious human rights because they have been perceived as foreign impositions, not as opportunities for mutually advantageous cooperation. Instead, religious freedom interventions have aroused official and popular suspicion of subversive political intent, eroding trust. So a new framework is needed to promote religious freedom in China.

The old approach has relied primarily on (a) lobbying for "top-down" government-to-government political discussions at high levels; and (b) media exposure of detentions or arrests, in order to pressure foreign governments into concessions regarding religious rights abuses. A new framework is needed that is a "both/and" approach. On one hand, this approach preserves room for selective use of publicity-

oriented tactics and advocacy for urgent immediate cases of abuse. On the other hand, it would emphasize new innovative mutual efforts (such as training, experimental projects) to support medium- and long-term cultural and institutional changes. We could return to the stance of mutual cooperation in human rights, focused on the rule of law, matching domestic with international law, which failed on launching in the late 1990s. The government dialogue could focus on practical issues involved in China's ratification of the "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights" (including religious freedom), which it signed in 1998.

Most important in my view, this mutual cooperation framework could be used in strategic planning by civic institutions as well as by economic actors to promote respect for religious and other rights in China. These nongovernmental actors are purveyors of "soft power" (i.e. cultural power, exercised across multiple social sectors via explicit training and implicit modeling of important values). They often have more influence and access to the agents of social transformation than do governmental actors, which typically rely on "hard" political and military power.

In an era of transnational interaction of all kinds, government is not always the best choice to play the leading role in bringing about positive change. In general, this is an approach that emphasizes "win-win" diplomacy and multi-sectoral engagement.

