

B451. "Religious Civil Society is Antidote to Anarchy in Iraq and Afghanistan" The Christian Science Monitor (April 1, 2004), 9.

When countries like Afghanistan or Iraq are liberated from either a religious or a secular tyranny, or when regimes like the former Soviet Union implode, an enormous increase in antisocial behavior typically follows. As if someone had removed a heavy lid from a boiling pot, its contents spill over in an explosive increase in crime, drug abuse, AIDS, alcoholism, child abandonment, and much more.

The US and its allies are so dedicated to liberty that they tend to ignore the darker side of the early phases of democratization. Although it is rarely put this way, Western actions seem to be based on the assumption that this damaging behavior is the price that must be paid to learn to be free, and will subside on its own. But that's hardly the case, as experiences in countries as different as Russia and Iraq have shown.

The social disorder that prevails in these countries is so severe that many citizens yearn for the forceful order that existed during the days of tyranny - misbegotten longings that illustrate the threat of social anarchy and the difficulty of attending to it.

Russia, because it has been liberated longer, is a good example. In the four years following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia's overall crime rate increased 73 percent and murders 116 percent. An indication of how shredded the social fabric had become is that victims in 63 percent of major criminal-injury cases were relatives or friends of the offenders. Alcohol abuse increased 39 percent between 1989 and 1997. Alcohol poisoning deaths topped 30,000 in 2002 - up nearly 155 percent from 1991. By 2000, 3 million Russians were addicted to drugs, and HIV cases neared 2 million. Russia's suicide rate rose 60 percent between 1989 and 2000 to become the second-highest in the world.

Afghanistan and Iraq are experiencing similar developments. Many citizens - outside Iraq's Sunni triangle, for example - report they are afraid to go out at night. Kidnapping and various forms of petty - and not so petty - crime have become common in both countries.

A typical Western response is to focus on law and order, fostering police forces, retrained and under new command. When the police don't suffice, efforts are made to add other armed forces. These clearly have a role to play. But in the long run, something different is called for, something not included in the typical aid organization or World Bank manual: a renewed social moral fabric that leads most people, most of the time, to refrain from antisocial behavior on their own, not because they fear the cops.

Advocates of liberty assume that people are good by nature, but corrupted by totalitarian regimes - and that once these regimes unravel, people will take to doing what is right. But being pro-social requires that people internalize a moral code. Communities must gently chide those who deviate from the straight and narrow and honor those who fulfill their social obligations.

In the long run, liberated societies can form new informal moral codes and social controls. In the short run, however, they must build on what is in place. And in many areas, this is religion. I refer not to the fundamentalist but to the moderate teachings that exist in all religions, Islam included. The line that separates the two is precisely what is at issue: Fundamentalism under girds totalitarian regimes; moderate practices depend largely on moral suasion.

As a guest of Iran's reformers in 2001, I learned their main goal is to establish "a religious civil society" in which people will want to follow the prophet Muhammad rather than being forced to do so. The fact that to Western ears a "religious civil society" sounds like an oxymoron is precisely what is wrong with Western thinking.

The West should not export the French or American idea of separation of religion and state, but instead draw in moderate mullahs and other religious figures as one of the best ways to shore up social order, as has been done in southern Iraq. And whatever other social groupings - ethnic or tribal - that promote informal moral codes must be drawn in if they seek to persuade people to live up to their duties rather than violate basic human rights or worse.

Instead of being replaced with secular schools, religious schools (madrassahs) should be allowed to exist as long as they provide education in subjects such as science and math, their teachers are qualified by educational authorities, and their religious texts reflect moderate rather than virulent Islam. Social services provided by religious or tribal communities should be reimbursed rather than replaced with state-run welfare agencies. And the constitutions of these nations shouldn't entail coercive secularization, as Turkey's first president, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, imposed, but make room for moderate Islamic tenets.

In time, the remaining foundations of social order - religious and tribal - will be modified under the impact of economic development, the spread of education, and the opening to global communications and free travel. For now, curbing antisocial behavior and providing voluntary bases for social order is of the essence.

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