

B423. "Don't Separate Mosque and State" Los Angeles Times (June 16, 2003) p. A11.

The United States should cease promoting a secular civil society as the only alternative to a Taliban-like theocracy in Iraq. We cannot quell the religious yearnings of millions of Iraqis merely by fostering democracy and capitalism.

The most effective way to counter a theocracy is to promote moderate, liberal religious institutions.

The 1st Amendment's separation of church and state is not a foreign policy tool; it's a peculiar American conception. Just because the American government is banned from promoting religion within the U.S. does not mean that it cannot promote it as part of a civil society in Iraq or Afghanistan.

I know a bit about how receptive Shiites (and arguably also Sunnis) are to moderate Islam because they laid out their position during a three-day meeting in Iran that I attended a year ago. It was organized by reformers, but hard-liners also participated. The main point, repeatedly stressed during the meeting, was that both camps want to live in an Islamic society. The hard-liners are committed to enforcing the religious code by the use of moral squads, secret police and jails, while the reformers favor encouraging people to be devout. "If you do not force people to come, they will want to come," they said.

Liberal Islam is spiritual and social rather than political. Indeed, it differs from the rigid authoritarian version much as liberal Protestants differ from Southern Baptists, and Reform Jews differ from ultra-Orthodox ones, although by a higher order of magnitude.

What would a pro-Islam policy look like in Iraq?

Instead of demanding that the current madrasas be replaced by wholly secular schools, as Sen. Joseph Biden has suggested, we might favor the inclusion of religious electives in public schools (as long as the teachers are qualified, which entails tolerance for a diversity of viewpoints). We could allow the funding of social services through religious organizations, as long as the funds are used for social and not political or religious purposes (call them faith-based institutions). And we could allow the state to pay the salaries of clergy and for the maintenance of places of worship, as do most democracies (other than the U.S. and France).

One may ask, "What about Christians and those who do not wish to adhere to any religion?" A religious society, as opposed to a religious state, can tolerate nonbelievers. It is the difference between enforcing adherence to a religious code and merely supporting it as one alternative. If this sounds abstract, consider that in the U.S. you can be legally married by religious authorities or government authorities, despite our insistence on the separation of church and state.

Favoring liberal Islam as an antidote to fundamentalist Islam is not to be confused with a related but different issue, whether Islam is compatible with democracy. I take it for granted that Iraq can and should have a democratic form of government. However, it should not treat religion as a threat but, potentially, as one mainstay. The current U.S. position ignores that potential.

The 13 points released by U.S. Central Command -- that the rule of law be paramount, for instance, or that the role of women be respected -- are fine, but they all speak only to secular issues. Whether deliberately or unwittingly, they reflect the concept of the "end of history" -- that all ideologies are on their last legs as the world embraces the American version of democracy, human rights and the free market.

This idea, in turn, is an extension of the Enlightenment conceit that modernity is based on rational thinking. Irrational religion, then, belongs to history, and secularism -- reason and science -- will govern the future.

However, as we are learning all over the world, people have spiritual needs that cannot be addressed, let alone satisfied, by Enlightenment ideas. We see the explosive growth of Christianity in East Asia and Africa, a resurgence of religion in Russia and other former communist nations in Eastern Europe and a rise in Islam even in countries that had extensive secular, modern periods -- most tellingly, in Turkey. People ask: Why are we cast into this world? Why are we born to die? What do we owe our children, our elderly parents and our friends and community?

Neither democracy nor capitalism speaks to these issues. Hence for the many millions of people there is religion, hard-line or moderate. Which one we should favor is clear, as long as we can get off our Enlightenment horse.

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