

Article

Trump and the Politics of International Religious Freedom

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Abstract: The article examines the USA's international religious freedom policy during the presidency of Donald Trump. It argues that the Trump administration consistently prioritised America's international religious freedom (IRF) policy according to Judeo-Christian values. This contrasted with previous administrations, which did not pursue such a clear Christocentric approach. The Trump administration has pursued the policy with vigour, drawing on Judeo-Christian ideology and prioritising religious freedom above other human rights, such as equality for women and sexual minorities. The article begins with a brief summary of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), signed into law by President Clinton in 1998. It then examines the influence of Judeo-Christian ideology on Trump's international religious freedom policy. To do this, the article surveys three recent initiatives: the Commission on Unalienable Rights, the annual Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom, and the International Religious Freedom Alliance. I argue that collectively the initiatives promote the paramountcy of Judeo-Christian ideology. The article concludes that the Trump administration's international religious freedom is strongly informed by a Judeo-Christian ideology which seeks to place religious freedom first in a hierarchy of human rights, while relegating others, especially equality for females and sexual minorities, to a lesser position.

Keywords: religious and politics; freedom; minorities; ideology

1. Introduction

International religious freedom (IRF) is an issue of great significance for American foreign policy. From the 1990s, International religious freedom was a key concern for both religious and secular human rights advocacy groups (Haynes 2008). Initially, however, the Clinton administration was indifferent to the issue (Bettiza 2019). This was not because the Clinton administration believed the issue to be unimportant but because it did not the issue as one that needed prioritising. To try to change the administration's view, an alliance of human rights advocacy groups successfully lobbied Congress and other arms of government. President Clinton signed into law the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998¹. The Act identified international religious freedom as a core facet of America's foreign policy. Successive administrations have pursued IRF. The Trump administration's policy on IRF is characterised both by its enthusiasm and by its distinctive ideological position (Casey 2017, 2020). The ideological focus was notable from April 2018, when Mike Pompeo was appointed as Secretary of State. Pompeo, an evangelical Christian, applied a Judeo-Christian division perspective to America's IRF policy, which emphasised Pompeo's personal view that religious freedom is first among human rights (Casey 2017, 2020; Stewart 2020). Pompeo's approach was viewed with alarm by mainstream

¹ IRFA aims 'To condemn violations of religious freedom, and to promote, and to assist other governments in the promotion of, the fundamental right to freedom of religion.' (<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title22/chapter73&edition=prelim>).

human rights advocacy groups, both religious and secular. While they did not disagree on the desirability of international religious freedom, they questioned Pompeo's Judeo-Christian approach (Verma 2020).

Expressed in the Constitution of 1788, religious freedom is a foundational component of US culture and values. During World War II, the US government portrayed the "Christian" West's fight against fascism/Nazism as an international struggle between 'good' and 'evil'. In 1948, leading American Christians, notably the then first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, were instrumental in crafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a fundamental document of the United Nations². During the Cold War, America's ideological battle with the Soviet Union emphasised the USA's Christian culture and the USSR's "God-less" one. After the Cold War, US foreign policy prioritised human rights, including religious freedom, democracy, and anti-slavery and human trafficking. As already noted, promulgation of international religious freedom was the motive for the 1998 IRFA. While in the early 2000s, both Bush and Obama administrations pursued IRF policies with "an implicit Christian soft spot", the Trump presidency prioritised "attention to Christian concerns and communities" which became "even more overt and explicit" (Bettiza 2019, p. 223).

The article's first section briefly examines the Bush and Obama administrations' IRFA policy. The second section surveys the Trump administration's IRF policy via an examination of three of Pompeo's initiatives: the Commission on Unalienable Rights, the annual Ministerial to Advance International Religious Freedom, and the International Religious Freedom Alliance. All were introduced in 2018–2019. The article concludes that while the Trump administration brought fresh attention to America's IRF policy, the application of Judeo-Christian values and beliefs had the possibly unintended impact of undermining the rights of women and sexual minorities.

Before proceeding, a few words about methodology. Research for the article was conducted by analysing relevant policy speeches, statements, remarks, press conferences, writings, and interviews of relevant figures in the Trump administration, including President Trump, Vice-President Mike Pence, and Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. In addition, the research drew on primary source data, including policy documents and legislation. The research was also informed by critiques of and commentary on the Trump administration's IRF policy from scholars, human rights advocates and journalists. The overall aim was to employ a range of appropriate sources in order to present a balanced view of the Trump administration's IRF policy.

1.1. From Advocacy to Law: The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998

This section briefly examines the origins and early development of IRFA. The Act was a bipartisan, consensual effort in the 1990s to persuade an initially indifferent administration to take international religious freedom seriously. Religious human rights advocacy groups were instrumental in helping create a new architecture for human rights' monitoring and advocacy in American foreign policy (Green et al. 2003; Hertzke 2006; Haynes 2008). According to Hertzke (2006), this involved an 'unlikely alliance'. It comprised Protestant Evangelicals, Conservative Catholics, mainline Protestants, progressive Catholics, Jews, Copts, Buddhists, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Scientologists. All agreed that "religious freedom [w]as a neglected norm that needed greater attention" (Bettiza 2019, pp. 65–66). The "unlikely alliance" convinced an initially sceptical Congress to support the goal of enhanced IRF, encouraging an originally indifferent President Clinton to sign the Act into law. Bettiza (2019, p. 65) reports that the alliance's lobbying was successful due to a shift 'from a particularist Christocentric discourse to a more universalistic religious freedom one [that] was pivotal in ensuring

² Roosevelt served as First Lady of the United States from 4 March 1933 to 12 April 1945, during her husband President Franklin D. Roosevelt's four terms in office. She was the longest-serving First Lady of the United States. Roosevelt was chair of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, instrumental in the creation of the UDHR. Roosevelt was a lifelong Protestant Christian, a member of the Episcopalian church, and regularly attended church services (Glendon 2010).

that a controversial act', which authorised the State Department 'to be systematically involved in global religious matters', received Congress's undivided approval and President Clinton's assent.

Following IRFA, three related Acts were introduced in the early 2000s:

- The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000): The Act targeted international crime syndicates who sent children and women, mainly from the Global South, into prostitution and sweatshops in many parts of the world (Lobasz 2019).
- The Sudan Peace Act (2002): Christian evangelicals championed the Act, outraged by Sudan's Islamist government's persecution of southern Sudanese Christians and animists. The Act and its accompanying sanctions were influential in helping to develop the road map for Sudan's ceasefire (2003) and subsequent peace treaty (2004) (Srinivasan 2014).
- The North Korea Human Rights Act (2004): Christian evangelicals and Korean Americans strongly lobbied for this Act. It encouraged the Bush administration both to aid North Korean defectors and to draw attention to its government's egregious human rights violations and nuclear weapons programme (Chang 2006).

Collectively, the three Acts focused on a global issue—human trafficking and slavery—and two specific country-based concerns: persecution of Sudan's religious minorities and in North Korea, a general denial of human rights, including religious freedom. The Acts also highlighted two attributes of the "unlikely alliance". The first was the inter-faith consensus which transcended conventional particularist interest group politics, bringing together various faith groups in pursuit of a common goal. The second was the alliance's strong support for the Bush and Obama administrations' international concern with minorities' human rights. During the former, there was sustained support for females' rights in Afghanistan and a wide-ranging and high-profile HIV/AIDS programme: the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) (McAlister 2019).

The Obama administration's foreign policy supported human rights for sexual minorities, including for LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, questioning/queer) individuals and communities (Cooper 2015; McAlister 2019; Marsden 2020). During the Obama administration, IRFA was strengthened by two additional pieces of legislation: the Near East and South Central Asia Religious Freedom Act (2014), which included a regional Special Advisor for Religious Minorities, and the Frank R. Wolf International Religious Freedom Act (2016). The Wolf Act required (1) the executive to compose and announce a Special Watch List for countries which seemed to the US government to be significantly denying religious freedom to significant numbers of their citizens, and (2) compilation of both 'Entities of Particular Concern' and 'Designated Persons' lists. These were aimed at non-state actors, notably Islamic State, at the time egregiously abusing many persons' religious freedom in territory it briefly controlled. In addition, the Wolf Act committed the State Department to an online training course on IRF for all foreign service officers (Marsden 2020, p. 4). In sum, over time additional measures were added to IRFA in order to strengthen and deepen US commitment to IRF, including in relation to females and sexual minorities' human rights.

This section has noted a consensual and bipartisan approach to international religious freedom from an alliance of faith groups during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama presidencies. It also noted the administrations' Christocentric approach, which was nevertheless pliable enough to feature a range of concerns, including anti-AIDS and pro-LGBTQ+ policies, as well as a focus on particular regions of especial concern, such as the Near East and South Central Asia. The next section examines the Trump administration's approach to IRF, explaining that the erstwhile consensus dissolved following a relatively narrow interpretation of IRF which, critics allege, privileged Judeo-Christian values and beliefs.

1.2. The Trump Administration and Judeo-Christian Values and Beliefs

The US policy on international religious freedom has been extensively surveyed. Farr (2008) summary of the moral and ethical desirability of IRF is a thoughtful analysis which commands wide

attention³. He argues that promoting religious freedom around the world is not just a good thing in itself. It is also a necessary component of a foreign policy which aims to be both just and ethical. Hurd (2015) regards America's IRF policy as designed to aid the USA's bid for international hegemony, via an "approved list" of religious minorities which the USA would seek to assist, but without concern for those not on the list. Hurd (2015, pp. 5, 35) argues that protections for the rights of religious minorities have "gone viral" and "the good religion-bad religion mandate has become an industry". Joustra (2016) contends that what Hurd is dissatisfied with is not "religion, or religious freedom, but really with the project of liberalism". That is, protection of religious freedom around the world is a project of liberalism, along with other human rights such as democracy, equality, and the rights of minorities. In June 2020, President Trump issued Executive Order 13,926 referring to IRF as a moral and national security issue:

Religious freedom, America's first freedom, is a moral and national security imperative. Religious freedom for all people worldwide is a foreign policy priority of the United States, and the United States will respect and vigorously promote this freedom. As stated in the 2017 National Security Strategy, our Founders understood religious freedom not as a creation of the state, but as a gift of God to every person and a right that is fundamental for the flourishing of our society. (<https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2020/06/05/2020-12430/advancing-international-religious-freedom>).

President Trump's comments underline that religious freedom is a core concern of both domestic and foreign policy. He believes that it was granted not by governments but 'as a gift of God'⁴. However, unlike Joustra (2016), Philpott (2020), Barker (2020), Casey (2020), and others, Trump asserts the paramountcy of religious freedom ("America's first freedom") over other human rights. Trump affirms that if foreign governments deny religious freedom to their citizens, then the USA "will respect and vigorously promote this freedom". The notion that human rights are a creation of God, not of humans, is a core belief of those adhering to Judeo-Christian ideology. This section, and those that follow, examine the claim that the Trump administration used IRF policy not only to pursue and further Judeo-Christian values and beliefs but also to emphasise Christians' religious freedom which might, perhaps unintentionally, undermine the human rights of females and sexual minorities.

Philpott welcomes Trump's support of international religious freedom, especially the claim that it "is a moral and national security imperative". Philpott points to recent killings of "several hundred Christians . . . killed in Nigeria", China's "brutal crackdown on churches" and incarceration of "a million Uighur Muslims", and the "high" or "very high" multi-faith religious restrictions on religion in around 50 other countries. These moral issues are augmented by concerns for US national security. "Religious freedom mitigates terrorism and civil war, strengthens democracy, enhances economic development, fosters peace, enables reconciliation and advances opportunities for women" (Philpott 2020).

Barker underlines Philpott's concern with widespread multi-faith religious restrictions in numerous countries. Religious persecution "target[s] the most vulnerable, particularly religious minorities, non-believers, converts from the majority religion, and those who otherwise dissent from or reject the religious establishment". Further, there are many other threats to religious freedom, including: "technology-enabled state repression of religion, non-state violence aided by inept governance, and blasphemy and apostasy laws that are regularly weaponized against religious minorities or

³ In 1999, Tom Farr became the first director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom. Currently (July 2020), he is president of the Religious Freedom Institute, an NGO working to achieve worldwide acceptance of religious freedom.

⁴ Martin Castro, appointed by President Obama to chair the US Commission on Civil Rights, writes that *religious freedom* is often used as a "code word" for "discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia," and "Christian supremacy" (Peaceful Coexistence 2016, p. 30).

dissenters". To try to deal with any or all of these threats, "new forms of [international] cooperation" are essential (Barker 2020).

Casey (2017), Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs at the Department of State during the Obama presidency, agrees that there are moral and national security concerns encouraging the US government to seek improved global religious freedom. Casey contends however that under President Trump, "[e]ngagement with religious actors and communities has dissolved from the global, inclusive, strategy of the previous [Obama] administration to an almost exclusively conservative Christian, primarily Protestant, engagement". As already mentioned, this is also a concern noted by Bettiza (2019, p. 223).

Critics allege that during the Trump presidency, IRF policy was strongly influenced by Judeo-Christian values and beliefs (Stewart 2020; Sherratt 2019; Bump 2019; Verma 2020). What are Judeo-Christian values and beliefs? According to Altshuler (2016), they derive from a belief that culturally, socially, and politically, US principles and achievements reflect "fundamental values of Western society that are believed to come from both Judaism and Christianity". Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, an American Orthodox Jewish rabbi, claims that "Judeo-Christian values are the underpinning of Western civilization" (Boteach quoted in Altshuler 2016).

Critics aver that Judeo-Christian values privilege religious freedom over other human rights. According to Jews for a Secular Democracy⁵,

Listen to any religious-right pundit discuss the intersection of governing and faith, and you'll likely hear them refer to Judeo-Christian values. Take Focus on the Family (FOTF), for example, a fundamentalist Christian advocacy organization with a public policy approach self-described as 'drawn from the wisdom of the Bible and the Judeo-Christian ethic'. Under this guise of Judeo-Christian values, FOTF opposes same-sex marriage and LGBTQ equality, staunchly lobbies against abortion and reproductive freedom, and promotes creationism and abstinence-only sex education. (Jews for a Secular Democracy 2019)⁶

These comments reflect that, in the USA and many other countries, human rights debates take place in a polarised political, social, and cultural climate (Haynes 2017, 2019). Bob argues that such discourses have 'great utility in political conflict'. The rights involved are not necessarily the essential objectives over which opposing entities compete. Bob emphasises that they 'fight over a wide range of substantive demands and hope that using rights-oriented discourses could reinforce their political interests' (Bob 2019a, p. 16). This suggests that, because many understandings of rights are influenced by political and ideological considerations, then the language of rights is used to try to achieve proponents' objectives. The latter are not necessarily concerned only with rights but may also involve additional political, social and/or cultural objectives (Schwartz 2019).

Schake (2017), director of foreign and defence policy at the American Enterprise Institute⁷, claims that the Trump administration focuses on an issue of key Judeo-Christian importance: strong support for Israel. Judeo-Christian values also include strong defence of religious freedom. The Trump administration is enthusiastic in this regard, targeting, *inter alia*, communist states (China, Vietnam, North Korea) and several Muslim-majority countries (including Pakistan and Turkey). The US focus is on Muslim Uighurs and Tibetan Buddhists (China), and religious minorities, including Ahmadis and

⁵ 'Jews for a Secular Democracy is a pluralistic initiative of the Society for Humanistic Judaism' (<https://jfasd.org/2019/10/why-judeo-christian-values-are-problematic/>).

⁶ James Dobson, founder and head of Focus on the Family, is a strong supporter of President Trump (Dobson 2019). Dobson is also a friend and ideological ally of Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. See Dobson's 2020 interview with Pompeo at <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-with-dr-james-dobson-of-family-talk-with-james-dobson/> We refer to this interview in the conclusion of this article.

⁷ The American Enterprise Institute describes itself as: "a public policy think tank dedicated to defending human dignity, expanding human potential, and building a freer and safer world". (<https://www.aei.org/about/>).

Alevis (Pakistan and Turkey)⁸. In sum, the Trump administration highlights persecution of all several groups, including Christians and non-mainstream Muslims (Philpott 2020; Barker 2020).

America's IRF policy is the concern of five separate entities:

- The Office of International Religious Freedom (OIRF), established in 1998 by the IRFA and controlled by the State Department.
- The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), established in 1998 by the IRFA and independent of the State Department.
- The Ministerial on Religious Freedom, an annual event, established in 2018 by Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo.
- The Commission on Unalienable Rights, established in 2019 by Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo.
- The International Religious Freedom Alliance, established in 2020 by Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo.

Let us examine them to assess their impact on America's IRF policy.

1.3. *The Office of International Religious Freedom and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom*

The OIRF and USCIRF separately release annual reports on international religious freedom⁹. The OIRF's annual report is a global survey of religious freedom, compiled by employees of the State Department. The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity, whose annual report highlights, for consideration by the Executive Branch, 'countries of particular concern' (Frequently Asked Questions 2020).

The relationship between OIRF and USCIRF is sometimes problematic. This is explicable when we bear in mind that each has different priorities: those of the State Department and Congress. The OIRF is concerned with the incumbent administration's IRF policy, while the USCIRF prioritise Congress's concerns (Bettiza 2019, pp. 67–68). To be more effective, Casey (2020) argues that the OIRF 'should be led by a career diplomat and not a political appointee', as it has been since IRFA became law in 1998. He adds that: 'This would help take politics out of religious freedom and allow a president to seat an ambassador quickly and eliminate the inevitable year-long wait each term for a political appointee to be vetted and confirmed by the Senate'. May (2019) argues that '[s]ome members of Congress disapprove of USCIRF. They object to its prioritization of "freedom of religion or belief"—which I [May] regard as the most foundational right, the right upon which all others are built—over what they consider most important: expanding rights for select grievance communities". These highlight two issues said to bedevil the USCIRF: (1) it is a politicised body, and (2) it reflects the views of Congress, which may not be vigorous in defence of religious freedom.

The USCIRF comprises nine members, all political appointees¹⁰. Members are appointed by the two main political parties (Democratic and Republican) in the Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as by the president. The USCIRF annually reports on what it sees as the effectiveness of the State Department's efforts to promote international religious freedom, and highlights perceived deficiencies. Until June 2020, the chair of USCIRF was Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, 'a religious public policy organization that provides research and advocacy on issues related to religious

⁸ For details, see USCIRF's annual reports at: <https://www.uscirtf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report>).

⁹ In addition, there was the Office of Religion and Global Affairs (RGA), established in 2013 during the Obama presidency. In August 2017, the then Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, announced that the RGA was to be absorbed into the OIRF. (Bettiza 2019, p. 224).

¹⁰ At the time of writing (July 2020), the Commission comprised eight commissioners, following the resignations of former chair Tenzin Dorjee (May 2020), Kristina Arriaga de Bucholz (November 2019) and Andy Khawaja (December 2019). Details of USCIRF commissioners at <https://www.uscirtf.gov/about-uscirtf/commissioners>.

freedom¹¹ Perkins was appointed in May 2018 by Mitch McConnell (R), Senate Majority Leader, for a two-year term, renewed in May 2020 for two more years. Perkins was elected in July 2019 by his fellow commissioners to chair USCIRF ([Tony Perkins Elected 2019](#)). The Commission also elected two Vice Chairs in July 2019: Gayle Manchin, former first lady of West Virginia, appointed in April 2018 to the Commission by Charles Schumer (D), Senate Minority Leader, and Nadine Maenza, founding Executive Director of Patriot Voices, appointed to the Commission in May 2018 by President Trump. In July 2020, the members of the Commission were: Gayle Manchin, chair; Tony Perkins, vice-chair, Anurima Bhargava, civil rights lawyer, vice-chair; Nury Turkel, civil rights lawyer and Uighur rights advocate; Gary Bauer, former Senior Vice President of Focus on the Family and President of the Family Research Council; Johnnie Moore, founder and CEO of the KAIROS Company and President of The Congress of Christian Leaders; and James W. Carr, President and Chairman of Highland Home Holdings and on the Board of Directors of World Christian Broadcasting. Finally, Sam Brownback, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, serves *ex officio* on the USCIRF¹².

Casey (2020) claims that USCIRF ‘has been dominated since its founding by conservative Christians who advance a pro-Christian bias and a partisan anti-Democratic political agenda’¹³. USCIRF is said to be influenced by Judeo-Christian ideology, encouraging a strong concern with Christians’ religious freedom ([Afandi 2011](#); [Bettiza 2019](#); [Bump 2019](#); [Casey 2020](#); [Stewart 2020](#); [Taylor 2019](#); [McAlister 2019](#)). [Pandey \(2020\)](#), a senior politician in India’s ruling BJP party, alleges that several members of USCIRF—including, Perkins, Maenza, Bauer, Carr, and Moore—are ‘associated with Christian Missionary activities [in India]’ and ‘have been supporting aggressive expansion of Christianity all their lives which includes demonizing other religions’. Do such claims stand up to scrutiny? Pandey’s comments came following USCIRF’s 2019 report which stated that in India: “religious freedom conditions . . . experienced a drastic turn downward, with religious minorities under increasing assault” ([USCIRF United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#), p. 20). On the other hand, undermining claims of USCIRF’s Christian bias is the overall focus of its comprehensive annual reports, which regularly run to more than 100 pages. They scrupulously detail abuses of religious freedoms in many countries, highlighting the plights not only of persecuted Christians but also of other religious minorities. Finally, the USCIRF is an advisory body. The State Department makes IRF policy. Is the State Department subject to Judeo-Christian ideology in relation to its IRF policy? The next section looks into this issue, examining three State Department bodies concerned with IRF.

1.4. Additions to International Religious Freedom Policy during the Trump Administration

Following President Trump’s sacking of his predecessor, Rex Tillerson, Michael R. Pompeo became Secretary of State in April 2018. Pompeo quickly introduced three major IRF initiatives: The Commission on Unalienable Rights; the annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom; and the International Religious Freedom Alliance.

2. The Commission on Unalienable Rights

The Commission on Unalienable Rights, announced on 8 July 2019, advises Pompeo on ‘the role of human rights in American foreign policy’ ([Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press 2019](#)). The day before, Pompeo put his name to a *Wall Street Journal* “op ed” (“opposite the editorial page”) where he stated that the Commission’s “mission” was not “to discover new

¹¹ Perkins claims that pedophilia is a ‘homosexual problem’ and LGBTQ activists want to ‘destroy’ America ([Tony Perkins n.d.](#)). The then vice-chair of USCIRF, Gayle Manchin, was elected chair of USCIRF by her fellow commissioners in June 2020, replacing Perkins. Perkins was elected as a vice-chair, as was Anurima Bhargava. The term of office for Manchin, Perkins and Bhargava was June 2020 to June 2021.

¹² According to [McAlister \(2019, fn. 1\)](#), ‘Brownback’s nomination to the Ambassador position was fiercely contested by LGBTQ groups and he was only approved when VP Pence cast a tie-breaking vote.

¹³ Casey is currently (July 2020) Director of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

principles but to ground our discussion of human rights in America’s founding principles” (Pompeo 2019). Pompeo asked the Commission to come up with recommendations how US foreign policy could best protect and promote ‘fundamental’ or ‘unalienable’ rights, said to be foundational in both the USA’s ‘founding principles’ and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). According to Pompeo, the Commission’s aim was to “provide fresh thinking about human rights discourse where such discourse has departed from our nation’s founding principles of natural law and natural rights” (Morello 2019). Pompeo believes that ‘novel’ human rights have been enshrined in international comprehension for only a few decades, following the UDHR’s creation (Haynes 2017, 2019). According to Pompeo (2019), supposedly universal, one-size-fits-all human rights affirmations after the UDHR are both *essential* and *non-essential*; only the former are core needs.

The USCIRF chair, Tony Perkins, commended the Commission, stating that:

USCIRF is very pleased that the State Department is continuing to make human rights an integral part of U.S. foreign policy and relations. We applaud the creation of this Commission as another way of ensuring that the protection of these fundamental rights—the most foundational of which is freedom of religion or belief—is a core element of strategic policy discussions. (USCIRF Statement 2019)

Mainstream human rights advocacy groups were unimpressed by the Commission. They were concerned that its findings would ‘strengthen Trump’s conservative social agenda, with the administration unhappy that human rights are cited to uphold reproductive freedom or protect LGBTQ people from discrimination’. According to Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch such fears were “only intensified by Pompeo’s selection of Mary Ann Glendon, a prominent scholar opposed to abortion and same sex marriage, to head the commission.” (Roth quoted in Risse 2020, p. 3. Also see Roth 2019). Professor Mary Ann Glendon, George W. Bush’s Ambassador to the Holy See¹⁴, chairs the Commission. Glendon is an internationally renowned scholar, a strong opponent of abortion, in line with the conventional Catholic view (Mary Ann Glendon 2020). The remaining 10 members of the Commission were academics, philosophers, and activists. According to the official biographies of the Commission members on the State Department website, five have particular human rights expertise: Professor Paola Carozza, Dr. David Tse-Chien Pan, Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett¹⁵, Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik¹⁶, and Dr. Christopher Tollefsen (Commission on Unalienable Rights: Member Bios n.d.).

Three of the 11 commissioners were women¹⁷ and two were “people of color”¹⁸. According to Schmitt “LGBTQ, immigrant, indigenous, and disabled communities do not seem to be represented” and, she asserted, “most” Commission members “are known opponents to LGBTQ and reproductive rights” (Schmitt 2019). Verma (2020) reports that, according to critics, the Commission’s make-up was not demographically or socially representative of today’s USA and, as a result, its conclusions would necessarily be flawed. In addition, while the Commission was an advisory not a policy making

¹⁴ According to Rutten (2010), Glendon is a ‘conservative Catholic . . . who refused to accept an award from Notre Dame [University] because it invited President Obama to speak at its commencement’. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-mar-31-la-oe-rutten31-2010mar31-story.html>). Glendon garnered controversy for statements like *The Boston Globe’s* receiving the Pulitzer Prize for its investigation into child abuse by priests “would be like giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Osama bin Laden.” (Verma 2020).

¹⁵ Swett was USCIRF chair, 2012–2016.

¹⁶ According to Equity Forward, a human rights advocacy group, ‘Soloveichik is an orthodox rabbi and professor of Judaic studies at Yeshiva University. He has ties to influential anti-abortion and anti-birth control groups including the Becket Fund for religious Liberty and the Witherspoon Institute. Soloveichik has repeatedly argued against Affordable Health Care Act’s birth control benefit and opposes marriage same-sex couples [and] individuals’ (<https://equityfwd.org/meir-soloveichik>).

¹⁷ Professor Mary Ann Glendon, Dr Jacqueline Rivers, and Dr Katrina Lantos Swett.

¹⁸ Dr. David Tse-Chien Pan, Professor of German at the University of California, Irvine and Dr. Jacqueline Rivers, Lecturer in Sociology at Harvard University. Rivers believes that ‘marriage is a gift from God’ and that ‘sexual partnerships between persons of the same sex are being legally recognized as “marriages,” thus abolishing in law the principle of marriage as a *conjugal* union and reducing it to nothing other than sexual or romantic companionship’. (<https://insidethevatican.com/magazine/people/eugene-jacqueline-rivers-scholar-protestant-minister/>).

body, it was feared that its focus on ‘natural rights’ could lead to undermining minorities’ rights. Finally, it was feared “that the emphasis on natural law would mean a departure from the strong antidiscrimination policy platform of the Obama administration” (Schmitt 2019; Montgomery 2020)

To hear views from invited human rights experts, the Commission was due to have six public hearings between October 2019 and March 2020. Five meetings were held, although reportedly “sparsely attended” (Verma 2020). The last scheduled meeting was not held because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Commission’s conclusions were unknown at the time of writing this article (late June 2020)¹⁹. In June 2020, Peter Berkowitz, a Stanford University philosopher, director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff and the Commission’s executive secretary, published an essay at *RealClearPolitics*²⁰. While the essay presented Berkowitz’s personal views, it might be inferred that it reflected some elements of the Commission’s thinking. Berkowitz notes that the Commission was greeted with “skepticism and indignation . . . by human rights activists, former public officials, and Capitol Hill lawmakers.” Critics regarded its work as unnecessary because both human rights and America’s commitment to them were, Berkowitz claimed, “understood, settled, and uncontroversial”. Criticism came from two ideological positions: “Influential voices on the left disparage the cause of human rights as a vehicle for imposing Western hegemony. Powerful critics on the right regard the institutionalized apparatus of the human rights movement as a thinly disguised system designed to entrench progressive transnational government” (Berkowitz 2020).

The controversy hinges on a definitional issue: what are “unalienable” rights? Berkowitz contends they are “those rights inherent in all persons”, captured in the 1776 Declaration of Independence. He claims this ‘marked the first time in human history that a nation came into being by solemnizing its commitment to “unalienable rights”, an experiment in “liberty under law” which resulted in a country “whose citizens enjoy a freedom, pluralism, and prosperity that few countries have equaled” (Berkowitz 2020). Bob (2019b) notes that, regarding the principles of the 1776 Declaration of Independence, America’s Revolutionary era in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was characterised by a situation whereby “slaves, women and men without property experienced a notably different reality”. In other words, not all Americans have historically enjoyed the same “unalienable” rights.

In addition, there is a second concern: the Commission was tasked to come up with findings to justify a foreign policy focus prioritising religious freedom over other human rights (Schmitt 2019; Human Rights Watch 2020; Human Rights First 2020; Verma 2020). Critics claim that the concept of “unalienable” highlights rights the original late-18th century, Christian-informed, understanding of the term. Posner (2019) also notes the archaic use of “unalienable” rather than “inalienable” normally referring to Christian, especially Catholic, understandings²¹. Posner (2019) claims, finally, that, “given what we know about the Trump administration’, it was highly likely to mean that by the use of “natural law” the government would ‘argue that abortion and possibly other forms of family planning violate “human rights”—that is, the sacrosanct right to life. If so, this would emphasise “religious rights and freedoms as a matter of international human rights law”.

Law professors Huckerby and Knuckey (2020a) attended the Commission’s public meetings. They claimed that the Commissioners used the body’s public meetings to:

- ‘demonstrate skepticism toward human rights treaties and institutions;
- assert the dubious claim that there are (sic.) a proliferation of human rights; and
- advance the idea that human rights are in need of prioritization or being placed into a hierarchy, conceivably with freedom of religion trumping other rights.’ (Huckerby and Knuckey 2020a).

¹⁹ The Commission’s draft report was released on 16 July 2020. It is available at <https://www.state.gov/draft-report-of-the-commission-on-unalienable-rights/>.

²⁰ ‘At RealClearPolitics (RCP) we’re dedicated to providing our readers with better, more insightful analysis of the most important news and policy issues of the day. RCP’s daily editorial curation and original reporting present balanced, non-partisan analysis that empowers our readers to stay informed’ (<https://www.realclearpolitics.com/about.html>).

²¹ The Declaration of Independence refers to “unalienable rights” with which people “are endowed by their Creator”.

Huckerby and Knuckey (2020a) also claim that the Commission's meetings were noteworthy for what they did not include: namely, any mention from the Commissioners of what some regard as the Trump administration's steady domestic human rights backsliding, apparent tolerance of foreign dictators and authoritarians, and America's gradual withdrawal from various multilateral institutions, including those that seek to protect human rights, such as the UN Human Rights Council. What the Commission did frequently reference, however, was the paramountcy of religious freedom. According to David Kramer, assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor in the George W. Bush administration, "[t]his is about the only human right they seem to care about . . . It seems to be a play for political support domestically, that could rebound to our detriment in foreign policy" (Kramer quoted in Verma 2020).

Critics feared that the Commission would seek to validate the claim, made by the Commission's executive secretary, Peter Berkowitz, that America's international "unalienable" rights policy should draw on principles derived both from the Declaration of Independence and natural law²². If this was the case, it might encourage Pompeo to reduce the human rights with which the USA's IRF policy is concerned. For Pompeo, we have noted, there are too many extant human rights and not all are essential (or "unalienable"). Potential "inessential" human rights might include "gender emancipation and reproductive rights", religious freedom should take priority over other rights, and newly validated unalienable rights would not be subject to "any international oversight" (Risse 2020, p. 3) and, in effect, be "human rights with American characteristics".

3. The Annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom

With these concerns in mind, let us turn now to another of Secretary of State Pompeo's innovations: the annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom.

Our nation is so special and it's the greatest nation in the history of civilization. . . . Our diplomats all around the world can be incredibly proud of the fact that they represent a nation that has God-given rights ensconced in our fundamental founding documents (Pompeo and Brownback 2019)

Pompeo frequently asserts that religious freedom is the 'first liberty', but it is not clear what he means. It may be politically necessary to be ambiguous in this respect: the USA's constitution proclaims separation of church and state. Is Pompeo referring to the chronological order of the First Amendment in the US Constitution? Or does he mean that it is his ideological preference that religious freedom is the primary freedom, above other human rights, such as the right to equality and freedom from discrimination? Maybe he means it in both senses.

Either way, his comments, as expressed in the quotation above, appear to show that Pompeo personally believes that human rights should be placed in a hierarchy in order of importance, headed by religious freedom. This is important because Pompeo presides over America's foreign policy. Launching the 2019 OIRF report, Pompeo stated that:

We've talked about religious freedom. We want to make sure every country has the understanding how central that is to their nation's success and how they shouldn't let a bureaucrat somewhere sitting in an international organization interfere with their country's sovereign desire to allow their citizens to practice their—to practice religious freedom. (Pompeo 2020)

²² A letter, critical of the Commission, and signed by 167 human rights groups, was published in May 2020. They wrote 'to express [their] grave concern about the work of the U.S. State Department's Commission on Unalienable Rights and any potential report or output that undermines the international human rights system and purports to reinterpret its respective treaties and monitoring bodies'. Letter available at https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/supporting_resources/050120_lettertocour_crr_hrwhc.pdf. Also see (Berschinski and Wordern 2020).

Pompeo claims that each country, without ‘interference’ from ‘a bureaucrat somewhere sitting in an international organization’, should come up with its own unique, culturally and religiously-informed, understanding of religious freedom. For the USA, this would be “human rights with American characteristics”. It does not necessarily mean that this policy would protect all citizens’ human rights—particularly if their rights seemed to deviate significantly from the majority religion’s view of what are appropriate rights (a “country’s sovereign desire to allow their citizens to practice their—to practice religious freedom”).

The first annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom took place in July 2018. Its stated purpose was to seek “outcomes that reaffirmed international commitments to promote religious freedom and produce real, positive change” ([Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom 2018](#)). The event gathered around 350 faith ministers and activists from around 80 countries. Pompeo and the Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback, organised and hosted the event in Washington, DC. In his opening speech, Pompeo highlighted the Trump administration’s priority of religious freedom, both at home and abroad:

The Trump administration recognizes that religious freedom is a fundamental American liberty, and this has been clear from the administration’s earliest days and indeed the earliest days of our nation.

The United States advances religious freedom in our foreign policy because it is not exclusively an American right. It is a God-given universal right bestowed on all of mankind. Seventy years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirmed this when 48 nations declared that “everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.”. ([Pompeo 2018](#))

Vice-president Mike Pence also spoke at the Ministerial. Conveying greetings from President Trump, Pence pledged to the gathering that “religious freedom” was the Trump administration’s “top priority”, because it “is right. But we also do this because religious freedom is in the interest of the peace and security of the world” (Pence quoted in [Marsden 2020](#), p. 7). Pence chastised several countries and other actors – including, China, Russia, Iran, Nicaragua, Turkey, and the Islamic State—for egregious denials of religious freedom. [McAlister \(2019, p. 109\)](#) comments however that “Setting aside how much of a beacon the US appeared to be, as President Trump courted leaders in Russia, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, Pence also spoke about persecution in a way that disproportionately highlighted the oppression of Christians, ignored the oppression of Muslims everywhere but China and Iran, and conflated religious and ethnic oppression”. Finally, Pence announced formation of a ‘Genocide Recovery and Persecution Response Program’ and the launch of the Potomac Declaration, which sought to build on Article 18 of the UDHR celebrating religious as a universal, God-given right ([Marsden 2020](#), p. 7; also see [Casper 2019](#)).

The second Ministerial was held in July 2019 in Washington, DC. It brought together over 1000 civil society representatives and religious leaders from about 100 countries. In his opening remarks, Pompeo asserted that while all countries are different, they all aim to progress religious freedom. He did not claim that this goal was the sole province of the USA, as it should become ‘normative’ both domestically and internationally ([Marsden 2020](#)). Pompeo’s remarks about normative standards guiding a country’s religious freedom policy do not necessarily suggest that the rights of minorities would be protected—if that policy is not a country’s norm: for example in the case of Myanmar, where persecution of the Muslim Rohingyas is “genocidal” ([McAlister 2019](#), p. 110). In conclusion, what emerged from the two Ministerials was that the Trump administration’s IRF policy views religious freedom as the primary human right.

4. The International Religious Freedom Alliance

We have focused on religious freedom, not just for Christians but for people of Jewish faith, Muslims, all faiths, to make sure that every human being has the capacity and the will and a government who will permit them to exercise their conscience, their rights; and then secondly to make sure that

people understand that here in America our rights are, in fact, God-given. They didn't come from any government who gave them to us. We—they were bestowed upon us by God, and it is the government's role to make sure that those God-given rights are protected.

And the people of the United States should know that the world looks to us as a beacon. They know that this is a special place. They know that God gave us this set of rights and our founders set this course in motion for this great experiment (Dobson 2020)

Pompeo announced the formation of the US-led International Religious Freedom Alliance in September 2019. Pompeo stated that it was “an alliance of likeminded nations devoted to confronting religious persecution all around the world” (Banks 2020). In January 2020, Ambassador Sam Brownback told reporters during a conference call that there was ‘a pretty high bar’ for countries to be included in the Alliance. It was ‘the activist club of countries’, strongly in favour of religious freedom (Banks 2020)²³.

The Alliance was launched in February 2020, with 27 founding members (Banks 2020)²⁴. Twenty-two (81%) have Christianity as their majority religion, four (14%) feature Islam as most popular faith, and Israel (<0.5%) is the state of the Jews²⁵.

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, welcomed ‘the Principles of the newly established Alliance, including explicit protection of the non-religious’. Copson noted however that, while ‘[s]ome members of the Alliance include strong defenders of freedom of religion or belief, such as the Netherlands, [others] including, Brazil, Hungary, and Poland have regressive human rights records’ (Copson 2020)²⁶. Copson (2020) alleged that some members of the Alliance ‘do not have good track records on upholding human rights, and have in fact used so-called “religious freedom” as a justification for trampling on the rights and freedoms of others, including non-Christians, women, and LGBT people’²⁷. Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of the NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, criticised the Alliance’s composition. She was sceptical that its members comprise, as Brownback claimed, ‘the activist club of countries’, strongly in favour of religious freedom. When she first heard of the Alliance, she thought ‘the idea was [that] nations having difficulty providing for religious freedom were joining together to try to improve’. She believed it was ‘shocking . . . that Alliance members were lionised as “models for religious freedom” as it seemed to indicate that the Trump administration had a ‘very narrow perspective of what religious freedom is’ (Campbell quoted in Schor 2020).

Does Campbell’s claim stand up that not all Alliance members have a good track record in regard to religious freedom? While this is not the place to do an extensive survey of the religious freedom policies of all Alliance members, below I comment briefly on where they stand in relation to social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and rights, and restrictions by the state and hostile non-state actors collectively restricting religious beliefs and practices. The aim is to get a snapshot from 2020 on which Alliance member states are “activists” to protect religious freedom.

Table 1 provides information on Alliance members, in relation to three specific indices: the Global Acceptance, 2014–2017 (GAI), Government Religious Restrictions, 2017 (GRI) and the Social Hostilities

²³ According to Casey (2020), “Secretary of State Pompeo, Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback, and USAID’s new religious freedom adviser Mark Kevin Lloyd all have a history of Islamophobic positions and comments”.

²⁴ Founding members of IRFA: Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, The Gambia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, The Netherlands, Poland, Senegal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

²⁵ All member states are Christian, except: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, The Gambia, Israel, and Senegal. This suggests that criteria for membership are two-fold: religious affiliation and whether a country is a U.S. ally.

²⁶ Despite Copson’s concern, however, neither Brazil, Hungary, or Poland are included in the 28 “countries of concern” in USCIRF’s 2019 (<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2019USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>).

²⁷ Alliance members identified as having ongoing religious freedom issues in the State Department’s 2018 annual report are Hungary, led by a far-right government, and Austria (OIRF Office of International Religious Freedom).

(SHI)²⁸. Collectively, the three measures identify restrictions on religion, including in relation to certain social groups, including LGBTQ+ entities.

Table 1. International Religious Freedom Alliance members' restrictions on religion.

Country	Global Acceptance Index (GAI), 2014–2017 (Higher the Better)	Government Religious Restrictions Index (GRI), 2017 (Lower the Better)	Social Hostilities Index (SHI) (Lower the Better)
Albania	3.5	1.6	0.1
Austria	6.8	4.2	3.2
Bosnia & Herzegovina	3.1	2.9	3.2
Brazil	6.8	1.3	4.3
Bulgaria	4.6	5.3	4.2
Colombia	5.9	2.0	2.2
Croatia	5.2	2.4	0.4
Czech Republic	6.0	3.3	2.6
Estonia	4.9	1.2	0.8
The Gambia	3.4	0.7	3.0
Georgia	2.7	3.5	3.1
Greece	5.0	4.3	5.1
Hungary	4.9	3.3	3.7
Israel	5.4	5.5	7.3
Kosovo	2.9	2.7	4.4
Latvia	4.4	2.6	1.2
Lithuania	4.1	2.5	0.6
Malta	7.6	2.1	0.8
The Netherlands	8.6	2.6	2.8
Poland	4.8	2.9	2.2
Senegal	1.7	1.2	1.0
Slovakia	5	3.0	2.7
Slovenia	5.9	2.6	0.2
Togo	3.0	2.1	0.8
Ukraine	3.3	3.8	7.1
United Kingdom	7.7	2.6	6.8
United States	7.2	3.3	4.4

Source: Adapted from Grim 2020, pp. 12–15.

First, there is patchy adhesion to LGBTQ+ rights among Alliance member states. Grim (2020) reports that, “on average, support for LGBT rights is 41% higher in countries with low levels of social hostilities involving religion”. Some Alliance members have relatively low SHI levels, scoring 1.0 or lower: Albania, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovenia and Togo. Others have relatively high SHI scores (>5.0): Greece, Israel, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. Second, some Alliance members have relatively high GRI scores (>4.0): Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, and Israel, and others score relatively low in this measure (<2.0): Albania, Brazil, Estonia, The Gambia, and Senegal. Third, some Alliance countries score relatively poorly on GAI (<3.0): Georgia, Kosovo, and Senegal, and others score relatively highly (>6.0): Austria, Czech Republic, Malta, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In sum, no Alliance members score poorly on all of the measures identified in Table 1, while only a minority does well in all three aspects. Nine—that is, a third of the Alliance membership (Albania, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, The Netherlands, Slovenia, and Slovakia)—do relatively well on all three measures. The United States is not among them. These data do not support Brownback’s claim—that is, the Alliance is ‘the activist club of countries’, strongly activist in pursuing freedom for all.

²⁸ “GAI seeks to measure the relative level of social acceptance of LGBT people and rights in each country at specific time periods”. “GRI assesses the level of restrictions on religion by governments around the world” (Grim 2020, p. 11). “SHI measures hostile acts by private individuals, organizations and social groups that restrict religious beliefs and practices” (<https://www.pewforum.org/2011/08/09/rising-restrictions-on-religion4/>).

If it is the case that not all Alliance members are countries which plausibly comprise “the activist club of countries” in relation to religious freedom, as Brownback claims, what then is the strategic value of the Alliance for US foreign policy? On the one hand, the Alliance purports to champion international religious freedom, perhaps with a Christian prioritisation. But what of the US attack on China over the government’s treatment of the Muslim Uighur minority? While this issue is not about the plight of Christians, it does concern a country—China—that is a key global rival of the USA. To attack its government over its treatment of a religious minority fulfils two goals: (1) critiques China in an area in which it is vulnerable, and (2) indicates the USA’s foreign policy commitment to minorities’ religious (and cultural) freedom. For the Trump administration’s domestic support base, the anti-China policy highlights that the USA is willing “to take on” egregious deniers of “religious freedom” such as China, while also implicitly castigating the country’s government for its denial of human rights more generally. A particularistic approach to religious freedom and human rights is also shown in the case of the Trump administration’s relationship with the rulers of Saudi Arabia. Among the world’s most egregious deniers of the rights of religious minorities, including Christians, the Saudi government is not criticised by the Trump administration for its approach. Instead, the importance to the Trump administration of the Saudi government’s role regionally—that is, anti-Iran, anti-radical political changes, pro-stability—easily takes precedence over any concerns that the administration may have over the Saudi government’s treatment of its religious minorities (Fox 2016, pp. 126, 131)

5. Conclusions

Trump hopes by shouting “Religious Freedom for All,” his political base will mistake the high decibel level for effectiveness. The gap between the rhetoric and the record is real. Only a new administration can bring any change. (Casey 2020)

The aim of the article was to examine the USA’s IRF policy over time. The article examined three claims in relation to the Trump administration: it (1) focuses primarily on religious freedom for Christians (2) privileges Judeo-Christian values, and (3) undermines internationally females’ and sexual minorities human rights. The first does not stand up to scrutiny: like previous administrations the Trump presidency, via its IRF policy, has called out egregious violators of many faiths’ religious freedom, including but by no means restricted to Christians.

The article indicated that the Trump administration actively pursued international religious freedom. While this was not new, what was novel was the privileging of Judeo-Christian values. It replaced a more flexible Christocentric approach, which characterised the three prior administrations: the Clinton, Bush, and Obama presidencies. In contrast, the Trump administration’s approach was contoured by ideological commitment to a Judeo-Christian view. Supporters of Judeo-Christian values, including USCIRF vice-chair, Tony Perkins, congratulated the Trump administration for its exemplary commitment to advancing international religious freedom. Critics saw the injection of Judeo-Christian values into foreign policy as undermining the rights of women and sexual minorities. Secretary of State, Michael R. Pompeo, was identified as a key figure in the development of US foreign policy privileging Judeo-Christian values via three initiatives: the Commission on Unalienable Rights, the annual Ministerial on Advancing Religious Freedom and the International Religious Freedom Alliance. Not only were principles invoked from the 1776 Declaration of Independence but also the 1948 UDHR. Critics feared that international human rights developed over the decades since the UDHR would, under Pompeo’s direction, be overlooked or regarded as non-essential. Post-UDHR, human rights developments focus on those highlighting minorities’ rights, including those of females and sexual minorities.

Concern was fuelled by one of the early acts of the Trump administration: to reinstitute the so-called “Mexico City policy”, also known as the global gag rule, banning US government support for international family planning programmes that “perform, promote or offer information about abortion”. In addition, the Trump administration worked industriously at the United Nations (UN) to remove all references to “sexual and reproductive health”, the term preferred by mainstream human

rights activists (Bob 2019b). Several Trump administration appointees worked internationally to insert anti-LGBTQ views into USA policy. For example, at the 2019 Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) at the UN, the US delegation attempted to remove “gender-responsive” language from CSW exit documents. US Ambassador at the UN, Cherith Norman Chalet, stated in a speech at the event that “we are not about gender jargon . . . we are about women and girls”. Some saw this as an effort to weaken the rights of non-binary individuals, in line with the Trump administration’s broader attacks on the LGBTQ community (Ford 2019; Verma 2020).

Concerns about the rights of women and LBBTQ+ communities were not restricted to events at the UN. A chief US ally, Poland, held a presidential election in early July 2020. The winner was Andrzej Duda, a vociferous critic of LGBTQ+ rights, who narrowly triumphed over Rafal Trzaskowski, the liberal mayor of Warsaw. During his presidency, Duda, pledged to “defend children from LGBT ideology”. Duda is a friend and ally of President Trump (FP Editors 2019). Poland was due to host the third annual Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom between 14–16 July 2020 (U.S.-Poland Joint Statement on Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom 2020). However, the third ministerial appears to have been postponed or cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, although no official statement to that effect seems to have been issued.

Pompeo restated his opposition to same-sex marriage in July 2018 during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of the LGBTQ+ rights group GLAAD, stated that ‘Mike Pompeo’s reaffirmed opposition to marriage equality and LGBTQ rights further proves that he is dangerously wrong to serve as our nation’s chief diplomat . . . His personal ties to anti-LGBTQ hate groups and clear refusal to support the hard-fought equal rights of the LGBTQ community make him wholly unqualified to promote human rights abroad’ (Brammer 2018). Finally, Gevisser (2020) remarks that “during his presidency, Donald Trump has rolled back transgender rights as part of his efforts to consolidate his conservative Evangelical base, for whom ‘gender ideology’ has become the new evil; the latest bulwark against assaults on ‘the family’ now that same-sex marriage was legal and supported by a majority of Americans.” (Gevisser quoted in Tóibín 2020).

The article has sought to balance the views of those who believe that the Trump regime has advanced international religious freedom with critical voices that accuse it of discriminatory behaviour at home and abroad. Recent Pew surveys indicate that many Americans see a rise in discriminatory behaviour in the USA during the Trump presidency. For example, the “public has negative views of the country’s racial progress; more than half say Trump has made race relations worse” (Pew Research Center 2019). It can be hypothesised that the Trump administration’s religious freedom policy encourages the rise of hate crimes and hostility toward some minority faiths in America, as well as to exacerbate tensions over religion, race and ethnicity internationally (for example, Trump’s strong support for Israel) (Haynes 2019, pp. 141, 170). It would also be interesting to examine and probe international religious leaders’ responses to the Trump administration’s Judeo-Christian approach and to consider how such policies have been received by human rights advocacy groups in countries experiencing religious conflict or the oppression of religious minorities (for example, China, Russia, Myanmar, Syria, Yemen, Pakistan, Turkey). While the current article does not examine these issues due to lack of space, their examination suggests a fruitful avenue for future research.

The issue of religious freedom in the USA was highlighted because of President Trump’s appearance holding a Bible outside St. John’s Episcopal church in Washington, D.C. on 1 June 2020 in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd by a police officer. Some Episcopalian leaders accused the president of using the church for a photo opportunity and expressed outrage that law enforcement dispersed the crowd of overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrators proclaiming that “Black Lives Matter.” The response suggests that not all American Christians are united in supporting Trump’s religious freedom policies. This issue—that is, intrafaith, and intradenominational difference—could also usefully be addressed by further research.

The November 2020 US presidential election is between Donald Trump and Obama's former vice-president, Joe Biden. It is unclear the extent to which the USA's IRF policy would alter if the presidency changed from Trump to Biden. During the quarter century since Bill Clinton signed IRFA, the USA has clearly shown commitment to seeking to end religious persecution around the world. It is less clear, however, if the current US approach would change very much if the presidency changes hands. Adherence to Judeo-Christian values is unlikely significantly to diminish in Congress and elsewhere even if Biden, who may well not be a supporter of such values, wins. In addition, both Mike Pompeo and Mike Pence are likely presidential contenders in 2024. If either becomes president, then the Judeo-Christian turn in America's IRF policy looks set to continue.

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