

Vance supports religious freedom: What about Ukraine?

Putin believes religion is an arm of statecraft



Vice President JD Vance speaks at the International Religious Freedom Summit at the Washington Hilton, Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025, in Washington. (AP Photo/Rod Lamkey, Jr.) Vice President JD Vance speaks at ... more >

COMMENTARY

By Gary Marx

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OPINION:

On Feb. 5, Vice President J.D. Vance addressed more than 1,000 people at the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington. He articulated powerful truths about American values, the importance of enshrining religious freedom and President Trump's plans regarding this critical issue.

A few specific parts of the vice president's remarks stuck out to me, as I have been working alongside Defenders of Faith and Religious Freedom in Ukraine for a year. Mr. Vance said: "Part of our protecting religious freedom initiatives means recognizing, in our foreign policy, the difference between regimes that respect religious freedom and those that do not. The United States must be able to make that distinction. We must be able to look at catastrophes ... and possess the moral clarity to act when something has gone wrong. Now, this administration stands ready to do so."

I wholeheartedly agree with Mr. Vance, and I hope and pray that the position he articulated comes to bear as the United States considers what to do about Ukraine. I believe America must continue to support Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression. I believe that religious freedom is enshrined in Ukraine and not in Russia. I have been to Ukraine three times in the past 12 months, and I have seen with my own eyes Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim and Protestant clergy standing together and speaking cordially about working together to help their countrymen. I have seen them laughing, smiling, hugging and praying together. No such gathering could occur in Russia, where Russian Orthodoxy is the only public option for expressing faith.

During his remarks, Mr. Vance tackled the situation of the U.S. Agency for International Development. He said: "In recent years, too often, our nation's international engagement on religious liberty issues has been corrupted and distorted to the point of absurdity. Think about this: How did America get to the point where we're sending hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars abroad to NGOs that are dedicated to spreading atheism all over the globe? That is not what leadership on protecting the rights of the faithful looks like, and it ends with this administration."

I agree with Mr. Vance again.

We should not be advancing atheism because our Founding Fathers created a country based on the idea that God creates all people with certain inalienable rights.

As Americans on the far right of the political spectrum flirt with the notion of Russia being a defender of “Western, conservative, Christian values” and that religion in the Soviet Union was Marxist-Leninist atheism, Russia is showing its true, godless face in the occupied territories of Ukraine. Its soldiers kidnap children, target apartment buildings for drone strikes and use rape as a weapon of war.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin believes he can catch more bees with honey than vinegar in terms of religious language, imagery, and associations. That’s why the office of Patriarch Kirill, who runs the Russian Orthodox Church, is in the Kremlin. To Mr. Putin, religion is an arm of statecraft. Patriarch Kirill blesses Russian tanks, calls the attack on Ukraine a “holy war,” and oversees priests to reportedly traffic weapons and participate in intelligence gathering for the Russian Federation. We shouldn’t allow ourselves to be fooled by Mr. Putin’s insistence that his behavior is that of a defender of anything “Western,” “conservative” or “Christian.”

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With President Trump, all options are on the table. That makes him a compelling president to most American voters who want things to change for the better.

As negotiations around a peace settlement between Ukraine and Russia continue, we will hear about a wide range of issues, including rare earth minerals and kidnapped Ukrainian children, 20,000 of whom have been taken from their homes and relocated to Crimea, Siberia and Moscow. We will hear about the dangers of letting Iran, China and North Korea win by letting Russia win. All that is important.

There is an axis of evil in this world, and Russia uses the same drones to strike Ukraine that Iran uses to strike Israel. Monday was the third anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Hopefully, if Vice President Vance's comments can be included at the negotiating table and if America continues standing with regimes that uphold religious freedom and against regimes that oppose it, we will see a just peace in Ukraine this year.

• Gary Marx is president of Madison Strategies and former executive director of the Faith and Freedom Coalition. This material is distributed by Madison Strategies on behalf of Kyiv Global Outreach. More information is on file with the U.S. Department of Justice.

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