Religion and Diplomacy

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John Kerry [2]
Toward a better understanding of religion and global affairs

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry tours the "Sala Regia," the "royal room" of the Vatican, Jan. 14 with Msgr. Jose Bettencourt, the Holy See's head of protocol. (CNS photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais, pool via Reuters) (Jan. 14, 2014)

One of the most interesting challenges we face in global diplomacy today is the need to fully understand and engage the great impact that a wide range of religious traditions have on foreign affairs. I often say that if I headed back to college today, I would major in comparative religions rather than political science. That is because religious actors and institutions are playing an influential role in every region of the world and on nearly every issue central to U.S. foreign policy.

In June, Pope Francis’ historic encyclical “Laudato Si’” helped advocate for global measures to combat climate change. Religious advocacy groups have long raised awareness about famine and human rights violations abroad; Buddhist nuns in Nepal play a crucial role in natural disaster recovery efforts; and religious organizations have been essential to providing humanitarian support to Syrian refugees.

On matters as diverse as how to drive economic growth, rein in corruption, combat terrorism, mitigate conflict, advance women’s rights and promote public health, religious beliefs shape the views of publics and change-makers near and far.
Religion is a multivalent force, not reducible to good religion and bad religion. Still, we must take seriously those instances when actors seek to justify violence through religion. Rather than talking about building a school, creating a community or providing health care, these actors sometimes promote destruction—occasionally, sadly, in the guise of religion.

In the Central African Republic, militia groups, some of which are Christian and Muslim, are engaged in a bloody conflict. Religious minorities in Burma, including the Rohingya—a Muslim community—are subject to hate speech and controversial legislation that threatens religious freedom. In the Middle East and Africa, terror networks like ISIL and Boko Haram justify violent acts with religious arguments. Major European cities are also struggling to cope with the aftermath of terror attacks amid strong evidence of anti-Semitism, radicalization and anti-Muslim sentiment.

As secretary of state for the past two-and-a-half years, and before that as a senator for 29 years and also as a presidential candidate, I have met with religious leaders all across the world. I have also met with people of all religious traditions, life philosophies and belief systems. That experience has only reaffirmed my belief that there is much more that unites us, and should unite us, than divides us.

Amid the diversity of the world’s religions, there are common denominators; many are tied together by the Golden Rule. They share fundamental concerns about the human condition, poverty, human relationships and our responsibilities to each other. Many people talk about how we draw strength from the example of our religious communities—but too few actually translate those words into actions or policies. Leaders in public life need to recognize that in a world where people of all religious traditions are migrating and mingling like never before, we ignore the global impact of religion at our peril.

A New Approach

It is not enough just to talk about better dialogue. We have to act to meet this need. That is why in 2013 I announced the creation of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the State Department, which helps to implement President Obama’s U.S. Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement. Its mission is clear: to expand our understanding of religious dynamics and engagement with religious actors. The office is led by Shaun Casey, a former professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary, who is one of the country’s leading thinkers on religion in public life. As U.S. special representative for religion and global affairs, he is charged with growing our ability to reach out to more communities and to create greater understanding among peoples and countries.

The new office’s mission is multifaceted. First, it provides me with high-level advice on policy matters as they relate to religion. In many countries around the globe, a comprehensive look at almost any policy area requires attention to religious dynamics. Second, it works with U.S. embassies and consulates to improve their capacity to assess religious dynamics and engage religious actors. We want foreign service officers to know how to work effectively with local religious individuals and groups. Finally, it serves as an initial point of contact for organizations and people interested in discussing foreign policy issues related to religion.

That final charge revolves around an important skill in diplomacy: listening. We regularly meet with religious leaders and religiously based organizations, listening to their thoughts and suggestions in order to work with them on matters of significance to both sides. These religious actors and organizations are key players in their countries, holding influence at both local and national levels. Although just two years old, the office has already met with over 1,000 religious leaders from five continents and a range of religious traditions. Indeed, engagement is a two-way street and our foreign policy will be better informed by hearing what they have to say.

In creating the office, I encouraged strategic collaboration by consolidating multiple offices that already handled religion-related topics. For example, Ira Forman, the special envoy to monitor and combat anti-
Semitism, now works alongside Shaarik Zafar, the special representative to Muslim communities, and Arsalan Suleman, the acting special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. While their special mandates remain unchanged, their diplomatic experiences will be better shared and their insights more effectively implemented.

The Office of Religion and Global Affairs is adding value on some of the most difficult international challenges that our country faces. One is the fight against climate change, a priority for the Obama administration and an issue that has long been important to me. It is also an area in which we have strong partners in the religious community. Even before Pope Francis issued his encyclical, organizations across the religious spectrum raised the banner against global warming. We have worked with many religiously based groups to advance the fight, including those preparing to participate in the U.N. Climate Change Summit in Paris later this year. Importantly, the office has ensured that leaders of these groups have been able to meet and exchange views with department officials on topics such as the Green Climate Fund.

The office is also leading engagement with communities abroad on a regular basis. Just a few months ago, Shaarik Zafar led a delegation of American Muslims to Jakarta to talk about ways Indonesia and the United States can address shared challenges. They discussed how best to take advantage of opportunities to collaborate in areas like increased trade and investment, and made a renewed commitment to the values of tolerance, pluralism and democracy. The visit was typical of our outreach efforts to build people-to-people ties, spread key messages and strengthen relationships with local civil society institutions.

Understanding Religion’s Complexity

I understand that there may be concerns about the U.S. government engaging religion in this way. Some may worry we will mistakenly see religious influences when only political and social ones exist, or we will overstep the separation of church and state laid out in the First Amendment. While these concerns are serious, and we think about them daily, the goal is to make sure we approach religion with a critical and sophisticated analytical lens.

State Department lawyers have already drawn up clear and practical guidelines to help officers serving overseas identify what is and is not allowed by the First Amendment’s establishment clause. We must be careful to not overemphasize the role of religion and to properly understand its intersection with political, economic and other factors.

We are also providing resources to support our diplomats’ engagement with religious actors. The office is designing, developing and implementing training modules for a broad range of State Department officials—from ambassadors to new foreign service officers—on fundamental issues related to religion and foreign policy. These interactive materials and creative teaching methodologies will increase the knowledge of the department’s officers serving overseas. The courses will help officers think about the complex issues surrounding religious actors, religious dynamics and American interests in a comprehensive framework designed to support our foreign policy goals.

These efforts are complemented by our work defending religious freedom around the globe. The ambassador at large for international religious freedom, David Saperstein, and the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom, have long been successful at protecting religious minorities and raising alarms about religious oppression. The office works to execute its Congressional mandate to monitor, report on and promote the human right of religious freedom across the globe. With these two offices, I am proud to say that the United States is better able than ever before to engage with religious communities and ideas from South America to the Middle East to Asia.
In early 2014, I had the honor of traveling with President Obama to Rome to meet His Holiness Pope Francis. Visiting the first Jesuit pope as the U.S. secretary of state was an experience that I never could have imagined when I was an altar boy 60 years ago. The moment was both personally thrilling and an embodiment of the deep connection between religion and America’s foreign affairs.

Today, we are approaching religious actors and groups in a new way. The State Department understands the central role that religion plays in the lives of billions across the globe, and we know engagement can open a world of possibilities. The challenging array of foreign policy issues we face today demands that we recognize a fundamental truth: Our foreign policy needs a more sophisticated approach to religion.

John Kerry, former Democratic senator from Massachusetts, is the 68th U.S. secretary of state.

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