

A close-up, high-angle portrait of an elderly man with light-colored hair and deep wrinkles on his face. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a thoughtful expression. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of his skin. He is wearing a white shirt and a dark, patterned tie.

The Father of

*'I left the think tank,
as it were,
to form a do tank.'*

DOUGLAS JOHNSTON



Faith-Based Diplomacy

DOUG JOHNSTON IS GOING WHERE FEW FOREIGN POLICY EXPERTS HAVE GONE BEFORE.
BY ROB MOLL



MICHAEL TEMCHINE/GENESIS PHOTOS

COURTESY OF ICRD

IN PAKISTAN'S Northwest Frontier Province, on the border with Afghanistan where many believe Osama bin Laden is hiding with local support, Douglas Johnston walked into one of the most infamous of the region's *madrassas*. In the West, media had identified the religious school as being linked to the 7/7 London bombing.

"The situation was tense," Johnston recalls. Israel was fighting Hezbollah in Lebanon. Because of U.S. support for the war and its invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans were not considered friends. Leaders of the madrassa warned Johnston to say nothing provocative. But as the youngest ever to qualify for the commander of a nuclear submarine, Johnston is accustomed to tense situations.

Johnston introduced himself and two other Americans as followers of Jesus, saying they were committed to his reconciling work. But Johnston didn't proceed with feel-good statements about different faiths getting along—though he believes Christian and Muslim scriptures enjoin mutual respect. Instead, he challenged his hostile audience. Johnston said Muslims are to respect other faiths because, as Muhammad had said, God himself created people separately to compete in good works. In order to be good Muslims, Johnston said in effect, they must hear him out.

The audience, which likely included members of the Taliban, listened as Johnston then quoted Jesus' command to turn the other cheek. As followers of Allah, Johnston said, they must also be followers of Jesus, considered to be a prophet. And because Jesus said to turn the other cheek, these Muslims should follow Jesus' example and not launch unprovoked attacks on those they consider enemies.

Despite the school's links to terrorism, the audience warmed to Johnston's rebuke. Soon someone asked, "Are there other parallels between Muhammad's teaching and Jesus?" Later, another participant greeted Johnston with a hand over his heart. "You have made me very, very happy," he said. "We thought all Americans hated us."

This is one example of how Johnston's long, tedious work in the Northwest Frontier Province has borne unexpected fruit. When the Taliban kidnapped 18 Korean missionaries in Afghanistan last year, Johnston used his contacts in the region to help secure their release.

A FOREIGN SERVICE VOID

Johnston's work goes against the traditional diplomatic grain. "The main purpose of foreign policy," says former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, "is to persuade other countries to do what we want." In her book *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Albright says that diplomats use everything from reason and logic to the threat of military force to achieve their ends. She also says that typically, religion

Goodwill Ambassador: Johnston met with Muslim leaders in Pakistan, including the chairman of the Muslim Christian Federation International (left). MCFI last fall co-sponsored a workshop for madrassa teachers alongside Johnston's think tank.

is never a consideration. As the Clinton administration negotiated in the Balkans and the Middle East, she says, expressing the standard foreign-policy approach, "we hoped, nevertheless, to devise a legal formula clever enough to quiet the emotions generated by the past."

It took 9/11 to awaken Albright to religion's role in international relations, but

[Profile](#)

five years after 9/11, the topic at a high-level strategic initiatives discussion at the Pentagon was still, "Is religion significant?" Chris Seiple, president of the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE) (CT, May 2007), participated in the event. He was flabbergasted that military leaders, particularly given the religiously motivated violence in Iraq, needed to ask the question.

Johnston, now 69-years-old, founded the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) eight years ago because he saw religious faith as a catalyst for peacemaking, instead of a basis for conflict (CT, April 2007). Johnston, an evangelical who attends the prominent Falls Church in Virginia, has learned that Muslims will listen more closely to a Christian than to the typical secular Westerner. Johnston doesn't evangelize, but his center's Christian motivation and framework are clear. "If you can operate on a faith-based basis, you find that, particularly with Muslims, they really open up," says Johnston. "This is what they like to think they're about. They get very uncomfortable dealing with just secular constructs."

ICRD is working with madrassa leaders in the Northwest Frontier Province to reform these training centers of Islamic militancy. By appealing to the schools' centuries-long tradition of education and scholarship, Johnston hopes to add mathematics, science, and literature to their curricula. And he hopes to inspire critical thinking.

Now the madrassas teach Islam by requiring students to memorize the Qur'an. "But they don't have any idea what it says," Johnston says. "They're memorizing in Arabic. Their language is Urdu." When local militants come along and "misappropriate a little scripture . . . these kids are easy prey. They've got no ability to question, no ability to challenge."

ICRD isn't the first group to address the madrassas, but Johnston is tapping into the desire of leaders and their students to be, first and foremost, good Muslims. "They don't trust the West, and they don't trust Pakistan's government," says Azhar Hussain, ICRD's vice president for preventive diplomacy and a Muslim native of Pakistan. Instead of insisting, as the government and British colonial policy did, that the madrassas expand their curricula, Hussain first educated leaders on their schools' illustrious history. "That opened the door. As

soon as self-criticism began, we could talk about moving forward."

So far, 2,000 teachers have been trained, and ICRD is enlisting Pakistani universities to help because the demand is overwhelming. But Hussain, who once attended a madrassa, says that while many schools are eager to improve, many educators don't know the subjects they're trying to teach, and students might walk away in frustration. "It will be hard to bring them back," Hussain says.

Johnston has become an elder statesman

But by expanding the curriculum and promoting critical thinking, Johnston expects ICRD will eventually counter the forces that create militants.

NO NAÏVETÉ

Johnston doesn't approach his work with naïveté, however. After his Navy service, he worked in the office of emergency preparedness for the Nixon White House, reporting on occasion to Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. Johnston has never had the luxury of speaking in platitudes.

Seiple says Johnston "tries to walk the ground in the cold light of day," with the realism of a hard-nosed diplomat. After his work in the White House, Johnston taught international security at Harvard and then ran the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the respected foreign-relations think tank in Washington, D.C.

At CSIS, Johnston began investigating how religion could play a role in resolving intractable conflict. He was inspired by relationships built through the National Prayer Breakfast. Johnston tells the story in his book (edited with Cynthia Sampson) *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, of how members of the U.S. government worked outside official channels to avert war between Kenya and Somalia.

"In 1981, an American and his son who were involved with the National Prayer Breakfast landed at the airport in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, en route to visit President [Daniel arap] Moi in Kenya." The two countries had been involved in a long-running border dispute that had already provoked a war. The two Americans met with the presidents of both countries and "discussed the power, importance, and results of men and

women meeting in the spirit of Christ around the world."

Johnston, who watched all this from the sidelines, realized both the power of faith to resolve international conflicts and the inability of the U.S. government to deal with religious clashes, so he began working on *Religion*. "Over the course of the seven years of that book's production," Johnston says, "the Berlin Wall came down and ethnic conflict started blossoming. All of a sudden you have all these identity-based conflicts permeating

the geopolitical landscape and exceeding the grasp of traditional diplomacy."

Following its launch in 1994, the book made waves among foreign policy experts and government officials, because it foresaw the ethnic and religious conflicts that were already starting to erupt following the collapse of Communism. "During the cold war, there was no place for religion, culture, or ethnic identity," says Seiple, "because we could explain the system so clearly between two great powers who were competing worldwide."

As the book earned acclaim, Johnston says, he created a preventive diplomacy program at CSIS. But the environment of the think tank constrained Johnston's ability to "actively intervene overseas. So I left the think tank, as it were, to form a do tank."

In 2000, Johnston formed ICRD. "We go overseas, and we intervene. Of course our trademark calling is to make religion part of the solution."

SHARI'AH'S SECOND CLASS

Walter Russell Mead (CT, March 2008), a fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, says focusing on one particular aspect of diplomacy, such as religion, will take you only so far. Mead says evangelicals and other religious groups tend to get focused on specific issues, rather than more general policy debates. "Religious freedom is good, along with [addressing] HIV and disaster relief," Mead says. "But what the



country really needs is to have evangelicals engaging what American power is for, contributing to national discussion on big picture issues.”

It is easy to be marginalized when you're only interested in one piece of the pie. “The big decisions will be done in a room where you're not a part of the conversation.”

Still, Johnston's approach has had more than modest success. His first project was to assist in brokering a peace deal between the Christian South in Sudan and the Mus-

A previous peace agreement in 1972 broke down because, Johnston says, “nothing had been done to cement new understandings at the grassroots level.” And when war broke out again, it was for the same reasons. “Rather than focusing on getting the peace agreement, I felt that we would be doing greater service by putting in place an interreligious council. Under the auspices of that council, [there would be] a committee to protect religious freedom.

“We weren't there to abolish Shari'ah,”

lim-on-Muslim conflict), they've honored that commitment,” Johnston says, “to the tune of more than half a million dollars in land and funding to permit the building of new churches and to provide restitution for past seizure of church properties.”


Since that first peacemaking attempt, ICRD has begun projects in Kashmir, Afghanistan, and Syria.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Despite the rise in religious conflict over the last 20 years, efforts to bring religion into international relations are still not much appreciated, much less followed, in the foreign policy establishment.

“Faith-based diplomacy understands that religion is at the heart of identity,” Seiple says. “If you don't know how to work within that context, then you're never going to be able to do anything.” Johnston's groundbreaking academic work as well as his on-the-ground success, Seiple says, have made room for other organizations to work in faith-based diplomacy, including IGE. “Doug is John the Baptist out there in the wilderness, saying ‘wake up’ to international relations people.”

Johnston has become an elder statesman and a model for evangelical overseas engagement. Bob Andringa, ex-president of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities and a former congressman, has known Johnston since the '70s. “I was struck by how Doug modeled intellectual openness and understanding of the world and how diplomacy worked, and had an evangelical faith.” Johnston reached out to engage Muslims before 9/11—well before the evangelical community as a whole began thinking about it, says Andringa. “Doug is a unique person, gifted by experience and education as very, very few are in the evangelical community.”

Johnston says his focus was inspired by Matthew 5:9, in which Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” While remaining committed to Jesus, Johnston says he sees the image of God in all people. With that common ground, Johnston has shown it is possible to make friends out of enemies. 

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and a model for overseas evangelical engagement.



Religion Round Table: Johnston met with Taliban commanders in 2007 in the mountains of Pakistan.

lim government in the capital of Khartoum. At the time, “Under the Clinton administration the policy toward

Sudan was one of isolation and demonization,” Johnston says. “The problem is, when you isolate and demonize, you lose all your leverage. You've got no ability to influence the situation in a positive way.”

Experts call international involvement like Johnston's “Track Two” diplomacy. “You can interact and intervene in situations where governments cannot,” Johnston says. And intervene they did. “We set out to establish relationships of trust with the Islamic regime, and from that vantage point inspired them to take some steps toward peace they otherwise wouldn't [have taken].”

After 18 visits to the country, Johnston's work in Sudan culminated in a conference between Christians and Muslims.

Johnston says. “We were there to answer that very simple question of, ‘What steps can an Islamic government take to alleviate the second-class status of non-Muslims in a Shari'ah context?’”

ICRD first convinced the government to allow the creation of this independent council, which would have the authority to criticize the government. By the end of the conference, Christians and Muslims alike said it was the first time they had spoken heart to heart.

The agreement, now five years old, included the creation of an independent body charged with holding the government accountable for its religious policy. The government allowed leadership on the council that Johnston wanted but Khartoum initially opposed. And it agreed to listen to the recommendations of the council. “Darfur notwithstanding (as that is a Mus-

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