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On Faith

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Religion a crucial tool in U.S. foreign policy

By Douglas M. Johnston

It is past time to accommodate in a meaningful way the post-Cold War centrality of the religious factors that permeate today's geopolitical landscape. As long-time practitioners of the art of *realpolitik*, U.S. decision makers have shown a general disregard for the influence of religious ideas and forces in their foreign policy calculations. This purposeful exclusion, however, raises a question: What constitutes a more credible definition of *realpolitik* --One that sees the world complete and whole or one that is artificially constrained by dogmatic secularism?

Indicative of the challenge is a recent statement by Sebastian Gorka, an expert on Irregular Warfare at the National Defense University, before the [House Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities on June 22, 2011](#):

“It is very difficult, if not impossible, to provide the contextual knowledge we need to understand and defeat our enemy if we rely solely upon anthropologists and social scientists.... Today our multi-disciplinary analysis of the enemy and his doctrine just as much requires-if not more so-the expertise of the regional historian and theologian, the specialist who knows when and how Sunni Islam split from Shia Islam and what the difference is between the Meccan and Medinan verses of the Koran. We should ask ourselves honestly, how many national security practitioners know the answers to these questions, or at least have somewhere to turn to within government to provide them such essential expertise.”

I suggest several steps for incorporating religious considerations into the practice of U.S. foreign policy. First, there is the need to address the political ambiguities surrounding our separation of church and state that are actively inhibiting many of our political and military leaders from addressing the religious dimensions of the threats they are facing. Here, the president should task the Department of Justice to provide the legal case for a policy of religious engagement as a component of U.S. foreign policy and take the necessary steps to secure bipartisan support for this policy from the congressional leadership. Equipping our government officials to deal with religion as an undeniable phenomenon in international politics should be impervious to constitutional challenge.

The second step involves realignment of the executive branch. Here, I believe there are four organizational alternatives for the State Department, each of which would enable the department to address religious factors in the normal course of doing business. The most promising of these would involve placing the new function under the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, who, in keeping with his or her expanded responsibilities, would be retitled the Under Secretary for Political and Religious Affairs.

Key to each of the above structural options would be the assignment of a well-qualified religion attaché to those U.S. missions in countries where religion has particular salience. The critics will instantly suggest that establishing such a position is the surest way to guarantee its marginalization, but that is not necessarily so. By assigning these attachés to the political section of the embassy staff and giving them the same status and comparable responsibilities as political/military officers, these political/religion officers would soon be influencing mainstream decisions in an equally helpful way.

The third step calls for top-cover endorsement by the president who should (1) impress upon his or her Secretary of State and National Security Advisor the urgent need to include religious imperatives in their foreign policy calculations and (2) require that ambassadors as part of their in-country responsibilities take steps to anticipate and deal with religious factors that could directly or indirectly affect the U.S. national interest.

Another idea that should also be considered is the appointment of authoritative religious figures as special representatives of the president, one each for Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and a sixth for the outliers. Not only could these representatives perform an important liaison function with their religious communities, but their individual and collective presence could help inform our foreign policy and public diplomacy with a more nuanced understanding of their respective faith traditions. Further, by working together on selected joint projects as part of the president's team, they could demonstrate for all to see, the benefits of working cooperatively across the religious divides.

Measures such as these would go far toward enabling us to escape the law of unintended consequences to which we have all-too-often fallen victim.

Douglas Johnston is president and founder of the [International Center for Religion and Diplomacy](#). His new book is [Religion, Terror, and Error: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Challenge of Spiritual Engagement](#),

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http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-voices/post/religion-a-crucial-tool-in-us-foreign-policy/2011/08/09/gIQAPpha6I_blog.html