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FAITH-BASED DIPLOMACY:  
BRIDGING THE RELIGIOUS DIVIDE

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## **Faith-Based Diplomacy: Bridging the Religious Divide**

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## **Faith-Based Diplomacy: Bridging the Religious Divide**

I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the dynamics of faith-based diplomacy and to suggest how this form of diplomacy can contribute to the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. First of all, what is it? Simply put, it means incorporating religious concerns into the practice of international politics. Even more simply put, it means making religion part of the solution in some of the intractable, identity-based conflicts that exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy.

Why is it important? Just about anywhere one turns these days, one finds a religious dimension to the conflict: Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Kashmir, Sudan, Indonesia, Chechnya, Kosovo — the list goes on. Whether religion is a root cause of the conflict as it probably comes closest to being in the Middle East (where there are competing religious claims for the same piece of territory), or merely a badge of identity and mobilizing vehicle for nationalist or ethnic passions (as has typically been the case in the Balkans), it is nevertheless central to much of the strife that is taking place.

It is also the case that most of these conflicts have an Islamic interface, driven largely by the collision of globalization with traditional values, often embedded in religion. But there is another dynamic at play as well. If you think back to the beginning of the last millennium when Christianity and Islam were locked in mortal combat over their mutual claims to the Holy Lands and then fast-forward to the present, you get the uneasy feeling that not a whole lot has changed. One wonders why it is that these two world religions, which share so much in common theologically — and they do — either talk past one another at best or, alternatively, resort to conflict to settle their differences. I submit that at least part of the reason has to do with the fact that they speak different languages. Muslims speak the language of integration — of religion and politics; while we in the West speak the language of separation — of church and state. Even the same words assume different meanings. We say “secular,” they hear “Godless,” when what was intended was “freedom to worship as you please.” They hear “Godless” in large part because of the cultural image we project.

The events of September 11th are one of the more severe manifestations of where all of this can lead. In the wake of those attacks, the United States has been pursuing a dual-track strategy — a track of justice and retribution in Afghanistan and a track of pre-emption in Iraq. Whether one

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agrees or disagrees with this strategy, it is at least understandable in light of the fact that the leading vital interest of every nation-state is protecting the security of its citizens. However, unless we complement our military action with an effective strategy of cultural engagement, all we will do in the final analysis is expand the pool of future terrorists and drive ourselves toward a police state as we seek greater security in an increasingly insecure world.

Samuel Huntington noted in his “Clash of Civilizations” that religion is the defining element of culture; and that is not good news for the United States. As Iraq clearly demonstrates, we have little, if any, ability to deal with religious differences in a hostile setting. Nor do we have any ability to counter demagogues like bin Laden or Milosevic who manipulate religion for their own purposes. This is due in large measure to the fact that religion has been off the Western policymaker’s screen for as long as I can remember because of our long-held commitment to the rational-actor model of decision-making. Sadly, we have also let our rigorous separation of church and state become a crutch for not doing our homework to understand how religion shapes the worldviews and political aspirations of others.

Our inabilities in this area, however, are not solely a function of not knowing how to deal with religion. Directly or indirectly, our separation of church and state also imposes perceived constraints on what we can do. In Iraq, for example, there were instances early on in the conflict where modest investments on the religious side could have had significant payoff on the security front, but those investments were not made for fear of running up against the “establishment clause” — favoring one religion over the other and the like. Thus we find ourselves relegated to fighting with one hand behind our back.

It was in anticipation of these kinds of challenges that the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD) was established in August of 1999 to perform four functions: (1) bridge the political and religious spheres in support of peacemaking, (2) recruit and deploy inter-religious action teams to trouble-spots where conflict threatens or has already broken out, (3) train religious clergy and laity in the tasks of peacemaking, and (4) provide feedback to theologians and clergy on interpretations of their teachings that may be contributing to strife and misunderstanding. I should mention that these action teams not only include people with the

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right secular skills to deal with the problem(s) at hand, but their composition reflects the same religious composition as those with whom they will be working on the ground — so that those folks know there's someone on the team who understands their values and religious sensitivities.

Since our establishment, we have been involved in a number of important projects. I will describe two of these to give you a feel for the nature of our involvements. First, our work in Pakistan.

### **Pakistan**

This past summer a young lady from a village in Balochistan (the “hot zone” of Pakistan near the Afghan and Iranian borders) was caught talking on her cell phone at 2:00 am with a young man from another village in whom she had an interest. For this violation of tribal custom, the village elders decided that she should die, along with her mother, her sister and the boy's mother, and that the boy should lose his nose and ears. Upon learning of this, a local madrasa (religious school) leader from the girl's village felt compelled to intervene because of discussions on human rights in which he had participated during a training workshop sponsored by our center.

With considerable trepidation, the madrasa leader sought permission from the elders to mediate the situation on the basis of Qur'anic principles. By pointing out that the Qur'an has no restrictions against a woman talking to a man and referring to selected passages that encourage the peaceful resolution of differences, he was able to resolve the situation without anyone being harmed. In other words, religion trumped tribalism in a context where it is often difficult to determine where one ends and the other begins. I should point out, too, that it is not always a given that religion will triumph in such a contest. As some tribesmen are quick to point out, their tribal customs date back 3,000 years, whereas Islam has only been around for 1,400 years.

The above workshop was one of a series that ICRD has sponsored over the past three years in its efforts to reform the religious schools of Pakistan, including those that gave birth to the Taliban. While these madrasas were once the peaks of learning excellence in the Middle Ages (indeed, it was European exposure to them that led to creation of the university system in the West), they

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regressed over time under the influence of colonialism and other factors to the point where most of them today do little more than focus on memorization of the Qur'an and the study of Islamic principles.

ICRD's goals in this project have been twofold: (1) to expand the madrasa curriculums to include the physical and social sciences, with a special emphasis on religious tolerance and human rights (especially women's rights), and (2) to transform the pedagogy in a way that will produce critical thinking skills among the students. The latter is particularly important. Because students memorize the Qur'an in Arabic and their own language is Urdu, they are often clueless as to what it means. This makes them particularly vulnerable to local militants who come along and misappropriate scripture in order to recruit them to their cause. With no ability to challenge or question, these students become very easy prey.

Thus far, the success of our approach has exceeded expectations and stands in stark contrast to the failure of past attempts by the government of Pakistan to influence these schools. Because the madrasas are independently funded, they have resisted government reforms for fear that they will ultimately lead to the secularization of their curriculums. The center's success, on the other hand, has been a function of (1) conducting the project in such a way that the madrasas feel it is their own reform effort and not something imposed from the outside (by giving them significant ownership in the process), and (2) inspiring them with their own heritage, pointing out how many of the pioneering breakthroughs in the arts and sciences, including religious tolerance, took place under Islam a thousand years ago. Once madrasa leaders internalize this, they begin to walk a little taller and start thinking that perhaps they can, in fact, do better.

A month or so ago, at the height of the conflict in Lebanon, I visited several of the harder-line madrasas with which we had no prior involvement. One was a Wahhabi madrasa outside of Lahore that had been linked in the popular media to the London bombers. Another was a Deobandi madrasa in Karachi that had spawned the two most violent anti-Shiite terrorist groups and that was thought to be the chief supplier of fighters for Kashmir and Chechnya. As one might expect, there was a lot of rage in the air over U.S. foreign policy.

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I was able to get past that rage by pointing out that our center was not a government organization, nor had it ever received any government funding. And while it was pretty clear the U.S. government had made some mistakes of late, it was important for them to recall the instances in which the United States had intervened on behalf of Muslims — in Bosnia, Kosovo and Somalia. Lost in most accounts of Somalia is any mention of the more than 100,000 Somali lives that were saved as a result of the humanitarian aspects of that intervention.

I further noted that while the United States has clearly been operating with a double standard in the Middle East, owing to its strategic relationship with Israel, so too have a number of Arab states been operating with double standards as they complain mightily of Israeli mistreatment and then turn a deaf ear to Palestinian pleas for humanitarian assistance. In short, there are double standards everywhere one turns, driven by perceived national self-interest.

I then quoted from memory several important passages from the Qur'an that enabled us to begin discussing various values that we hold in common. By this point, the rage had all but totally dissipated, and we were able to engage in a useful give-and-take discussion. The bottom line of all this? Mutual engagement based on demonstrated respect for the other's values provides far greater leverage to influence a situation than do policies based on isolation and demonization. Indeed, I was amazed that the madrasa leaders even heard, much less accepted, the points made with regard to U.S. foreign policy.

### **Sudan**

The second project I want to discuss is the work we have been doing in Sudan. Seven years ago, the center began working in the North of that country, with a specific goal of persuading the Islamic regime to take steps toward peace that they might not otherwise take in their long-running civil war with the Christian/African Traditionalist South. This effort eventually led to the establishment of an Inter-religious Council in 2003 that has been bringing top Christian and Muslim religious leaders together on a monthly basis to surface and resolve their problems. In addition, a Committee to Protect Religious Freedom was also formed (under the auspices of this council), which has been bringing accountability to this highly sensitive area. At the same time,

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we worked behind the scenes in Washington to get the Bush administration engaged in forcing a peace agreement. That engagement eventually paid off, and after 21 years of conflict, leaving more than two million dead and four million displaced, the struggle finally came to an end.

The council's accomplishments over the several years of its existence have been quite impressive. In just the first few months, it generated more in the way of concrete measures to benefit non-Muslims than the churches had been able to achieve over the previous 10 years working on their own. The remarkable aspect of all this is that it has taken place within the context of an Islamic dictatorship. Not only did the Khartoum regime agree to the formation of an independent council that has as part of its mandate holding the government accountable on its religious policies, but it also agreed to take the council's recommendations seriously. Darfur notwithstanding (which is an internal Muslim conflict), the government has thus far honored its commitment — to the tune of more than \$500,000 in real estate and funding to provide land for the building of new churches and restitution for the past seizure of church properties.

The 1972 peace agreement that concluded the country's first civil war (immediately following independence in the 1950s) eventually broke down because nothing was done to cement new understandings at the grassroots level. It is hoped that the council and the committee can help ensure a lasting peace this time around.

These are but two examples of our center's activities, which also include projects in Kashmir, Iran, Syria and the United States (with the American Muslim community). As one might suspect, our approach is never the same, since every situation is unique — driven as much by personalities as circumstances. Suffice it to say, though, the stakes are enormous and the need for this kind of engagement is urgent.

Let me close by noting that for the better part of the last decade, the Pentagon has been planning against the threat of what is termed "asymmetric warfare" — precisely what bin Laden used on 9/11 to rock the United States back on its heels. I seriously doubt there is enough money in the U.S. Treasury to protect the country against the full range of asymmetric possibilities and feel strongly that we should develop some asymmetric capabilities of our own — capabilities that



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don't merely "respond to the guns" but that get to the ideas behind the guns. Faith-based diplomacy represents one such capability, but there are others that should be developed as well.

Among these are a sound working relationship with our own American Muslim community and a more effective use of our military chaplains. If the U.S. government and the American Muslim community could start working together for the common good, the United States would be able to (1) bridge its relations with Muslim countries overseas more effectively, (2) avoid missteps in foreign policy and public diplomacy through a better understanding of the Muslim perspective, and (3) encourage the further intellectual and spiritual development of Islam through support for an American Muslim leadership role in this area. With regard to the latter, American Muslims enjoy greater freedom of thought than any other Muslim community in the world, and they bridge modernity with the contemporary practice of Islam on a daily basis.

As for the chaplains, with appropriate training and expanded rules of engagement, they could enhance the conflict prevention and resolution capabilities of their military commands. Here, it is interesting to note that when French troops found themselves in tight situations during the Algerian War for Independence, it was their military chaplains that they sent out to negotiate with the Muslim insurgents. Even the authors of secularism understood the need to deal with religious imperatives.

Another possibility would involve the creation of a religion attaché within the U.S. Foreign Service for posting to those Missions in countries where religion has particular salience. As things currently stand, complex religious issues typically get pushed aside by "more pressing business," whether these issues are being handled by the cultural affairs officer, the political officer, or the ambassador him or herself. The nuances surrounding religious questions are many and varied and should rightfully command the attention of people who have been trained to handle them.

Unlike the chaplains who constitute a resource-in-being, the religion attachés would require new funding. It is estimated that a cadre of 30 such attachés could handle our global needs at an

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annual cost of \$10 million — a small price to pay considering the billions we are already spending on symptoms, such as baggage inspectors and the like.

In much the same manner that setting a counter-fire is often the best antidote for a blaze that is raging out of control, so too does religious reconciliation offer a potential counter to religious terrorism. Incorporating religion as part of the solution, however, is not without its challenges. Beyond requiring a special set of skills, the work itself is physically, emotionally and psychologically draining. And it is by no means risk-free. Most conflicts are accompanied by vested sets of interests that want to see them continue, and more than a few spiritually-motivated peacemakers have paid the ultimate price for their efforts. Despite such risks and whatever other discomfort one may feel in navigating the uncharted waters of spiritual engagement, the stakes are simply too high to refuse the challenge. Only time will tell if we are up to the task.

*This paper is based on a talk given to the Secretary's Open Forum at the U.S. Department of State on Dec. 8, 2006. It is similar in many ways to the presentation Dr. Johnston gave at the Baker Institute on April 8, 2009.*