

# Commentary: Religion and Foreign Policy

July 26, 2010

“Once considered a private matter by western policymakers, religion is now playing an increasingly influential role - both positive and negative - in the public sphere.” This is the opening sentence of a major foreign policy report [Engaging Religious Communities Abroad. A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy](#) by the Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs.

Suzii Paynter Historically, U.S. government leaders and foreign affairs professionals have considered the light of the faithful to be firmly under a bushel - at least when they made decisions about public policy. But as global connections are more interrelated and policies cross boundaries of culture and belief, the old paradigm of ignoring religious content and context is changing. Dialogue and nascent relationships have begun. Major universities, think tanks, government agencies, denominational representatives and worldwide compassionate ministries are coming together.

Religion has gone from being virtually ignored in foreign policy to being acknowledged. This is clearly stage one of a relationship and is accompanied by much of the same awkwardness of any new encounter. If religion is being acknowledged in policy circles, the relationship is soon to advance to a process of more integration. In the past three years, I have participated in several forums that bring religious and foreign policy leaders together. Both sides are learning. The public policy folks are often strong on persuasion and information. The religious leaders are almost always trying to convey the diversity of religious interests and voices -

there is no religious monolith in the 21st century either within religious traditions or among religious traditions.

One clear development is the inclusion of the study of religion and foreign policy at prestigious academic institutions. The level of analysis and the intriguing studies of religion and foreign policy are building a body of complex data and reference for current and future engagement. As a result of its robust initiative on Religion and Foreign Policy, the Council on Foreign Relations convenes a group of religious leaders with leading policy makers to focus on specific issues and countries every summer. The meetings have become robust and [the reading list](#) is growing as scholars add their important voices.



The next stages of engagement will surely be marked by more textured integration of religion and foreign policy. But when moving beyond curiosity and polite protocol to true engagement the defining questions for both the religious sector and the public policy sector yield powerful and complex responses. .

At a recent consultation at Wheaton College, hosted by Bread for the World, the Micah Challenge and the Center Applied Christian Ethics, the topic was “Government, Foreign Assistance and God’s Mission in the World.” I am not sure I ever expected to see those topics together on a

dais, but the reports and reflections from mission leaders and USAID program planners was unexpectedly robust. The consultation was guided by three questions: How do we understand the biblical and theological grounding for the government's role in addressing global poverty? Why, should, and how can churches engage in the larger discussion of government responses to global poverty? How do we understand the church's global poverty advocacy role in the context of God's mission in the world?

The group of about a hundred evangelical leaders worked to articulate a position statement on [Government, the Poor and Gods Mission in the World](#). It was valuable to articulate biblical and theological affirmations, and to begin to try to describe informed Christian engagement. Although the declaration is still a work in progress, it is clearly a discussion that needs to continue and my hope is that Texas Baptists can be an integral part.

Are you asking yourself about now, what does this have to do with Baptist Church, County Seat Texas? More than you think. Do you send or support missions in other countries the world? Do you have a returning veteran in your congregation from Iraq or Afghanistan? Are your church members relocating around the globe for school, work or for short term missions? What if the worldwide definition of religious liberty changed tomorrow to be only a position of anti-defamation? (no disparaging remarks) with no protection of free speech ( especially for Baptist minorities)? Returning to the compelling report of the Chicago Council on Global Affairs ( opening quote) it asserts important patterns of the intersection of religion and foreign policy that will affect our future:

- 1. The influence of religious groups is changing virtually every sector of society -politics, culture, business and science.*
- 2. Patterns of religious identification are changing worldwide. (For*

example: [African nations are more than 80% religiously converted since 1980.](#)

*3. Religion is being transformed by globalism.*

*4. Religion plays a role that government cannot and will not.*

*5. Religion is being used to escalate tensions in many areas of worldwide conflict.*

*6. The growing significance of religious freedom as a universal human right and the source of social stability.*

“For God so loved the world” is still our call. The conference table of the 21st century has a chair marked for our participation.