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ENGAGING DIPLOMACY AND RELIGION

Report Calls for Attention to Faith Dimension of Politics

By Father John Flynn, LC

ROME, FEB. 28, 2010 (Zenit.org).- In recent years, religion has come to be seen as a problem or a threat to national or international security. One strategy for countering religious extremism has been to attempt to banish faith to the purely private sphere. This is a big mistake, according to a report released Feb. 23 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

The report, "Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy," was authored by a task force of 32 experts, ranging from former government officials, religious leaders, heads of international organizations, and scholars.

Currently, the authors of the report argued, the U.S. government does not have the capacity to fully understand and effectively engage religious communities. There have been improvements in the past years in recognizing the role religion plays in global affairs, but this process is still far from complete.

For better or worse, religion is playing an increasingly influential role in politics, the report observed. The trend to globalization along with new media technologies has facilitated the spread of extremist views. This is not about to go away, the report noted, and it urged the U.S. government not only to improve its knowledge of religious communities and trends, but also to develop better policies to engage believers.

It's important to realize, the report commented, that religion is not some kind of a secondary human experience without any bearing on political developments and that we can

therefore ignore. "Religion -- through its motivating ideas and the mobilizing power of its institutions -- is a driver of politics in its own right," the report affirmed.

The report also warned against viewing religion solely through the focus of terrorism, as this would lead to overlooking the positive role of religion in dealing with global problems and promoting peace.

It's also necessary to move beyond a focus just on the Muslim world and to take into account other religious communities, the report said.

Global

While attention is often focused on the Middle East when it comes to the interaction between religion and politics the report pointed out that religion is a factor in many other countries.

China, for example, has a number of indigenous new religious movements such as Falun Gong as well as a rapidly-growing sector of legal and underground Christian churches and Muslim communities.

Buddhist monks have justified, and even promoted, conflict against Tamils in Sri Lanka, as well as marching against a repressive regime in Burma. Tensions between Christian and Muslims exist in Nigeria, and Indonesia, but also in European cities like London, Amsterdam, and Paris.

In India political debates are often influenced by different visions of Hinduism and the proper relationship of Hindus to other ethnic and religious communities.

The rise of Pentecostalism in Latin America and of Christian churches and preachers in Africa and Asia are other important religious developments that warrant attention, the report added.

And while religion has fomented bloody conflicts in countries such as Bosnia and Sudan, it has also promoted peace and forgiveness in South Africa and Northern Ireland. Alongside

religious extremists there are other figures such as Pope John Paul II and the Dalai Lama, the report noted.

"The many examples of religious contributions to democratization and of religious leaders who help provide foreign assistance, implement development programs, and build peace are emblematic of how religion can play a positive role everywhere in the world," the task force affirmed.

Patterns

The members of the task force identified six principal patterns in the role religion plays in international affairs.

1. The influence of religious groups -- some old and others new -- is growing in many areas of the world and affects virtually all sectors of society.
2. Changing patterns of religious identification in the world are having significant political implications.
3. Religion has benefited and been transformed by globalization, but it also has become a primary means of organizing opposition to it.
4. Religion is playing an important public role where governments lack capacity and legitimacy in periods of economic and political stress.
5. Religion is often used by extremists as a catalyst for conflict and a means of escalating tensions with other religious communities.
6. The growing salience of religion today is deepening the political significance of religious freedom as a universal human right and a source of social and political stability.

In more concrete terms the report pointed out how these trends can present challenges in making policy decisions. For example, while the United States supports the spread of democracy, in some countries the introduction of popular elections could give greater power

to religious extremists who often have anti-American views. So there needs to be a reconciliation between the promotion of human rights and democracy with protecting national interests, according to the task force.

The report also pointed out that the promotion of religious freedom as part of the foreign policy of the United States needs to be done in a way that is not seen as some kind of challenge by Western society on local religions or customs.

Recommendations

In dealing with religion's role in public affairs the report advocated that the best way to counter extremism is through a greater engagement with religion and religious communities.

This means listening carefully to the concerns and fears they have and then entering into a substantive dialogue with them. At the same time it's important not to overstep this dialogue by intervening in theological disputes or by trying to manipulate religion, the task force warned.

One of the most important things the United States must do, the report noted, is to learn how to communicate effectively. Therefore, in addition to listening to what religious communities are saying government needs to be more effective in presenting America's own views. It's also vital to keep in mind that actions often speak louder than words, so government policies must back up its media strategy, the report added.

Among the measures proposed in the report was the need to give a comprehensive instruction to diplomats, military personnel and other officials, on the role of religion in world affairs.

The report also recommended that the United States continue to promote religious freedom. "Imposed limitations on religious freedom weaken democracy and civil society, poison political discourse, and foment extremism," the task force commented.

Healthy cooperation

Religion's role in politics was a theme touched upon by Benedict XVI in his Jan. 11 address to the members of the diplomatic corps.

"Sadly, in certain countries, mainly in the West, one increasingly encounters in political and cultural circles, as well in the media, scarce respect and at times hostility, if not scorn, directed towards religion and towards Christianity in particular," he commented.

Echoing the views expressed in the Chicago Council report the Pontiff said that: "It is clear that if relativism is considered an essential element of democracy, one risks viewing secularity solely in the sense of excluding or, more precisely, denying the social importance of religion."

Such an approach, however, only creates confrontation and division, the Pope pointed out. "There is thus an urgent need to delineate a positive and open secularity which, grounded in the just autonomy of the temporal order and the spiritual order, can foster healthy cooperation and a spirit of shared responsibility," he urged. A cooperation that will greatly benefit efforts to promote peace in the world.