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World's religions seen as solving conflicts

Sara Angle Catholic News Service | Jul. 18, 2011

WASHINGTON -- Few would argue against the notion that to solve conflict created by religious intolerance, prejudice and discrimination, it is essential to understand how religion motivates believers and shapes their worldviews, that respecting all religions is not enough.

While religion can be a cause of conflict, it carries political leverage that many say makes it a source for solutions and a tool for peace building.

"We are giving a whole government effort to put religion on the table," said the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook, the new U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

The United States is "on the front lines of confronting conflict and urging and pressing governments" to fight for religious freedom, she told Catholic News Service in a phone interview.

Her comments came in response to remarks of participants in a recent panel discussion at the National Press Club in Washington on the role of faith-based diplomacy and the use of religion to resolve conflict, especially with regard to Pakistan.

The press club discussion, held in mid-June, focused on a new book by Douglas M. Johnston, president and founder of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, who says the U.S. should realign its view on the role religion plays in politics.

Among those joining Johnston were James Glassman, former undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs, and Edwin Meese, former U.S. attorney general.

Johnston said his book -- "Religion, Terror and Error" -- is a "how-to" book for U.S. foreign policy as it relates to religion.

In it, he addresses what he says are political ambiguities surrounding religion and the state; describes the need for additional training of military chaplains; offers suggestions for reorganizing the executive branch of the U.S. government to create a religion attache position; gives examples of effective conflict prevention; and highlights the important work of nongovernmental organizations.

Johnston's book also introduces the idea of "organic suasion," a method of change from within. He specifically focuses on one of his ongoing projects at the international center -- a teacher-training workshop to reform madrasas, Pakistani religious schools, by transforming the pedagogy.

Over the past seven years, he said, the workshops have had success in more than 20,000 madrasas. The project works to expand the curriculum to include issues of human rights and women's rights, but suggested changes are grounded in Islam. The program also appeals to Islamic heritage, respects the importance of having ownership in the culture and is taught "with humility."

By changing the education of young Pakistani boys, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy hopes to change the future of Pakistan by combating the nation's historically violent past, according to Johnston.

Speaking of government methods of solving religious-based conflict, Johnston said, "most of what we've done today is addressed the symptoms, but we need to address the cause."

Johnston said in his book that "there is nothing more persuasive on or off the battlefield" than religion.

Glassman said, "We need to take the tools of public diplomacy as seriously as we take the tools of violence" and "engage the persuasive impact of religion."

He described Johnston's approach as "a new avenue to diplomacy," adding that the U.S. needed to "address the ideas behind the guns."

Meese said he believes religion is often excluded as a solution to political issues because there is a misunderstanding of what the concept of "separation of church and state" means.

Meese cited the First Amendment, which says the government cannot endorse one religion over another or establish a national church, but "there is no mention that government should exclude religion in their activities."

"There is no prohibition from properly using religion and providing a bridge between people," said Meese.

Meese said Johnston's work provides an accurate depiction of what a proper relationship is between church and state, and his approach would allow readers to "rediscover what our founders had in mind."

Glassman said the problem now is that "the State Department is not constructed to address issues of religion."

Johnston agreed, saying the department is "still tightly bound in a straightjacket of dogmatism." He also emphasized the pragmatic side of the issue: "It's not that they need to be religious, it's just that they need to be informed about religion."

But Rev. Cook told CNS the State Department is already taking an active role in addressing issues of religion.

For example, the Foreign Service Institute in June launched a new program offering an annual religion and foreign policy course to all foreign service officers. Rev. Cook said the course was such a success State Department officials hope to expand the program and offer the course more often.

Rev. Cook agrees with Johnson that "education is an ongoing process," saying the State Department is "not afraid of having the conversation" about religion and has monthly religious seminars with scholars, as well as faith round tables.

"The change is already here," she said. "I've come into a structure that exists and we're making it work."

Rev. Cook said she is confident about effecting change. "The structure does not confine me; it compels me."

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