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New State Department office to engage faith groups on policy issues

Brian Roewe | Aug. 12, 2013 NCR Today

A new branch of the U.S. State Department will seek to give greater priority to engaging faith communities on issues of foreign policy.

On Wednesday, Secretary of State John Kerry formally launched [1] the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives, whose mission he described as ?to engage more closely with faith communities around the world, with the belief that we need to partner with them to solve global challenges.?

?In a world where people of all faiths are migrating and mingling like never before,? Kerry said, ?where we are this global community, which we always talk about, we ignore the global impact of religion, in my judgment, at our peril.?

The office developed from the department?s Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, along with its U.S. Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement. Its role will largely involve meeting and collaborating with government offices and officials (both in the U.S. and abroad) that focus on religious issues.

In their day-to-day work, Kerry challenged State Department officials to ?build strong relationships with them and listen to their insights and understand the important contributions that they can make individually and that we can make together.?

Melissa Rogers, director of the White House?s Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, said the new office will work with the Obama administration in engaging religious communities along three objectives: promoting sustainable development and effective humanitarian responses; protecting pluralism and human rights (including religious freedom); and preventing and resolving violent conflict.

The new office would enhance ongoing efforts, Kerry said, such as the work of the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, by growing the outreach network.

Heading the office?s work will be Special Advisor Shaun Casey, a professor of Christian ethics at Washington?s Wesley Theological Seminary. In his remarks, Casey described engaging faith communities in the scope of policy as ?a matter of very great and deep importance.?

?As religious leaders and faith communities shape their environments, they also have an influence and shape our own foreign policy concerns here in the United States. It?s essential for the United States to understand them and to bring them into our diplomacy and development efforts,? he said.

Rogers described the potential religious communities possess ?to spark both positive and negative movement? as an essential reason for the U.S. to better understand and relate to them.

?As the State Department does its work around the world, it must have a firm grasp of these dynamics and it must know how to address them in ways that are informed and intelligent,? she said.

So far, reception to the new office has been tempered.

?I would put this under the rubric of wait-and-see,? retired Ambassador Randolph Bell told Religion News Service [2]. Bell, president of the religious freedom watchdog group First Freedom Center, said the program could prove useful ?if this can lead to an increase in the salience of these rights.?

Knox Thames, director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, called the office?s creation ?a positive and timely step,? seeing its potential as an effective tool in engaging religious communities and promoting religious freedom at a time when movements like the Arab Spring make religion-state issues more relevant.

As for how the new office might blur church-state relations, both Kerry and Rogers sought to clarify any Constitutional concerns.

?And I want to emphasize this to everybody because I know the question will be out there: Is this sort of a departure from the norm? No.,? Kerry said. ?We approach this with the full recognition and understanding of ? Thomas Jefferson?s understanding and admonition about the wall of separation between church and state.

?But what we are doing is guided by the conviction that we have to find ways to translate our faiths into efforts that unify for the greater good. That can be done without crossing any lines whatsoever,? he said.

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[1] http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/212781.htm
[2] http://www.religionnews.com/2013/08/07/ethicist-shaun-casey-to-oversee-religious-engagement-for-state-department/