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Religion & Foreign Policy

Michael Sean Winters | May. 16, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, the Brookings Institution co-hosted an event with George Mason University and City University London on the role of religion in foreign policy. Sara Silvestri from London and Peter Mandaville from George Mason, both of whom were on the panel, have been meeting with foreign policy leaders on both sides of the Atlantic, inquiring about and assessing the degree to which religion is considered in the formulation and execution of foreign policy. They were joined yesterday by Shaun Casey, who serves as special advisor to the U.S. Secretary of State for faith-based and community initiatives, and Merete Bile, an experienced Danish diplomat who is a policy advisor to the European Union?s European External Action Service. The event was moderated by Bill Galston from Brookings with an introduction by E.J. Dionne.

Casey went first and outlined what his office does and what he hopes to accomplish during his tenure at State. He noted that ?religion cuts across almost everything Secretary John Kerry faces today,? yet until recently there was no strategy for integrating religious and civic leaders into foreign policy formation or implementation. There is a great deal of policy expertise among the different offices in Foggy Bottom, Casey said, but a sensitivity to religious issues and people was not ?baked in? to policy formulation. Casey also said that one of his principal tasks is to serve as a conduit for others. Casey, who is always cheerful, seemed undaunted by this task even though he allowed that hundreds of religious actors have brought their agenda items to him. ?There was a lot of pent-up demand to work with State Department on issues of religion and foreign policy,? he said.

This pent-up demand is not all domestic. Casey told of a recent visit to the Holy Land during which he met with the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. The Patriarch greeted Casey with the words, ?Welcome, Dr. Casey, we have been waiting for you for forty years.? Casey said that this is a parable of why his office is needed. Foreign religious actors want to be part of the solution to the problems of diplomacy, and previously, they were rarely if ever consulted, just as religious groups in the United States have acquired a fair amount of policy insight and expertise through their foreign missions.

Casey said he hoped to use his office to help the State Department achieve its goals. He noted that religious groups have an obvious role to play in promoting sustainable development and in the area of global climate change. In the area of conflict prevention and mitigation, ?we need to develop more robust capacity to reach out to religious actors,? Casey said, noting that almost all the current global hot spots from South Sudan to Ukraine to Nigeria contain religious aspects of the conflicts. He said that religious groups were integral to the effort to fight the trend of restricting civil society throughout the world. And, Casey said that the promotion of human rights was one of his office?s principal goals.

This last point made for some interesting conversation among the panelists. Merete Bilde from the EU said that one of the differences between the U.S. and European approaches is that the Europeans understand religious liberty as ?embedded? with other human rights whereas in the U.S., we tend to isolate it and even prioritize it, as evidenced by the creation of an ambassador for international religious freedom, a national commission and, perhaps most importantly, the annual report from that commission that assesses which countries are violating religious liberty the most egregiously. Professor Casey, who has quickly learned the art of diplomacy, tried to

minimize the different approaches but Bill Galston is not the kind of moderator to let a difficult issue be sidetracked by the diplomatic art: He pointed to conflicts in the EU over Jewish and Islamic dietary laws, and quoted a European politician who said that animal rights should trump religious rights. As Galston pointed out, it is hard to imagine any U.S. politician saying something similar.

The other difference in approach between the EU and the U.S. was evident in Bilde?s comments about how to move forward. Like all the panelists, she agreed that what Professor Mandaville called a ?capacity deficit? needed to be addressed, that there needed to be better training in the history and sociology of religion, what she called ?religious literacy? among diplomats and policy makers, that religious considerations needed to be ?mainstreamed? into policymaking. But, it was clear that Bilde was talking mostly about educating bureaucratic elites. She said this transatlantic dialogue that Mandaville and Silvestri had begun was very needed because both the U.S. and EU could learn from each other and help each overcome the secular bias that has traditionally ruled the foreign policy establishment. But, unlike Casey, she did not speak about any domestic religious constituencies, clamoring for attention. The religious actors who interested her were those abroad, in the trouble spots, who could help mitigate a conflict or shed light on an issue or galvanize local support for an initiative. Casey told of the hundreds of U.S. religious groups and leaders that he has met with. Bilde did not indicate that such meetings filled her calendar.

Silvestri made a very fine point, noting that ?too often, foreign policy makers project domestic religious experience abroad? where it hinders a deeper understanding rather than furthering one. This is one tightrope that Casey must walk, bring not just religious awareness and input to policy formulation, but distinguishing between domestic religious interests and biases from the actual experience on the ground in foreign lands. And, Mandeville stated that while Casey?s office is doing great work, if, as all agreed, religious knowledge must be ?baked in? at Foggy Bottom, then the ?dearth of religious literacy? at the State Department will not be overcome by religious training sessions that remain optional. Most of the people who sign up for the training sessions already understand the significance of religion in global societies, and the sessions risk preaching to the choir. He said that in the meetings he and Silvestri had with policymakers, not just religion, but the importance of training in the humanities became obvious. Can I get an ?Amen.?

In the question and answer session, Casey made one of the most interesting points. He said that he hoped at some point the faith-based office at State which he leads would disappear because religious awareness will have been mainstreamed into the training and curricula of all diplomats. He also said that he had no fear of his office becoming counter-productive because of any ?ghetto-ization,? that is, other offices at State would think they have no need to pay attention to religion because Casey?s office was taking care of that. ?We won?t fail because of a lack of buy-in from the leadership of the State Department,? Casey said. Secretary Kerry has given the word that he takes these issues very seriously and wants the other State Department offices working with Casey to advance the agenda.

Sometimes, these Washington conferences are dull and uninformative. But, yesterday?s session at Brookings raised important issues and demonstrated some facts that I think we on the left tend to forget, especially the way the biases of professional classes of diplomats and scholars can deform rather than inform both policy and public opinion. It is somewhat shocking that Foggy Bottom and Brussels, with all their smart people, had apparently neglected the significance of religion for decades, is it not? You can pick almost any decade in the modern era and find someone predicting the death of religion yet, here we are, still motivated by our beliefs about the divine. Casey was very impressive and seems like just the man to correct this deficit that has afflicted our foreign policy culture: He is a bridge builder not a hectoring preacher. And, kudos to Brookings and their partners for an engaging and informative session.

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