

U.S. needs religious advisers in diplomacy, says Albright in book: Acknowledges complexities of finding appropriate boundaries

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Former secretary of state Madeleine Albright is breaking ranks with the conventional wisdom of her profession. Diplomats, she says, were traditionally taught to keep far away from potentially controversial subjects like religion.

Albright is now making a high-profile plea for religion—and religious leaders—to play a more prominent role both in the making of foreign policy and in the training diplomats receive.

“We need their help,” she told the PBS program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*. “In looking at what was going on in the world,” said Albright, “it was evident that religion and the force of religion and people’s interpretation of how they saw God really is very much a part of international relations.”

She spells out her views in a 314-page book, *The Mighty and the Almighty*. First, she sees a need for increased study of religion in educating U.S. diplomats. “They have not really focused on religion per se as a subject of study.”

Second, and more provocatively, Albright calls for a hands-on role for a group of outsiders—religious leaders. “A secretary of state has economic advisers and arms control advisers and environmental advisers,” she noted. “And so I would advocate having religious advisers that are complementing all the other advisers.”

Albright said religious experts could be used “prior to negotiations at high levels among different parties,” and then afterward to “validate some of the decisions that have been made after negotiators have finished.” But she acknowledged that it can be a delicate balancing act.

“It’s a question as to how much you really want religious doctrine to intrude into issues of how the state is run,” she said. “I believe in the separation of church and state. But you cannot separate people from their faith.”

Albright conceded that the Clinton administration didn’t always get religion right. “One issue where we considered a lot of the religious dimensions, but I think made some mistakes, was at Camp David,” she said, describing the efforts to negotiate a Middle East peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

“There were lots of aspects of the Palestinian issue that as a Palestinian leader, Chairman [Yasir] Arafat could make decisions on,” she said. “But when we were asking him to make the decisions about the holy places, the truth is that he did not have a sole understanding or sole responsibility for the holy places.”

In her book, Albright is critical of how the current Bush administration uses religion. “We are not above the law,” she writes, “nor do we have a divine calling to spread democracy any more than we have a national mission to spread Christianity.” She further criticizes the way President Bush uses religious rhetoric, quoting him as telling people, “God wanted me to be president.” She said Bush implies that the U.S. “has God’s blessing for everything. And that God is on our side. Rather than the way President Lincoln would have framed it, which is we need to be on God’s side.”

But she acknowledged that figuring out the appropriate boundaries between the proper use and the misuse of religion is complex.

During her term as head of the State Department, Albright sought to expand relations with American Muslim leaders, including establishing the now traditional State Department–sponsored Iftar meal that concludes Ramadan fasting.

“We have to understand Islam better,” she said. “I think we all have a tendency to generalize, to focus on the worst part of what is happening under the auspices, so to speak, of Islam.”

While not claiming to be an expert in religion herself, Albright said she believes that democracy is compatible with Islamic law. “And I haven’t turned into a religious mystic. I am a problem solver. And so I’m looking at it from that perspective.”

Her colleagues in the diplomatic community are “a little surprised” at her new focus, she said. She admitted it won’t be “an easy sell” to get diplomats and other decision

makers to adopt her ideas.

But she added: “By not considering the role that religion plays, I think we are being oblivious to a whole dimension of the problem. And we, in many ways, are making it more difficult to solve problems.” -*Kim Lawton, Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*