

Religion and foreign policy: Scholar Maryann Cusimano Love

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [May 15, 2013](#) issue



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Religion has generally not been seen as an important subject at the State Department when it comes to training, strategy and planning. Why?

During the cold war, the focus was on fighting communism and constraining the Soviet Union, and the Soviets were “godless communists.” Religion and religious actors weren’t seen as important if you were fighting an atheistic state.

After the September 11 attacks, religion was put on the agenda, but only as a negative factor—a source of conflict. There is not enough understanding that religion can be a force for peace. We need to do a better job of educating foreign service personnel and military personnel on religious actors and religious factors.

Has this changed in recent years?

In 2011, Secretary Hillary Clinton initiated an innovative program at the State Department called the Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society. She said, in effect, “Look, we are not doing well in engaging nonstate actors across the board. We have to get over this cold war hangover.” The department created a federal advisory commission and working groups to create recommendations for the secretary of state on how to improve relationship with members of civil society around the globe.

What challenges does the group face?

Few institutional structures support this effort. For example, there is no career track in religion at the State Department. You can be a specialist in economics or politics or military affairs—money and training, promotion and incentives are associated with those specialties—but not in religion.

A second factor is a misreading of the Constitution. The First Amendment says that the U.S. government may not establish a state religion, but it does not say that the government shall never speak to religious people or speak of religion. Unfortunately, in our risk-averse culture, many folks interpret the Constitution that way. Religion is seen as trouble, or as a source of conflict, and we don’t want to create problems by choosing sides. Some interpret the First Amendment as a gag rule: you can’t talk about religion, train government personnel in religion or interact with religious factors in foreign policy. That approach is clearly wrong.

Through the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, the Obama administration did a review of how government agencies were engaging with religious actors. They found a wide range of responses. On one end of the spectrum, they found that U.S. military commanders were using something called the Commanders Emergency Response Fund to rebuild mosques. The commanders argued that in order to engage with the civilian population, the U.S. needed to reconstruct these historical and cultural landmarks damaged by war. You could make a pretty good foreign policy case for that work. On the other end, there were folks in the State Department saying that you couldn't even talk about religion because that violates the Establishment Clause.

How would you want to further change the State Department's approach?

It needs a greater understanding of the female face of faith. Across different time periods, cultures, geographic regions and religions, women are more religious than men. We have government programs that work on outreach to women's groups. This is an area in which Secretary Clinton was very active, trying to focus on female education and empowerment—and for good reasons. But there is still a gap between that effort and religious engagement. Too often, when folks think of religious engagement, they think of engaging clerical leaders, which usually means engaging elderly males. They are not engaging women and youth, who are really the engines of religious organizations and activities.

What do you see as the future of this effort to engage religious actors?

I don't see any signs of a turning away from this effort, either at the White House or in other key leadership posts. People acknowledge that we need to do better in terms of religious engagement, whether it has to do with handling conflict or fostering peace and prosperity.

Congress reads the headlines and puts pressure on the executive branch: What are you doing about x? We are trying to ask: How is peace breaking out? How are religious actors involved in that process? Democracy is spreading. We want to ask: How are religious actors and other civil society actors involved? How does engagement with religious actors help prevent conflict, promote human rights and spread peace and prosperity?

How prepared has the U.S. been to deal with the Arab Spring?

The Arab Spring hit us in a doubly weak spot. During the cold war, the U.S. had a policy of “dictatorships and double standards.” We believed that you had to support nondemocratic leaders just because they were noncommunist. The theory was that a nondemocratic state might eventually transition peacefully to a democratic one, but a communist state would never peacefully transition to a democratic state. That rule proved to be untrue in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia.

But the idea that the U.S. needed to support nondemocratic dictators continued after September 11. The argument then was that the U.S. needed to support nondemocratic regimes as part of the battle against terrorism. That policy has sowed a lot of ill-will in countries where we have supported brutal dictators.

The positive side of the Arab Spring is that many of these dinosaur regimes, old kleptocracies in which some people used the government as their ATM machine, are dying. We are seeing a hunger for freedom and good government. But these countries do not have well-developed civil society organizations. When the regime falls, who is poised to compete for power?

This challenge is a difficult one for the U.S. because we don't have a good track record of supporting democracy in the Middle East and North Africa, and we don't have a good organizational structure for dealing with religious-based actors or political parties. This is why Secretary Clinton's engagement with civil society is so important: it recognizes that when you do have fragile states or regime changes, you need to know who the civil society actors are. In too many countries around the world, we don't.