

Losing faith in faith-based outreach

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US Marines give an Afghan imam funds to pay for repairs to a mosque damaged during an offensive against the Taliban in Marjah, Afghansitan, 2010.

Mauricio Lima/AFP/Getty Images

Last month the U.S. State Department [announced](#) the launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives to formalize U.S. relations with the global faith community and foreign religious leaders. This is the latest installment in a trend, which has been ramping up since the Clinton administration, of U.S. engagement with groups identified as faith based or faith inspired. The department's Office of International Religious Freedom and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom have been involved in similar activities for 15 years.

The trend goes beyond the State Department. In Afghanistan the U.S. military has built religious schools and sponsored trips like the Voices of Religious Tolerance tour to Amman, Jordan, where influential Afghans toured mosques, parks and shopping malls to learn about life in a religiously tolerant country. The U.S. Agency for International Development funds interfaith initiatives to promote tolerance. The Department of Homeland Security has a [Faith-Based Security and Communications Advisory Committee](#) to improve communications and establish partnerships with domestic faith-based

communities. The Obama administration created an Interagency Working Group on Religion and Global Affairs, co-chaired by the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and the White House National Security staff. Since 2009, U.S. military chaplains have engaged with local religious leaders overseas to help advance U.S. strategic objectives by cultivating relations with them, gathering cultural intelligence and promoting religious tolerance. The list goes on.

As well intentioned as these efforts appear, they raise serious concerns about government's relationship with religion. Such projects require the government to decide which groups count as religious and worthy of engagement. Here the state must choose among vying sects and authorities, privileging some at the expense of others. There may be no agreement within a particular religious tradition on who speaks authoritatively for that tradition, who is in and out of favor, which texts and practices represent the core of the tradition and so forth. For the government to decide which groups are in and out grants sanction to some theological understandings and practices over others.

Take, for instance, the U.S. government's efforts to identify religious leaders for strategic dialogue. A program guide from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) advises that "engagement with top religious leadership is critical ... [O]rganizing at the community level requires a great deal of groundwork and relationship building with senior leaders." But when officials court those leaders, heads of nontraditional religions and unorthodox versions of protected religions may be ignored. USAID's RelHarmony, a foreign-aid program to bring religious harmony to Albania in the 1990s, offers a case in point. Its final report states, "Religious leaders from Albania's four traditional religious groups were, with few exceptions, supportive of interfaith initiatives, which included all traditional religions, however their views differed on the question of including members of non-traditional religious groups in RelHarmony activities."

A commitment to religious outreach puts USAID in a bind. There are no clear rules for objectively distinguishing religious and nonreligious or moderate and extreme activities and groups for the purposes of public policy. Further practical choices must also be made about where to devote attention, since time and resources are limited. Such circumstances seem to justify engagement with dominant religious traditions in order to reach the most people. But this strategy leads to the religion of the majority or the politically powerful getting attention at the expense of the traditions of minority groups and dissenters.

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Even when outreach is evenhanded, such efforts become politicized. USAID's [Interreligious Action for Tolerance and Coexistence in the Balkans](#) sought to make religion part of the solution. This project, launched in 2004, supported the Interreligious Council of Bosnia-Herzegovina to lead the way to peaceful change and religious tolerance. It established a regional network of leaders of different religions to promote peace, reconciliation and conflict prevention; to strengthen the voices of religious women; and to support an interreligious youth group. The project's final report notes that several groups, including the Catholic Church and the Orthodox community, sometimes refused to participate for political reasons. The Orthodox community withdrew in protest against a NATO raid on an Orthodox parish in an attempt to apprehend Radovan Karadic that severely injured a priest and his son and destroyed their home. The Catholic Church froze its status within the council to protest a refusal by other religious leaders to support an agreement between the state and the Vatican that would have given the Catholic community additional rights and privileges.

Governmental religious-outreach programs operate on the assumption that all religions can be treated equally. This can only be a pretense that masks power relations: the religions of the majority, of the orthodox, of the ruling class, of allies of the United States, the United Nations, corporate interests or some other power broker will inevitably carry more political weight than others. Less-favored groups, by contrast, are likely to be classified as cults or extremists. In June U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Suzan Johnson Cook revealed this dynamic during the Council on Foreign Relations' Religion and Foreign Policy Summer Workshop, an annual religious-outreach event sponsored by the council and attended by prominent American religious leaders and scholars. "There are certain areas where the U.S. government has muscle," Cook said. Her chief example: the promotion of foreign religious leaders.

International public policy should be informed by a sophisticated understanding of religion. But when governments engage individuals and groups in policy terms as religious groups, they are liable to discriminate. To ensure that people in other countries -- all people, including but not limited to those that governments call religious -- receive fair treatment, they should be engaged primarily as citizens and as people. To rely on religion as a category in law and public policy is always, in some form, to establish it.

These efforts run foul of a long-standing American tradition of informal, voluntary religious association. They raise serious legal questions and have already sparked a lively [debate](#) over whether the establishment clause of the First Amendment applies to such actions abroad. In practice, however, the rush to empower foreign religious voices and actors favored by Washington has largely eclipsed these constitutional debates.

Whatever happens in the courts, Americans need to consider what these programs entail for diversity, difference and the right to dissent from reigning orthodoxies, secular or religious. The U.S. should not be using its muscle to promote religious leaders at home or abroad or to elevate religious affiliations above others. Instead, the government should relate to individuals -- whether U.S. citizens or not -- in civic, not religious, terms. While the idea of exporting religious tolerance may appeal to many Americans, government action to promote it is not the answer.