

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Faith Diplomacy Deserves a Larger Role ^[1]

Throughout the world, billions of people rely on their faith to lift them above lives of hardship or the banality of arid secularism. For them, belief trumps politics, and efforts to influence them must incorporate faith as part of any appeal.

The University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy organized a March 25th conference on "Faith Diplomacy: Religion and Global Publics" to examine ways that religion should be incorporated into public diplomacy. The conference analyzed how an appreciation of faith can strengthen foreign policy, how particular religions affect the course of international affairs, and how the religious community can infuse the practice of public diplomacy with the intellectual energy born of its beliefs.

In his splendid keynote address, Douglas Johnston, founder and president of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, noted the reluctance of many governments to address religion and urged those engaged in public diplomacy to "not hide your faith, as normal diplomats do." Johnston also stressed the importance of going beyond tolerance to respect, rather than "othering" religions that are not our own.

One of the foundations of public diplomacy, and this is particularly important in faith-related matters, is listening. Bob Roberts, an Evangelical pastor from Northwood Church in Texas and a conference panelist, told of reaching out to people in Vietnam and Afghanistan and cited the significance of "listening to their stories and finding a common narrative."

In addition to listening, a willingness to undertake difficult missions is part of faith diplomacy. Janice Kamenir Reznik, founding president of Jewish World Watch, described her trip to the Soviet Union during the Cold War and the experience of American Jews reaching out to Soviet Jews, bringing them hope. She called this kind of activism "praying with your feet."

The U.S. government was ably represented at the conference by Victoria Alvarado, director of the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom, which recognizes the relationship between religious freedom and national security. But religion remains a secondary factor in U.S. foreign policy. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has suggested that U.S. embassies add religion attaches, but the principle of separation of church and state has, quite unnecessarily, made American officials wary of this.

The world is becoming more religious, and to pretend otherwise limits the effectiveness of foreign policy. In the Arab world, for instance, the new order spawned by this year's revolutions will embrace Islam more fervently than was fashionable among the ousted regimes. If the United States is unprepared to address this heightened significance of religion, it will be relegated to the status of outsider, with diminished influence in the region.

Our Center on Public Diplomacy is just beginning its [Faith Diplomacy Initiative](#). Our goal is to help reshape governments' public diplomacy agendas by stressing the need to make religion

an integral part of their approach to international publics.

If they do so, they will embrace reality, and their faith-related public diplomacy efforts are likely to prove much more successful than those of the past.
