

Conference examines growing religious role in public life

VATICAN CITY - The role of religion in public life, long written off by many in secular societies, is growing steadily around the world and demands closer attention by civil authorities, speakers at a Rome conference said.

"Religion has been and will continue to be a powerful force that shapes and is shaped by historical experiences," said Miguel H. Diaz, U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. .

"In our times, we have all witnessed the positive as well as the negative impacts of religion at the level of national and international relations," Diaz said. "Today, consensus is on the rise that no nation can bypass the contribution of religion if we are to address successfully the signs of our time." .

The ambassador spoke at a conference March 11 on Christians, Muslims and their relationship with civil authority, sponsored by the Italian Catholic magazine "30 Giorni." .

Fred Dallmayr, who teaches political theory at the University of Notre Dame, told participants that today's "post-secular" society offers a role for religion that was foreseen when Christ urged his followers to be the "salt of the earth" - a term that Dallmayr said rejects religion's retreat from the world as well as its complete assimilation with the political order. .

Modern societies and faiths are struggling to achieve this balance, and avoid the "derailment" of religion through its privatization or its politicization, he said. .

A recent report recommending more positive and sensitive U.S. engagement of religions around the world briefly took center stage at the conference in a talk by R. Scott Appleby, director of the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at Notre Dame. .

Appleby was co-chairman of a task force that wrote the report for the Chicago

Council of Global Affairs. He told the conference that not only government agencies, but also business, educational and energy sectors need to deepen their understanding and respect for religious values and communities if they want to be successful in their global objectives. .

“Some people would rather that religion go away,” said Appleby. “Our realistic appraisal is that it’s not going away, and in fact in many areas religious communities can be positive partners. .

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“Those who predicted that religion would become privatized across the board globally and would decline were wrong,” he said. In most parts of the world, religion is an important part of daily life, “and every data we have indicates that religiosity is growing,” he said. .

Religion is also changing, he said, because of globalization and related trends of intermarriage, interaction between people of different faiths and more fluidity in religious affiliation. The world is not neatly divided into the secular realm on one hand and the religious on the other, but these two realms interact with each other and shape each other, he said. .

“We won’t be able to address questions like economic development, health care or women’s rights without taking into account religious people who are also technocrats, who are middle class, who are very well educated, and who are movers and shakers in their societies,” Appleby said. .

In an interview with Catholic News Service, Appleby said there needs to be better appreciation of religion as a constructive force around the world. News media tend to emphasize religious violence and intolerance, and to depict Islam, for example, as a destructive and terrorism-inspiring religion, while ignoring the many progressive developments among Muslims. .

Religions have a much more positive effect in society than is generally acknowledged in the West, he said. For example, he said, in sub-Saharan Africa, between 40 and 60 percent of health care is delivered by either Christian or Muslim organizations. .

“We need to address religion in a constructive way, recognize religion’s influence and bring some nuance to U.S. foreign policy on the role of religion,” he said.