

Faith-based diplomacy can help dialogue, says U.S. expert

ROME – In a world of increasing religious extremism, faith-based diplomacy can offer an effective path for dialogue and international problem-solving, a U.S. expert said.

“Religious reconciliation can be an antidote to religious extremism,” Douglas Johnston, president and founder of the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, said in Rome Nov. 15.

Johnston said the problem is that for many diplomats, including those in the United States, religion has been “a bit of a blind spot.”

“Our diplomats usually don’t have any training in this, in understanding how religion is a factor in diplomacy,” he said. Sometimes the separation between church and state is cited as a reason, he said, but the plain fact is that “we’re not doing our homework.”

“As we look at the U.S. role in Iraq, it’s crystal clear that the United States has no ability to deal with religious differences in a hostile setting,” he said.

Johnston spoke at the Pontifical Gregorian University in an event co-sponsored by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See. While Johnston has at times been critical of the U.S. diplomatic service, he praised those working in Rome and said his ideas have gained increasing acceptance among diplomatic professionals.

His key point is that because today’s identity-based conflicts exceed the grasp of traditional diplomacy religion must be incorporated as part of the solution.

That doesn’t only mean analysis of religious elements; sometimes a resolution requires prayer, he said.

To support his arguments, Johnston, an evangelical Christian, pointed to firsthand experiences in trouble spots around the world.

In Sudan, Johnston made 17 trips in an effort to help end the civil war between a predominantly Muslim North and a Christian and animist South. The idea was to gather 10 Muslims, 10 Christians and 10 international observers in a dialogue.

The Sudanese Christian representatives were the least enthusiastic, fearing this was another PR move by the Islamic government. But they soon saw that these meetings were different.

Participants began each day with a prayer breakfast, followed by readings from the Quran and the Bible. A prayer team flew in from California to pray for the success of the meeting. All that helped generate a “real dialogue from the heart,” which transcended the usual rhetoric, Johnston said.

The result was that the Muslim government established a council to deal with Christian grievances. The government eventually allowed the building of new Christian churches and other structures and approved reparations for past damage, he said.

It was a watershed moment in Sudan’s move toward reconciliation, and religion was a big factor in making it happen, Johnston said. People could see that “this stuff really works,” he said.

Johnston has also traveled to Pakistan in an effort to promote religious tolerance in the madrassas, the Islamic schools where many of the Taliban have been educated. He often found that he could make the greatest impact by citing the Quran’s teachings on openness to others.

He once found himself in the mountains meeting with 57 Taliban leaders, quoting Catholic teaching and taking prayer breaks. That encounter helped lead to the release of foreign hostages being held by a militant group.

Johnston has recently tried to set up a faith-based encounter with representatives from Iran, where he visited in 2003 as part of an “Abrahamic delegation” led by U.S. Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick.

The U.S. accusations over Iran’s nuclear program make such an encounter even more important, he said. Iranians mistrust Americans on strictly political terms,

because “they think we talk out of both sides of our mouth,” he said.

“If you want to engage Iranians, you’d better start with a religious frame of reference,” Johnston said.

He said it’s difficult to plan such a dialogue in Iran, however, because of Iran’s internal politics and U.S. government policies. For that reason, while in Rome Johnston explored the possibility of the Vatican hosting such a meeting.

“There seems to be some openness to doing this,” he said.

Johnston said a key focus of faith-based diplomacy is moving people past the mentality of vengeance.

“We deal with the concept of forgiveness, because it’s the only thing that can break the cycle of revenge in these identity-based conflicts,” he said.

Forgiveness changes hearts, he said, and meetings of hard-line militants have sometimes ended in tears and hugs.

“We’ve found the whole concept of forgiveness really resonates with Muslims,” he said.