

# BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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**SHAUN CASEY** is Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs at the U.S. State Department, and on leave as professor of Christian Ethics at the Wesley Theological Seminary. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before his talk on “Religion and Global Affairs: The View from the State Department.”

**OWENS:** Let’s start by talking about your newly re-named Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the State Department. What is your mandate?

**CASEY:** We have basically three missions in our office. The first one is to advise the secretary on matters of religion as they cut across his portfolio. As you can imagine, religion is relevant to much of his work. At one level, it’s ludicrous that an office of twenty or so staffers can advise him with a granular analysis of lived religion around the planet, because religion is so complicated. We do have in-house expertise, but we also have relationships with a broader range of experts that we often leverage in pursuit of answers. We’re located in the secretary’s bureau, and our major focus is on the offices and equities in that silo.

The second mission is to build capacity for the whole Department of State to have more resources for engaging religious actors and assessing religious dynamics. We do that through a number of tools. We offer senior visits, for example. There are four principals in my office, including me. Between the four of us, we have a lot of global experience and knowledge, and we can go out to embassies to help answer questions or to meet religious actors in their space.

Our second tool is what we call a custom consultation service. An embassy may have a set of research questions that

they would love to have answers to, but they don’t have the bandwidth to deploy assets to answer them. We can negotiate a research agenda with a post and send a research team out to find answers to the questions we have negotiated mutually,



and then try to find resources to answer those questions on a forward-looking set of relationships with our office.

The third piece is really about training and resourcing. We have an internal website where we put up a lot of publicly available information about religion globally, and we are also working on training at the Foreign Service Institute, which is the internal training institution of the State Department. There are four courses that we’ve targeted to help bring religion

assets to. We’re currently helping to reformulate an elective course called Religion and Foreign Policy. I taught it two years ago, when I first landed, and several of my staff have been through it last year. We met with them and said, “look, can we partner with you to organize it better and bring more resources to bear?” So in May, we’ll see the first iteration of this revised curriculum in that course.

But my real eye is on the required courses in the Foreign Service Institute. If you’re a new ambassador, there’s a required new ambassadorial course. We’d like to design a religion module for that, to make the case as to why ambassadors should have a robust curiosity about the political implications of religion in their country. There’s also a required course for new political officers in embassies. We’d like to design another module for that course and to make a case for why they should look to us for help on questions of religion. Then there’s the so-called Aroo course; if you’re a freshly minted foreign service officer, you have to go through this introductory course, and we’d like to design a module there, as well.

The third mission is to be the point of contact for any external group that wants to come and inquire about partnerships, or to request information from the State Department. We have met with hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals and NGOs that find the State Depart-

ment to be opaque. It is a very complex place, but now they can come to us and ask us a question: who works on this issue in our country? When it was just me, my standard answer was “I have no idea, but I’ll get back to you.” But now that we have a staff that knows the building well, we can often introduce people on the spot to the office that works on their issues. Now, faith groups, religious actors, and NGOs know they can come to us, ask us questions, make policy suggestions, or ask to be introduced to somebody else in the building. We have a kind of brokering relationship.

Those are our big missions: advising the secretary, trying to build the capacity for religious engagement in the building, and then being an external-facing conduit where people can come and inquire about how we might be able to partner or work together in some way.

**OWENS:** How do you respond to people who are worried that you’re promoting Christianity around the world? I’m sure it’s a common refrain to think that you’re putting religion in the hands of our diplomats and sending them out. How do you respond to those outside critics, as well as to skeptics within State?

**CASEY:** To the first part, the four principals we have in the office include the special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, which is not exclusively a Christian focus. I also have the special representative to Muslim communities as well as the acting special envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in my office. Between the four of us, you’ve got, on the face of it, an argument that says we’re not simply focused on Christians.

The other piece of it is our commitment to radical inclusivity. If we can find mutually workable time on our schedules, we will meet with anybody—secular groups as well as religious ones. We have met with an astonishing, dizzying array of religious groups from different faith communities—faith communities I didn’t know existed before I became a diplomat

in the State Department. If you look at who we’ve actually met with, it’s impossible to sustain the argument that this is just Christian-focused.

We have a regional focus, too, so in addition to the four principals, we have six regional advisors to map the six regional bureaus of the globe. We are a global office in that sense. If you’re the advisor

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for any of the six regions, you’re not going to be focusing exclusively on Christianity. The building bends us toward a truly global, inclusive view of religion.

**OWENS:** People sometimes speak about politics as the art of compromise. What are the compromises that need to be made around questions of religion in your line of work? Perhaps there are compromises that you feel obliged to make in

the office, or maybe there are compromises that you urge upon other groups?

**CASEY:** There is a set of compromises we’re prevented from making. In other words, we can’t favor one religion over another. We can’t favor religion over non-religion. We have a robust relationship with the Legal Affairs Department, and we have detailed guidance from them about the Establishment Clause, for instance. We are very careful in the sense that we don’t advocate for one religion over another, and we don’t advocate for religion over irreligion or lack of religion.

**OWENS:** Does that guidance explicitly extend the First Amendment to your activities, then? That’s been a matter of some debate.

**CASEY:** Yes, it does. We have very clear legal guidance. They know our phone number and we know their phone number. In fact, the secretary recently issued a policy guidance cable on religion and foreign policy that went out to all embassies and posts. It included a restatement of our legal guidance on the First Amendment. That is absolutely the bedrock. We have many very smart, strong lawyers in the Department of State, so we’re really quite vigilant on that point. If we veer somehow out of the proper lane, we’re going to have bells and whistles going off and people engaging us.

In terms of compromises, one of the less artful claims that’s often made is that we instrumentalize religion. The irony of that is twofold. First, I’ve yet to have a religious leader or community come in and prostrate themselves in front of us and say, “please do with us as you will.” They come in, frankly, looking for resources and looking to engage with us. Even if it was our method to try to manipulate religious groups, they don’t come prepared to be manipulated. They come to engage robustly with us.

When we have asked religious groups to help us on a piece of foreign policy, we try to make the best case we can in terms of

U.S. foreign policy interests, but I've had faith groups look at me and say, "thank you, Shaun, but no, we can't do that." As far as I'm concerned, it's game, set, and match at that point. If a religious group thinks that a piece of our foreign policy either violates or doesn't match their own moral interests, we respect that, and we take that as a "thank you, but no thank you." There have been some cases where certain groups have come in to talk with us about certain pieces of policy that we're promoting, and they just can't quite support it.

Coming from my own background, I am all about preserving the authenticity, sanctity and integrity of faith communities. I've written about my fear of coercive government agencies trying to manipulate them or trying to fund them in ways that manipulate them. I would be a hypocrite—with a capital H—if I couldn't respect a healthy "no" from somebody and walk away and say, "thank you for your consideration." There are going to be no recriminations and no coercion as a result of that.

Frankly, there are also times when the faith groups come to me and ask us to do things that we cannot, so it's very much a two-way street.

**OWENS:** In previous conversations, you've mentioned that you had identified four big priorities, including environment, development and human rights, I believe. Could you articulate those priorities? Is that still part of your charge, or has that changed?

**CASEY:** In July 2013, almost exactly when I started, the White House issued a national strategy for integrating religious leader and faith community engagement into U.S. foreign policy. I had no input in designing that. This had been about a year-long conversation in the National Security Council, who felt that we needed some strategic justification and description of how we should relate to religious actors in our foreign policy.

That document spoke about three broad work areas. The first one was about sus-



tainable development and humanitarian aid. The second work area had to do with the promotion of a broad array of human rights, including international religious freedom. The third area was about preventing, mitigating and ending conflict. Those are three broad playing fields where religion often plays a role. This national strategy was simply one way of conceptualizing the playing field.

**OWENS:** What, in your opinion, have been your biggest successes so far in the office?

**CASEY:** Bureaucratically, building a new office in this fiscal environment in the second half of an administration has been a real challenge, but I think we've been extraordinarily successful. To build a staff of between twenty and thirty with a high level of expertise in religion, and with a global footprint, is no small feat. If they fired me tonight, I would retire with a fair amount of satisfaction that we've built something. When I first started, it wasn't clear how many resources I would be able to get. I think our success is a reflection of Secretary of State John Kerry's depth of commitment to these issues. If he didn't care that much, we wouldn't have these kinds of resources.

Building the office has been really complex, but I've hired brilliant staff. I have to build a staff almost exclusively from people who already have security

clearances, and have been amazingly impressed and surprised about the depth of talent I've been able to find. But that's about getting prepared to do the work, not actually doing the work.

In terms of the work we have done: I think we've done some really good work on climate change. We're in the middle of a very pivotal phase in U.S. policy with respect to climate change. We have the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It's an ongoing process that will culminate in Paris in December, and we're hoping there will be a global emissions treaty.

We're in a pivotal political moment. We have found an amazing array of both domestic and global religious groups interested in climate change that we're partnering with to educate them on what we're doing on climate change and what we hope to do. In turn, they are a large megaphone in their own communities and in public life trying to magnify that message. The closer we get to Paris in December 2015, the more dividends will be paid from this relationship we have built between our policy people and these faith communities that are interested in fighting climate change.

I'm also proud of what we did around the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, even though the negotiations are not ongoing. We did systematic outreach in meeting

faith leaders across the three affected traditions, both here in the States and also in Israel and Palestine. Historically, faith leaders have not felt welcome in our policy negotiations. We built a set of relationships that we are maintaining; we're not walking away from that just because there's not an active negotiation. Ambassador Martin Indyk was the one who really felt like we needed to build more engagement with the interested faith communities there. I think we successfully pushed the envelope into new territory there around the negotiations.

In addition, I'm quite excited at this point about the custom consultation service we're offering to embassies. We have pushed this out to all 200-some odd diplomatic posts. Just a couple of weeks ago, we had the Global Chiefs of Mission Conference, where all 200 of these chiefs of mission came to DC for a week. I got to speak to them to say, "OK, you've read this astounding literary document that we've sent you, this policy guidance cable. Let me tell you how our office is poised to be a service office within the State Department."

I met with the executive secretary of the State Department, who basically runs the place and has served all over the world. When I gave him a copy of our memo, he weighed it in his hand and said, "This is a significant document. I'll tell you, Shaun, when ambassadors get these documents from DC, their first question is: is this an asking cable, or is this a giving cable? Which is yours?" I said, "Oh, it's a giving cable, obviously." He said, "That's good, because a lot of ambassadors feel like Washington sends them a lot of demand signals, but not a lot of resources to meet the demand."

I'm proud that we have built an office that has successfully communicated to ambassadors that we're here to provide them resources to help them be more successful in their mission. We're not creating work for them just to make people in Washington happy. We've taken a posture

of trying to provide them resources to be able to understand religious actors and dynamics in their countries in a more sophisticated way. Now, we're at the pivot point of actually trying to engage specific embassies, and I've got the staff to send out. It's at that point where I think we will have a much greater impact on the policy side, because we're going to be able to go and ask, "What are the tough questions you're facing, where you need better answers with respect to religion?" And then we're going to deliver resources in response.

**OWENS:** You're a scholar of Reinhold Niebuhr. In what sense would you say you are a Niebuhrian, and how has your study of Niebuhr's relationship to the foreign policy world in the mid-twentieth century impacted your work in the State Department?

**CASEY:** It's an interesting question. His nephew Richard R. Niebuhr was one of my teachers at Harvard. I particularly remember how Dick Niebuhr once said, "flee any attempt for somebody to put you in a specific school or box." He said, "run, do not walk, away from being labeled a Niebuhrian or a Barthesian or whatever." My thinking has been shaped by Niebuhr, Barthes and many other theologians, so I would not brand myself a Niebuhrian per se.

But here is the basic takeaway for me. I think Niebuhr's framework in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is right, that we live our lives between the dialectical poles of finitude and transcendence. I also think the critique against that is apt. Sometimes there's no stability. You just bounce back willy-nilly between the two poles.

I would argue that historically speaking, the poles split among Niebuhr's children. The dialectic ceased. The rightwing heirs of Niebuhr said it's all about finitude, and then the liberal, transcendent pole went off in another direction. Both, in a sense, are wrong. They've forgotten the other part of the dialectic. In fact, I was about halfway through a manuscript making

this argument before I joined the State Department.

So here we are, in a period of chaos and transition in international politics. We don't even know what to name this era. The Cold War is clearly over, but simply saying "post-Cold War" doesn't really shed a lot of light. It just tells us we're not back in Kansas anymore, but we're not really sure where we are.

In my installation event back in the summer of 2013, I quoted a passage of Niebuhr from *The Irony of American History*, because when that was being written in 1952 we were in a similar point of international chaos. The Cold War was beginning to ramp up. Niebuhr said there are some temptations America faced with respect to its foreign policy. One pole was just to fall back on American selfrighteousness and assume we're the brightest, smartest, most moral people in the world, so yes, we should be leaders. The other was more of a hawkish embrace of force. His fear was we might go in one of those two directions.

He said the real path is the Max Weber path. He didn't quote Weber directly, but Weber's line is about how politics is the "strong and slow boring of hard boards." Diplomacy has to attend to traditional categories and remain true to what you think is the right thing, without assuming that you're part of God's divine plan or assuming that resort to force is always the right thing to do.

I think we are in this period of chaos and transition, where there aren't necessarily clear paths for American democracy. Nevertheless, that's not a time to assume our moral purity and supremacy, nor is it a time to simply resort to the use of force automatically.

That's not a bad space to be in today. Even though we don't have a consensus on the shape of the world order, nevertheless there are pieces of American foreign policy we need to continue to pursue, like fighting extreme poverty, promoting

human rights and trying to mitigate conflict. Those are three good missions to have in this period of poor visibility. To that extent, I think Niebuhr actually helps us.

**OWENS:** We have an important religious leader visiting our country in September, as Pope Francis prepares to speak to Congress and the UN. What is your role with regard to the pope's visit in September? How is the State Department, and how are you in particular, involved with his visit?

**CASEY:** Our point person in the Vatican is Ambassador Ken Hackett, who is a wonderful human being and a dear friend. One of the things we're doing

is acting as a conduit from American groups to the Vatican. As you can imagine, in all three of the cities, everybody wants an event with Pope Francis. We send Ambassador Hackett the requests of organizations to see the pope, and he in turn then gives them to the Vatican. Of course, the Vatican's going to have to sort through quite a list!

The Vatican is also working with Ambassador Hackett and communicating about the pope's schedule. The pope will be addressing a joint session of Congress, he will be addressing the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and then he has the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia.



Obviously the pope has his own agenda of things he needs to do and accomplish when he comes. I suspect there will be a visit with the president when he's in Washington. My suspicion is that he's going to highlight the themes of climate change and poverty at the United Nations. I would not be surprised to see him talk about the plight of Christians in the Middle East. Those are three very prominent themes in his work recently, and I have every expectation that he will hit all three of those notes, among others. It is certainly going to be worth watching.

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