

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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MELISSA ROGERS is a senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution. She served as special assistant to the president and executive director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships from 2013-2017. She spoke with Boisi Center interim director **Erik Owens** about her time in the White House, religious freedom, and the common good.

OWENS: I want to start by asking what it feels like to be you right now, and what it feels like to be a private citizen after the whirlwind of government employment?

ROGERS: It is good to get a little rest! I'm enjoying getting reacquainted with my family and I'm beginning to reflect on the time I spent in the White House. It certainly was a wonderful experience. I learned so much. I'm looking forward to taking some of those lessons and applying them to this next phase of life.

OWENS: Can you articulate any of those lessons right now and share some of your take-aways?

ROGERS: There are lessons in different categories. Some are about what a person should be thinking about if they want to make an impact on public policy or in public affairs. Others are about the intersection of religion and government as a policy area. Others are about talking to people about the best ways to form partnerships with government. Those are at least three buckets of lessons that I'm thinking about, and there are different lessons in each category.

For example, one of the things that has come out of my experiences is that the relationship between religion and government, which is of course spoken to by the First Amendment and other laws and policies, must be taken serious-

ly by policymakers. This is as serious a public policy issue as any other, yet our government is not always structured in a way that would reflect that. It's incredibly important, especially given the government's extensive reach in today's society, for people who understand both the letter and spirit of the First Amendment and supporting laws to be active in policy-making discussions across a wide range of venues, whether it's veterans' affairs, education, health care, refugee policy, or national security issues like genocide determinations.



OWENS: Academics who study religion sometimes worry that non-academics, the greater public and parts of the government, make category errors where they think differently about religion or religious studies. They worry that non-experts somehow have a bad or insufficient way of understanding things. While that's likely largely flawed due to a

professional bias, there's got to be some differentials between your work as an expert outside the White House and the world that you worked in there. Did you come across any fundamental stumbling blocks among staff or structures that signaled a completely different view of religion that you knew to be true in your working life before that?

ROGERS: Yes. For example, when you're in government, it is important to ask yourself: who's not at the table and why? Of course, when you're working in the White House, you want to be and should be responsive to the whole of the American people, which is a daunting job. You can never do it as well as you might imagine it should be done. There are people who come to see you, great people who are very skilled, without an invitation. I had some wonderful relationships with people I met even in the first week who made it their job to come see me.

At the same time, you want to think about who's not at the table and who should be there, and what you can do to help them get to the table. For instance, communities that are religious minorities in the United States may not have as far-flung an organization with offices and offices that address particular issues. But they have a stake in partnerships and policy, and therefore their views should be sought and they should be involved.

One of the things I tried to do was make sure that we were always inviting to the table people from traditions that would be considered religious minorities in the United States, and not pigeonholing them.

Probably the most prominent example right now is Muslim-Americans. Sometimes government will have a tendency to “securitize” the relationship with Muslim-Americans. They’re invited in to talk about countering violent extremism, but not to talk about health policy, veterans’ policy, or education policy. When we were working on partnerships to improve public health, we invited Muslim-Americans to the table, among others. In fact, one of the people who is a great leader on health issues is Khadija Gurnah, who was with American Muslim Health Professionals when we worked with her on these issues. She did an amazing job of getting her community thinking about what its needs were in terms of health. She then joined with other religious and community leaders to learn what they were doing to address public health and shared her knowledge as well.

OWENS: As you moved about the smaller, more senior circles of policy advisers, did you have to push back against views of religion as a dangerous thing? Or did you find people more open or enlightened around religious believers and religious practices as being a full part of the American experience? Did you encounter a more political realist mode?

ROGERS: I found that it was pretty easy to enter the conversations both in the domestic and the international policy spheres. Part of that was because people knew that religion matters to President Obama. He would want to know how this issue would impact religious communities, and what religious leaders would be thinking about the issue. That’s true both about non-church/state issues as well as church/state issues. It’s true about immigration. It’s also true about the contraception mandate. That was a factor.

Conversations at the White House about policy are structured but still often fluid. If you can show why an issue matters to the work you do, then people are happy to have you at the table and they appreciate your insights. I found that to be true within the Domestic Policy Council, where our office was based. Over time, I also ended up working with the National Security Council a great deal. NSC too was extremely welcoming to the perspective I brought.

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OWENS: So you had a certain role to help advise the president and bring the religious world to the president, but you also had a role as part of the administration in shaping American public views on things. Part of the president’s role is to be a leader, not just to be responsive to the calls, but to be out in front on issues. I wonder, what were some of the religious issues that you think you and your colleagues helped to change Americans’ views on, or even kept in the right place?

ROGERS: We’ll have to wait and see what happens on refugee issues, but one of the things that I know we are all proud of was the fact that we were able to boost the

annual levels of refugees that were admitted to the United States during the time the president was in office. As you might recall, after 9/11 there was a lowering of our annual refugee levels for a long period of time, and we were in that modality when we began to look toward the visit of Pope Francis to the U.S. in 2015. Pope Francis has been so eloquent on the need to take in people who are persecuted and suffering around the world.

When the pope agreed to come visit, the president sat us down and said, “I do not want this just to be a moment or a photo-op. I want this visit to have lasting value. I want you to look at the values that we share with the pope, and think about where we might advance policy to be responsive to these values.” One of the areas we looked at was our level of refugee admissions into the country. The president wanted to be careful because he was not going to cut corners on security. There’s a very robust system of vetting refugees before they come to the U.S. But he also wanted us to reach to take in more refugees from around the world, especially at a time of such great dislocation and suffering.

When we got ready for the papal visit, we worked with national security staff and the State Department colleagues on the refugee admissions process and got into a position where we could announce a significant boost in refugee admissions. We were able to make that announcement around the time that the pope visited the White House.

That was a great example of just one of the many areas where our work with religious leaders led to a better result. And one of the things we found was that it wasn’t just Catholics going to bat for greater refugee admissions. We also found many evangelicals, who are often thought to be quite conservative, very dedicated to helping resettle refugees in this country. We had and continue to have strong support from a very diverse

religious community for reaching those goals.

OWENS: There's rhetoric around religious freedom being at risk or endangered, and that rhetoric can come from either side of the political spectrum. In some sense it's merely rhetoric, and yet at times, we also do feel that certain rights are really endangered. As an expert in this area, where do you feel the country is on broader questions of religious freedom? Do you have specific areas that you think need our citizens' special attention?

ROGERS: I feel positive on the whole about where we are in terms of religious freedom. When you look at countries around the world, you gain a greater appreciation of our own system and the way in which we really do strive to avoid governmental establishments of religion and the way we protect free exercise, which put together are just two great facets of a single fundamental freedom, as Justice Frankfurter said.

By and large, our country has done a very good job of protecting fundamental human rights, which has helped us become a nation of great religious vitality and diversity and incredible cooperation across faith and beliefs. You see that almost every day. I feel proud of that, and believe that we have a strong foundation to stand on.

At the same time, there are concerns. One of the things I'm worried about is the spike in hate crimes directed at Jewish-Americans, Muslim-Americans, Hindus, and Sikhs in recent years. People who cannot freely go to their houses of worship or to their community centers, or wear religious garb without fear, do not have real religious freedom. That is a deep, abiding concern, one we must prioritize. I also think a stigmatization or marginalization in some of our political rhetoric around those communities is something that we need to eradicate entirely.



There are also other issues where we have conflicting human rights claims – for example, claims of religious freedom versus claims of reproductive rights or LGBT non-discrimination. That's a difficult and sensitive area, but I do think that we can make real progress by having good conversations among people of goodwill with differing perspectives on these issues. I've seen that happen in the past, and I hope it happens more in the future.

OWENS: One last question: Not all of us get the opportunity to work in the White House and to be that close to the center of power. I wonder what you would say to people about the role of a citizen. What can we do on these issues that's important, that doesn't require the arm of law or the seat of power?

ROGERS: Citizens play an incredibly important role in our democracy. I often told people that I didn't realize how powerful citizens were until I worked in the White House and saw how citizens would change things by speaking up. There were times when the groundswell that a particular movement had created changed the direction of public policy. I would encourage people to use their power and voice to be vocal and engaged with their local, state, and federal policymakers. Not only can they make a difference

on a particular issue, but relationships with government officials often end up changing things. On occasion, someone would contact me, and although I might not have had something specific to work with them on at that moment, the fact that I had that relationship, and that we kept each other apprised of what we were doing, led me to get in touch with them later when I saw an opportunity for us to work together.

Forming relationships with people at all levels, even people who are not of your political persuasion—perhaps even most importantly those who are not of your political persuasion—and trying to find ways to work together not only advances shared policy goals, it also helps to decrease political polarization, which is all too common in our culture today. I think President Obama was right when—as he left office—he stressed that the most important office in our country is that of citizen.

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