Kmiec’s gospel falls flat at State Department

by Daniel Burke in the May 17, 2011 issue

The State Department has a "rigidly narrow" view of diplomacy that neglects religion's role in foreign affairs, a prominent ambassador charged as he announced his resignation in mid-April.

Other foreign-policy experts have another name for it: Religion Avoidance Syndrome. And the departure of Douglas Kmiec as ambassador to Malta, they say, is symptomatic of a long-standing God gap in American foreign policy.

Kmiec, a Catholic legal scholar who helped shape an intellectual framework for President Obama's outreach to Catholics during the 2008 campaign, was slammed in a recent State Department report for spending too much time writing about religion.

His focus on faith, "based on a belief that he was given a special mandate to promote President Obama's interfaith initiatives . . . detracted from his attention to core mission goals," the State Department's inspector general wrote in a February report made public in early April.

A former lawyer in the Reagan administration and onetime dean of Catholic University's law school, Kmiec announced he would resign on August 15, which he pointedly noted is the Feast of the Assumption.

The State Department fired back on April 18 at Kmiec's accusations. "I can't imagine an agency that has a broader portfolio," said State Department spokesman Evan Owen. "We have an ambassador for religious freedom; we

have an office for international religious freedom; we publish two reports a year on religious freedom; we maintain a list of countries of particular concern for religious freedom," Owen said.

Kmiec, currently on leave from the law faculty at Pepperdine University in California, fiercely defended his work in earlier letters to Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Kmiec told Obama his work was "devoted to promoting what I know you believe in most strongly—namely, personal faith and greater mutual understanding of the faiths of others as the way toward greater mutual respect. If I may be forgiven a dissent from the view adopted by the Inspector General, it is that I doubt very much whether anyone could spend too much time on this subject."

Kmiec also tied his work on religion to Clinton's promotion of "smart power," saying it had a "highly positive effect on our bilateral relations."

The inspector general's office, he said, has a "flawed and narrow vision of our diplomatic vision" and "manipulated their policy dislike of the president's policies, especially his interfaith initiative, into an unauthorized 'outside activity,'" Kmiec told Clinton.

The controversy over Kmiec reflects a widespread aversion to religion within Washington's foreign-policy establishment, said Thomas Farr, a former director of religious freedom at the State Department.

Farr said that he has not read Kmiec's speeches and that, as a fellow Catholic, he was disappointed with the ambassador's support for Obama. But, Farr continued, Kmiec is correct about faith in Foggy Bottom.

"There is a deep-seated discomfort with dealing with religious ideas, concepts

and religious actors," said Farr, who now teaches at Georgetown University.

Farr and Kmiec are not the first to find fault in the State Department's hands-off approach to religion. "Our diplomats are very well trained and they are very capable," said former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in 2006. "But they have not really focused on religion per se as a subject of study."

Albright, who wrote a book on faith and diplomacy called *The Mighty and the Almighty,* has said her former colleagues were "a little surprised" about her focus on religion. "They really look at me as if I had, you know, ventured into some post-secretary of state mode where I just didn't understand what was going on," she told the PBS program *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* in 2006.

The State Department has taken small steps toward reckoning with faith, including a three-day course on religion and foreign policy offered this summer by the Foreign Service Institute, Farr said.

But the inspector general's report on Kmiec could send a chilling message to other diplomats that religion lies outside their portfolios, said Randolph Marshall Bell, a State Department veteran who now directs the First Freedom Center in Richmond, Virginia.

"The wrong signal to me would be that somehow attention to aspects of religion which touch upon our foreign policy interests should be separated out," Bell said. "Compartmentalization never works." —RNS