Religious freedom and U.S. policy: An interview with Robert Seiple

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Robert A. Seiple has been named by President Clinton to be ambassador at large for religious freedom, a position created by the International Religious Freedom Act, which passed Congress in October 1998. His appointment was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in March, and well before that Seiple was at work setting up the office on international religious freedom at the State Department.

Before joining the State Department, Seiple was for 11 years the president of World Vision, Inc., a privately funded relief and development agency. Seiple, who served in Vietnam with the Marine Corps, has also been president of Eastern College and Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary. We spoke with him about his new post and how the U.S. can address issues of religious liberty around the world.

Tell us about your role as defined by the International Religious Freedom Act.

Implementing the act is partly my responsibility. The goal is to promote religious freedom, to promote reconciliation where conflicts have occurred along religious lines, and to make sure that these issues are woven into the foreign policy of the U.S.

The immediate task has been forming the nine-member commission called for by the act. I hope that shortly we will know who the nine members are. We know some but not all. The president has yet to make his picks.

The ambassador at large will be an ex-officio member of the commission. The commission will be independent, which means that theoretically it will not be influenced by Congress, by the executive branch or by the NGO (nongovernmental organization) community, but will seek the truth from all those communities on matters of religious intolerance, discrimination and persecution throughout the world. Its job is to look at facts from all these sources, to arrive at a consensus on

the truth, and then to propose corrective actions--or to issue praise, if there are countries making headway in religion liberties.

The commission is one of the instruments of accountability in this bill and it is critically important. It's critically important that it be staffed by distinguished folk with massive credentials, people who are good at discernment, people who will be able to see the intricacies and nuances of very complex issues.

How did your work with World Vision prepare you for this?

I hope that because of my 11 years with World Vision and my work around the world--not specifically on the issue of religious freedom, but always on the issue of human rights and human dignity, especially for the most vulnerable--I would bring experience and judgment. The facts about specific countries, from the legal context to the actual practices, are going to have to be assimilated. I'm grateful I will have a staff and the support of the State Department in doing that. I think that if I can properly apply the experience and judgment gained in World Vision to the facts, I should be able to make this position work.

What does it mean to make the position work? The primary constituency for this position is those who are suffering somewhere in the world. At the end of the day, we have to be willing and able to depict truth in such a way that lives are made better, that there is sustainable change in the treatment of those who are being persecuted or discriminated against because of their religious beliefs.

There are many areas of the world where religious freedom is a pressing concern--India, Sudan, Indonesia, Egypt and China come to mind immediately. Which of these regions are especially on your mind?

Our job is to promote religious freedom and not target a region or country. All the countries you mention have various states of paranoia about the impact of the International Religious Freedom Act. Perhaps they have the sense that it was written with them in mind.

The bill was written to promote religious freedom everywhere in the world. If some people are nervous about that, perhaps they should be. The countries you mention are ones on which I am trying to ratchet up the learning curve, because they are in the news. Being in the news doesn't mean they are on a special list, but it does mean we have to ask if the facts reported are correct. What's the context for the

facts?

I've been to Indonesia, China, Saudia Arabia and Egypt. I went to Sudan as president of World Vision, and we've had a steady group of visitors from India, Pakistan and Sudan, to add another layer of information.

I should add that though sanctions are a part of the bill, they are to be employed as a last resort. This is not a sanctions bill, it's a religious freedom bill. There is much in the bill that's designed to allow us to work with governments, with people, and with various expressions of church, synagogue, mosque, temple and so on to promote religious freedom.

How much of your work will be public?

There's a large reporting requirement entailed in the act. But some of the reports will be classified. Not all of them will be plastered over Web sites. One of the aims of the bill is to do no harm. If the public promulgation of material will increase the persecution of a particular faith group, then it shouldn't be published. That's not to say the information shouldn't be recorded or acted upon. But not everything has to be published.

Some of the key elements of our work will be tied to questions of discernment. What is the best methodology in a given situation? How do we measure success--in a short-term or long-term frame? These matters are all open to interpretation.

Are people and governments increasingly recognizing that religious freedom is a fundamental human right?

More and more people feel it is a human right. That's not to say everyone feels as strongly about this as Americans do. But if you take religious freedom out of human rights, you take out a very basic building block. Freedom of thought, freedom of discourse, freedom to change one's mind, to associate freely--all of these come out of what Jefferson called the "first freedom." It's hard to imagine a human rights package devoid of religious freedom.

That's not to say it is the only freedom. I would not make the case that, in some hierarchy of rights, religious freedom is at the top. But it's a very basic freedom, inherent in every individual, and it's universal--it's just as appropriate for someone in Tibet as someone in Toledo. We need to make sure that this view carries the day,

not from a distinctly American position but from a universal position.

Your experience in Rwanda seems to have deeply shaped your thinking about issues of intervention and international community.

There are a couple of signature disasters--Bosnia, for example, and Rwanda. Rwanda becomes a significant case for thinking about religious freedom when we acknowledge that this was a very Christianized nation. Yet, at the point of ultimate fear, at the point of people taking other people's lives, fear won out over faith. This raises a question both inside and outside the church about religiosity. What was it about this faith that, when it met its darkest moment and deepest test, did not carry the day? I have offered up, primarily to provoke discussion, a personal theory that if you do not at the point of conversion assimilate the cost of faith, the cost of this free gift, then in moments of crisis the faith may not stand the test.

This is a lesson that Americans perhaps especially need to hear. We've been wearing our faith on our sleeves for a long while. We would be hard pressed to find examples of Americans being persecuted for their faith. So we might also forget the cost.

One of the causes of religious persecution is that people do not understand their faith at its deepest level and do not know enough about their neighbor's faith to show the proper respect. When that happens aberrations of faith emerge--like the case of an Osima Bin Laden, using a religious rationale to kill people, or the Lord's Resistance Army, using a biblical rationale to traumatize children. In the U.S. we have people who under the "prolife" label feel a religious justification for bombing abortion clinics and assassinating doctors. These cases show what happens when people truncate the faith and pick and choose what they want to use of it and what they want to leave behind. This is very dangerous. And one of the manifestations of this was the failure of the church in Rwanda.

Are there resources in each religious tradition for respecting the other's religious tradition?

Each major faith has something akin to the Golden Rule, or a discussion of human dignity and the sanctity of life.

In your day-to-day work, will you be primarily interacting with other governments?

The constituency we should be most concerned about is those who are suffering for their faith beliefs. Besides talking to governments, we need also to talk to nongovernmental organizations and people from various religious traditions. Folk who are local, who have contacts, are going to be important to us.

There is a huge array of folks who will create a deep coalition around the issue of religious freedom. At the same time, religious freedom is going to be a very difficult issue to lift up in a way that is helpful to all whom we seek to serve. The defense of religious freedom has been called a minefield by some, and I suspect it is. In some cases we will be perceived to have not gone far enough in our efforts. In other cases we will be perceived to have gone too far. There will be peoples shooting at us from the front and, I suspect, from the back.

Religious freedom is not an issue that has yet found its place in realpolitik. It's relatively new in public policy. People have to insist that humanitarian intervention on this issue is just as important at some level as what we do with our military security or economic contracts.