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## The U.S. Department of State Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives: What does the U.S. engage when they engage `religion'?

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The U.S. Department of State Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives:

What does the U.S. engage when they engage 'religion'?

by

Belgica M. Cucalon

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Religious Studies  
Department of Religious Studies  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my hardworking mother, Marisol Hortencia. Her fierce dedication to me and my three older brothers has been my constant inspiration in life. For all the struggles she has faced for us, and for all the love she shares with us, I dedicate all my education to her. Te amo.

I also dedicate this thesis to Richard—a brother and a great friend who has always supported and encouraged me. Thank you for taking care of your little sister so well. Oh, the humanity of it all.

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## ABSTRACT

In August of 2013 the U.S. State Department launched the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives with the objective to foster and promote religious engagements in foreign diplomacy. The language used by the architects and proponents of the initiative suggests that even though religion can be a source of great conflict, religion is also a powerful force for good capable of mitigating conflict and fostering progress. The present optimistic belief of American foreign diplomats that religious engagement will foster beneficial partnerships capable of advancing U.S. foreign interests has led scholars to pose the question, "what will the U.S. engage when it engages religion?" This thesis argues that the language used in the promotion of faith-based initiatives exhibits a commitment to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. Further, this thesis explains that a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* limits religious engagement. In other words, the OFBCI will engage with religious groups only in so far as they fit their definition of religion.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT TO THIS STUDY

In August of 2013 the U.S. Department of State launched the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives with the purpose of engaging religious communities abroad. During the official launch press conference, Secretary of State John Kerry's speech urged American governmental staff working in foreign nations to go out, learn about, and engage religious leaders, actors and organizations in beneficial partnerships. The hope of the architects and proponents of the OFBCI is that in the process of engaging religious communities, American diplomacy abroad will be able to better confront the "challenges of simply *understanding* people."<sup>1</sup> Secretary Kerry's call for understanding was then mirrored in a speech by Shaun Casey, the head of the OFBCI. Casey's remarks stirred the audience's approval for the initiative by stating that "it's essential for the United States to understand [religious groups] and to bring them into our diplomacy and development efforts."<sup>2</sup> Finally, the press conference ended with praise from Melissa Rogers, the Director of the White House OFBCI. Ms. Rogers applauded religious efforts to provide social services as well as the continuing trend of collaboration between government and religious groups. In this way, the U.S. Department of

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<sup>1</sup> From the State Department's transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/212781.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



State OFBCI was introduced with the mission of engaging religious organizations abroad and partnering with them in humanitarian interventions.

The creation of the OFBCI has raised the interest of scholars in various disciplines because the U.S. State Department has traditionally shown an aversion to engaging religion in foreign diplomacy. In fact, it has often been accused of suffering from a stout “secular fundamentalism.”<sup>3</sup> With the exception of its mission to foster religious freedom abroad—an agenda undertaken by the Office of International Religious Freedom in 1998—the State Department has been wary and suspicious of any religious organizations’ interest in foreign policy. Its current agenda to improve foreign relations and foreign policy through religious engagement is, then, labelled a ‘novel’ commitment. In so far as the Office is newly formed, this is true. However, prior to John Kerry becoming Secretary of State and establishing the OFBCI, former U.S. Secretaries of State, including Madeleine Albright and Hillary Clinton, had begun to engage religious leaders and activists in conversation.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, the rhetoric propounded by the Office is inherited from recent decades of collaboration between the U.S. government and faith-based organizations.

The OFBCI at the State Department is the most recent example of the changing dynamics of religious organizations in American politics. The last several decades have seen a surge in faith-based initiatives throughout the United States—from the growth in Alinsky-style social advocacy to the institutionalization of faith-based initiatives during the Bush

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<sup>3</sup> Judd Birdsall, “The State Department’s Great Leap Faithward,” *HuffPost Politics*, August 13, 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/judd-birdsall/state-department-faith-based-office\\_b\\_3744290.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/judd-birdsall/state-department-faith-based-office_b_3744290.html), accessed December 6, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See Madeleine Korb Albrit, William Woodward, and Bill Clinton, *The mighty and the almighty: Reflections on America, God, and WorldAffairs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

administration. In 2001, the Bush administration established the first institutionalized collaboration between government and religious groups—the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. The apparent success of these faith-based initiatives has led to the growing inclusion of religion in U.S. political discourse. In fact, recent studies in political science have shown that the staunch separationist culture which has heretofore been a marker of the United States government has gradually given way to a culture of accommodation and collaboration.<sup>5</sup> In addition, rather than labeling religion anachronistic and dismissing it from political discourse as has been the custom in American politics, religion is now understood to be a powerful force for change and action. Apart from constitutional debates about church-state relations, the cooperation with religious groups in U.S. democracy has reached a level of legitimacy unlike in any other period of American history. The creation of the Department of State OFBCI is, in short, the foreign expansion of a domestically normalized partnership between religious groups and government agencies.

The formation of the OFBCI at the State Department has led scholars to debate its inherent assumptions concerning 'religion.' While there is considerable excitement about the prospects of such an office fostering relationships with religious groups in foreign countries, scholars question the fundamental claims that such an office makes. After all, to engage religion globally presupposes that there is a universal understanding of 'religion' to which all parties can agree. Moreover, the idea that there is—as sociologist Rebecca Sager puts it, a

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<sup>5</sup> See Jo Renee Formicola, Mary C. Segers, and Paul Weber, *Faith-Based Initiatives and the Bush Administration: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003); Rebecca Sager, *Faith, Politics, and Power: The Politics of Faith-Based Initiative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

“one-size fits all faith-based initiative” is extremely problematic.<sup>6</sup> These and other reservations about the State Department OFBCI have been introduced by scholars in fields such as religious studies, international affairs, political science and sociology. In November of 2013, Georgetown University’s Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs held a panel evaluating the OFBCI and debating the role of religious engagements in foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> The popular and well-respected intellectual blog, *the Immanent Frame*, held an online roundtable of seventeen scholars to discuss the prospects, assumptions and implications of the new office; the forum was titled, “Engaging religion at the State Department.”<sup>8</sup> Less than six months after the creation of the OFBCI, scholars have begun to analyze and criticize the fundamental claims and objectives of the office.

In short, the present optimistic belief of American foreign diplomats that religious engagements will foster beneficial partnerships that will advance U.S. foreign policy interests has led scholars to pose the question: what will the U.S. engage when they engage religion abroad?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This thesis will use an interdisciplinary approach to evaluate the U.S. State Department OFBCI. Since the State’s OFBCI was just inaugurated in August of 2013—less than a year before

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<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Sager, *Faith, Politics and Power: The Politics of Faith-Based Initiatives* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Arend, Michael Kessler, et. al, “Evaluating the State Department’s Office of Faith-Based Community” (video of a forum held at the *Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs* video, November 11, 2013), accessed March 20, 2014, <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/events/evaluating-the-state-department-s-office-of-faith-based-community-initiatives>

<sup>8</sup> “Engaging Religion at the Department of State,” *The Immanent Frame Blog*, July 30, 2013. Accessed November 20, 2013. <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2013/07/30/engaging-religion-at-the-department-of-state/>, accessed September 20, 2013.

this study—there is a scarcity in academic and governmental resources. Because of lack of official mandates that specifically describe the methods the OFBCI will use to engage religion, most of the sources will come from news releases and press conferences, official statements on the State’s website, and the recommendations from the Religion and Foreign Policy Working group. These sources will represent the major proponents of the State OFBCI, including President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and Special Advisor to the State OFBCI Shaun Casey. Research about the White House OFBCI, an office focused on U.S. domestic faith-based partnerships primarily in the social service sector, will also be used to support this thesis in so far as its history may have something to show concerning institutionalized religious engagement in U.S. politics.

All of the available sources for the Department of State OFBCI are theoretically thin. However, this thesis will argue that the lack of an explicit theoretical basis for the OFBCI does not denote a lack of theoretical assumptions.<sup>9</sup> As such, this thesis will draw upon various concepts in the academic study of religion to help identify the assumptions and implications of the State OFBCI. Particularly, since this thesis is interested in the politics of religion, the concepts within the critical approach in religious studies, exemplified by Russell McCutcheon, will help identify the possible religious engagements that will come from this new office. In other words, scholarship of the critical approach which theorizes about categories, like religion, will be applied.

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<sup>9</sup>This thesis is a work of religious studies. As such, the word theory and its variations is consistent with its use in the field of religious studies.

## AIMS OF THIS STUDY

This thesis aims to contribute a theoretical model for the U.S. State Department's OFBCI.<sup>10</sup> It is focused on interpreting the language of the OFBCI in order to understand what the U.S. government means by 'religion' in global religious engagements, and by extension, what it is committed to achieving. In other words, it is interested in the question: What does the U.S. State Department OFBCI engage when they engage religion? It is not the purpose of this thesis to partake in the theoretical debates regarding church-state relations and the establishment clause. This is not a study troubled with questions about the legality or constitutionality of institutionalized faith-based initiatives. While many studies are available concerning those issues and they are a subject worth study, those debates tend to exist solely within the realms of political philosophy. In addition, there is little agreement on how the Establishment Clause is relevant in foreign affairs.

This thesis endeavors to take a multidisciplinary approach to faith-based initiatives. As such, it will present scholarship from religious studies, political science and sociology. It will explore what the OFBCI means by 'religion' and what engaging religious communities consist of within the confines of U.S. foreign policy. This thesis will argue that from the language used by the representatives and proponents of this Office, much can be inferred about its theoretical assumptions. Particularly, I will argue that the language used by the State OFBCI indicates a commitment to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. This will be explained and defended in chapter three.

## OUTLINE OF THESIS

This chapter presented an introduction to the topic of this study. The following chapter will illustrate the current conception, within American politics, that religion is valuable, distinctly humanitarian, and worth collaborating with. It will introduce the discourse on faith-based initiatives as presented by the Obama administration and the State Department, particularly in the years leading up to the launch of the State OFBCI. It will end by presenting the culmination of that discourse—the creation of the State Department OFBCI and its mission and goals. The second chapter is meant to present the language used to promote religious engagements in our foreign policy. Chapter three will, then, critically engage the language revealed in chapter two. It will explain and defend my thesis that the State Department OFBCI is committed to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. Additionally, it will provide a critique of the use of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* as a political strategy in foreign policy. By extension, this chapter will seek to respond to the question: what will the U.S. State Department Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives engage when it engages religion? The concluding chapter will offer some suggestions as to how scholarship on religion and foreign policy, and by extension the State Department OFBCI, should move forward.

## **CHAPTER TWO: THE DISCOURSE ON FAITH-BASED INITIATIVES**

### **INTRODUCTION**

While 2013 marked the official institutionalization in our foreign affairs agency of an office concerned with religious engagement, the twenty-first century is distinguished by a series of political measures in that direction. This chapter will introduce a more nuanced understanding of religious engagement in our foreign affairs agency—the State Department—by presenting the discourse on faith-based initiatives in the years leading into the creation of the State OFBCI. In other words, it will present the language used to promote and pursue religious engagement in the U.S. government.

First, an illustration of the Obama administration’s attitude and convictions concerning faith will help recognize the contemporary political culture which influenced the creation of the State Department OFBCI. More importantly, the “political theology” of Obama—concerned with domestic faith-based and government collaborations—will distinguish the common language characteristic of the State Department OFBCI. Next, the many measures taken within the State Department to engage religion, prior to the creation of the OFBCI, will be presented. This will briefly address the resistance the State Department had previously maintained regarding religion in foreign policy. An example of this resistance will be illustrated by the failures of the institutional predecessor to religious engagement in the State Department—the Office of International Religious Freedom (1996).

Following a brief examination of the resistance to religion at the State Department, the shift towards religious engagement will be demonstrated beginning with the work of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. This will include an account of her actions and contributions particularly in the designation of a Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group (2011). Among the many recommendations from the working group was the proposal of an OFBCI at the State Department. Finally, the current Secretary of State John Kerry, the special advisor to the OFBCI Shaun Casey, and most importantly, the objectives of the OFBCI will be presented in the context of this more nuanced account of religious engagement in American foreign affairs.

Because the State Department OFBCI is a recently crafted office, there is very little in terms of official reports and documents. The available documents alone could not provide a thorough understanding of its assumptions and implications. For this reason, this chapter relies upon the historical retrospective of the various figures and cases selected to present a discourse on faith-based initiatives. The language presented here is the most frequently and consistently used throughout the years. Careful consideration was given to selecting the most relevant and reliable sources. However, while the chosen are rich examples, this topic is not limited to them.

In summary, this chapter will demonstrate the contemporary political culture that warranted the creation of the State OFBCI. More importantly, it will reveal how the language used by the proponents shaped the discourse on faith-based initiatives that has culminated in the pursuit of religious engagements in foreign policy. While the State OFBCI is a new office in foreign policy, its agenda is not so novel in the U.S. government. This chapter will demonstrate



how the domestic faith-based initiative expanded into a commitment to religious engagement abroad.

## THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

We know that faith and values can be a source of strength in our own lives. That's what it's been to me. And that's what it is to so many Americans. But it can also be something more. It can be the foundation of a new project of American renewal. And that's the kind of effort I intend to lead as president of the United States.<sup>11</sup>

During the presidential campaign of 2008, then-Senator Barack Obama launched a unique grassroots campaign strategy that conjured the imagery, among many things, of the power of faith-based organizations. Trained as a faith-based community organizer in Chicago, Obama recognized that collaborating with religious organizations had tremendous potential in community revival and participatory politics for progressive change.<sup>12</sup> He believes that faith entails a responsibility to the community and to others to help resolve some of the great injustices of our time—like global poverty, global warming, and the many human rights violations across the globe. Following in the footsteps of former President George W. Bush, Obama promised to expand the White House OFBCI to maximize that potential. However, he also committed to resolve the many issues and satisfy the unfulfilled promises of the Bush OFBCI.

Departing from the rhetoric of the Bush administration, Obama clarified many of the former assumptions of the faith-based initiative as well as increased the agenda. Consistent with the findings of sociologists like Chaves, Obama declared that he had no illusions about the

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<sup>11</sup> "Obama Delivers Speech on Faith in America," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008. Accessed March 6, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/us/politics/01obama-text.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/us/politics/01obama-text.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0)

<sup>12</sup> Obama '08 pamphlet, "Partnering with communities of faith." Accessed March 6, 2014. [http://obama.3cdn.net/c2c74198bb57fc007c\\_ego6mvllj.pdf](http://obama.3cdn.net/c2c74198bb57fc007c_ego6mvllj.pdf)

extent of faith-based potential. In other words, he made no assertions that faith-based organizations could provide better service than secular ones, or that they were an alternative to them. He also—as a solution to the many problems of proselytizing, partisan interests, and exclusion discovered of the Bush OFBCI—indicated that his initiative would be better regulated and more inclusive. He would require that these initiatives demonstrate successful results. In addition, he recognized that the rhetoric of ‘leveling the playing field’ had been wholly unfulfilled and that faith-based initiatives remained extremely underfunded. Regrettably, “the smaller congregations and community groups that were supposed to be empowered ended up getting short-changed.”<sup>13</sup> Once elected President, Obama and his administration launched the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships with many of the needed changes.<sup>14</sup>

As promised in his presidential campaign, the launch of the Obama White House OFBCI featured a series of changes that were meant to honor the inclusive spirit of our country. In a clear effort to represent the religious pluralism of America, the Obama White House OFBCI included a President’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. This Council is a deliberately diverse assembly of secular and religious non-profit leaders committed to partnerships with governments for change.<sup>15</sup> Members of the Council have included religious leaders from various faith traditions—Orthodox Judaism, Greek Orthodoxy, Islam, Seventh Day Adventism, Baptists, Humanistic Buddhism, Latter Day Saints, Evangelical

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<sup>13</sup> “Obama Delivers Speech on Faith in America,” *New York Times*, July 1, 2008. Accessed March 6, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/us/politics/01obama-text.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/us/politics/01obama-text.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0)

<sup>14</sup> The acronym OFBCI will continue to be used.

<sup>15</sup> Gaston Enrique Espinosa, “Barack Obama’s Political Theology: Pluralism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Christian Faith,” *Political Theology* Vol. 13 Issue 5 (Oct. 2012), p610-633.

Lutherans, and many more. These leaders and the communities they represent work collaboratively to draft recommendations to the President on how to move forward on social issues and public policy.

For Obama, democracy is strengthened by diversity. He encourages faith-based organizations to collaborate in interfaith coalitions and discover common ground, rather than be divided by multiplicity. The official OFBCI website quotes Obama as saying, “the particular faith that motivates each of us can promote a greater good for all of us. Instead of driving us apart, our varied beliefs can bring us together to feed the hungry and comfort the afflicted; to make peace where there is strife and rebuild what has broken; to lift up those who have fallen on hard times.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, all faiths have a common concern with the greater good.

According to Gaston Espinosa in his article “Barack Obama’s Political Theology,” Obama is highly committed to a *pluralistic deliberative democracy*.<sup>17</sup> This means that pluralism is beneficial to democracy as long as it mediated for the common good. Based on Obama’s autobiography *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), Espinosa argues that Obama’s political theology is grounded on the belief that religiously motivated people must proportionately compromise for the common good. In other words, “translate their religious concerns and vision for American public life into universal rather than religion-specific values, which must be subject to debate, amenable to reason, and applicable to people of all faiths and lifestyles or no faith at all.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships,” The White House: President Barack Obama. Accessed March 6, 2014. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/ofbnp/about>

<sup>17</sup> Gaston Enrique Espinosa, “Barack Obama’s Political Theology: Pluralism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Christian Faith,” *Political Theology* Vol. 13 Issue 5 (Oct. 2012), p610-633.

<sup>18</sup> Gaston Enrique Espinosa, “Barack Obama’s Political Theology: Pluralism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Christian Faith,” *Political Theology* Vol. 13 Issue 5 (Oct. 2012), p610-633.

President Obama's speeches have contended that the common ground in all religions—the universal values—are the aspirations for the common good. During the 2008 campaign, he declared that "if we're going to end genocide and stop the scourge of HIV/AIDS, we need people of faith on Capitol Hill talking about how these challenges don't just represent a security crisis or a humanitarian crisis, but a moral crisis as well."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in a speech given at the 2014 National Prayer Breakfast he affirmed the same sentiment; "brave men and women of faith have challenged our conscience and brought us closer to our founding ideals, from the abolition of slavery to civil rights, workers' rights..."<sup>20</sup> He then followed those words by quoting verses from the Bible, the Torah, and the Qur'an to illustrate the qualities of a "good Samaritan."

Since the 2008 election, the Obama administration has continued to foster faith-based initiatives. In most of his speeches, the President continues to shape the discourse on faith-based initiatives. Unlike the Bush OFBCI, the Obama initiative is unique in its effort to honor pluralism through deliberately diverse partnerships. These partnerships aim to cultivate solidarity by engaging religions through common, universal values. Obama came into office strongly believing that ignoring religion is "bad politics." Secretary of State John Kerry will mirror this conviction in the launch of the State Department OFBCI by quoting the now popular political refrain, "we ignore religion at our peril."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Obama Delivers Speech on Faith in America," *New York Times*, July 1, 2008. Accessed March 6, 2014. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/us/politics/01obama-text.html?pagewanted=print&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/01/us/politics/01obama-text.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0)

<sup>20</sup> Obama's speech at the National prayer breakfast February 6, 2014 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/06/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>

<sup>21</sup> From the State Department's transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., August 7, 2013. Accessed November 20, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/212781.htm>

## RELIGION IN THE STATE DEPARTMENT

As the oldest and most distinguished of the U.S. government executive agencies, the State Department is responsible for “policy formulation respecting international issues, implementation of policy and the conduct of foreign relations, and coordination of major overseas programs and activities.”<sup>22</sup> The protection and promotion of American interests at the global level is achieved through the U.S. State Department and its foreign diplomatic projects. It continuously adapts its approach to international relations in order to meet contemporary demands and needs. The rise of nation states and the force of globalization, with all of its tensions and conflicts, have made foreign diplomacy an increasingly demanding activity.

The United States government has had to expand its approach to foreign policy to include commitments it previously deemed irrelevant to international relations. The recent institutionalized commitment to religious engagements demonstrated by the creation of the OFBCI indicates a shift in the political culture of American foreign diplomacy. In the United States government, the domestic shift from separation to collaboration with religious organizations has been, arguably, completed. After all, the Obama administration is strongly supportive of faith-based partnerships. However, the State Department has continuously resisted—until now—the faith-based initiatives established by its domestic counterparts.

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<sup>22</sup> Elmer Plischke, *U.S. State Department: A reference history*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), 461.

Many former diplomats have accused the Department of State of “secular fundamentalism” or “religion avoidance syndrome.”<sup>23</sup> Because, while by 2012 twelve executive branch agencies had established versions of the White House OFBCI, the State Department had not.<sup>24</sup> In *U.S. Department of State: A Reference History*, a 700+ page book containing a thorough history of the Department, religion did not even make it into the index.<sup>25</sup> Historically, the State Department has been adamantly committed to presenting a secular approach to policy formulation. Nonetheless, real-world events like 9/11, the so-called Arab Spring, and continuing sectarian conflicts abroad have necessitated improving engagement with religion in foreign diplomacy.

Despite conventional wisdom that asserts that the 2013 launch of the OFBCI marked the year that the State Department began to “get religion,” the first decades of the twenty-first century illustrate its shift towards religious engagement. The OFBCI is the culmination of the discourse on faith-based initiatives, and more generally, religion, which has been nurtured for several decades now. Two years after the Charitable Choice Act (1996) changed the relationship of government and faith-based initiatives, the Clinton administration passed the International Religious Freedom Act (1998). The IRFA opened an Office in the State Department aimed at combatting religious persecution and promoting religious freedom

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<sup>23</sup> Judd Birdsall, “The State Department’s Great Leap Faithward,” *HuffPost Politics*, August 13, 2013. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/judd-birdsall/state-department-faith-based-office\\_b\\_3744290.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/judd-birdsall/state-department-faith-based-office_b_3744290.html), accessed December 6, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, “Ensuring the Opportunity for Mutual Counsel and Collaboration: A White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society,” October 16, 2012. Accessed November 20, 2013. [http://globalengage.org/content/1300\\_Religion\\_\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Working\\_Group\\_Submitted\\_WP\\_16Oct2012.pdf](http://globalengage.org/content/1300_Religion__Foreign_Policy_Working_Group_Submitted_WP_16Oct2012.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Elmer Plischke, *U.S. State Department: A reference history*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999).

abroad. Years later, during her term as Secretary of State (2009-2013), Hillary Clinton developed a series of forums, dialogues, and working groups to advance conversation about religious engagement in foreign policy. In 2013, the recommendations of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group were realized by Secretary of State John Kerry in the launch of the State OFBCI. The State Department had finally developed an official mechanism for engaging with religious communities.

### *Office of International Religious Freedom*

The Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department, along with the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, was created in accordance with the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998. With the leadership of the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, a currently vacant position, the office pursues four major objectives:

- Promote freedom of religion and conscience throughout the world as a fundamental right and a source of stability for all countries;
- Assist emerging democracies in implementing freedom of religion and conscience;
- Assist religious and human rights NGOs in promoting religious freedom;
- Identify and denounce regimes that are severe persecutors on the basis of religious belief.<sup>26</sup>

The promotion of religious freedom is based on the belief that it is a matter of national security. According to its proponents, the violation of the human right to religious freedom leads to sectarian strife and violence. Freedom of religion is a necessary ingredient for the promotion of successful development and democracy abroad. As a result, part of the mandate

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<sup>26</sup> "Religious Freedom," U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in Action. Accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/irf/>

of the IRF Act of 1998 requires that the USCIRF submit an annual report on the standing of religious freedom around the world. This report identifies countries with severe violations of religious freedom and recommends the classification known as Country of Particular Concern. In 2013, for example, the USCIRF recommended that the Secretary of State designate 15 CPCs.<sup>27</sup> In order to ascertain and report the situation of religious freedom in these countries, the OIRF must interact with religious communities around the world.

Although the IRF Act does not include religious engagement as an official mandate, the OIRF is involved in engaging with religious communities. According to a report by the President's Advisory Council, "the required annual International Religious Freedom report has also nurtured a corps of foreign service officers who have developed strong connections with religious communities in countries across the globe."<sup>28</sup> As such, it is arguably the first office in the State Department concerned with religion. It demonstrates how, as early as 1998, the State recognized that the obstruction of religious freedom led to conflict. More specifically, that religious freedom was necessary for development and conflict resolution. Despite the fact that religious engagement in the OIRF is limited to advancing religious freedom, the office symbolizes a shift—albeit a grudging shift—in the political culture of the State Department.

Since the inception of the OIRF, the State Department has been criticized for its weak commitment to the objectives of the office. According to international relations scholar Thomas Farr, "the implementation of the International Religious Freedom Act did not involve

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<sup>27</sup> In 2013 there were 7 CPCs; Burma, China, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Sudan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia. The USCIRF recommended the addition of Egypt, Pakistan, Nigeria, Iraq, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

<sup>28</sup> President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. "A New Era of Partnerships: Report of Recommendations to the President", March 2010, 74.



any serious attempt to 'advance religious freedom' as the law nominally mandated."<sup>29</sup> In fact, the designation of CPCs amount to no more than sanctions and warnings. In addition, Farr argues that today, no different than in 1998, diplomats lack knowledge or training concerning the importance and meaning of religious freedom. Most diplomats continue to resist actively promoting religious freedom. Farr adds that the IRFA "was essentially a humanitarian policy, rather than a policy of promoting religious freedom."<sup>30</sup> In other words, while sanctions are used to influence the release of religious prisoners, they do not necessarily advance the right to religious freedom.<sup>31</sup> The OIRF is largely considered a failure.

Currently, the Obama administration is criticized as having a poor religious freedom record. As such, during the 2014 National Prayer Breakfast he adamantly affirmed his continued commitment to religious freedom and faith-based partnerships. He stressed that religious freedom is a key objective in foreign policy. In fact, religious freedom is one of the objectives of the new State OFBCI. Unfortunately, Obama has failed to appoint a new Ambassador-At-Large for International Religious Freedom in a timely manner. Leaving the position vacant has signified a lack of concern for the plight of the religiously persecuted. Of more interest may be the fact that this has led to public outrage; the protection of religious rights in foreign nations is now conceived of as the responsibility of the U.S. government. =

*Religious Engagement at the State Department*

In the years leading up to the creation of the State Department OFBCI, debates about religion and foreign policy increased. Independent task forces emerged all around the U.S. For

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Farr, *World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 42.

example, in 2010, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs composed a report titled “Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative in U.S. foreign policy.” Similarly, in the same year, the President’s Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships submitted their annual report of recommendations to the President. Among their many recommendations, the Council advised for the creation of multi-religious working groups as well as increased training about multi-religious cooperation in global affairs.

In an effort to develop new ideas and strategies for religious engagement, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton developed a series of working groups and task forces. Among the many working groups was included the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group. At the launch of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group in 2011, the Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs, Maria Otero, stated that religious engagement was now, more than ever, necessary in foreign diplomacy. As was by then common rhetoric, religion had the potential to change lives all around the world. In her enthusiastic speech she proclaimed, “For those of us in this room today, we believe in religion as a force of good in the world -- and we are here to see how we can better leverage it in the pursuit of a stronger society.”<sup>32</sup> It was, in other words, time to put religion to its good use. In addition, she declared that this quality for good was found in religions all around the world. In her own experience, “No matter where I am, from Indonesia to Uganda, I am struck by the thread that unites the vast majority of the world, a faith that is bound by hope and defined by love of family and our fellow man.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Maria Otero, “Remarks to the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group,” U.S. Department of State, October 18, 2011. Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/176344.htm>

<sup>33</sup> Maria Otero, “Remarks to the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group,” U.S. Department of State, October 18, 2011. Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/176344.htm>

As these working groups developed their recommendations, the leaders at the State Department began to actively promote a new culture of religious engagement. In 2012, based on the recommendations of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, the Foreign Service Institute offered—for the first time in its history—a three-day optional course on religion and foreign policy. While it is merely optional and many diplomats opt-out, it does indicate a forward approach concerning religion in foreign diplomacy. In addition to the religions course, leaders began to hold public dialogues to endorse the importance of religious engagement. For example, in January 2012, former Ambassador-At-Large for International Religious Freedom, Suzanne Johnson Cook, held a “Conversation with America.” The topic was the role of religion in U.S. foreign policy. During her interview she pointed out that that the “key to all faiths is love thy neighbor as yourself ... religious freedom is part of the American DNA. And so it’s not a partisan issue. It’s a human issue...”<sup>34</sup> In addition, Chris Seiple—the President of the Institute for Global Engagement and a member of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group—said, “so the point of faith – good faith – is that you’re serving your local community.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, true religion is distinctly attached to caring and humanistic concerns.

Meanwhile, during her diplomatic trips abroad, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton increasingly engaged with religious leaders. In May 2012, at the annual Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society, Secretary Clinton acknowledged that

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<sup>34</sup> Suzan Johnson Cook, “Role of Religion in U.S. Foreign Policy,” January 23, 2012. Accessed March 16, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/pl/cwa/182470.htm>

<sup>35</sup> Chris Seiple, “Role of Religion in U.S. Foreign Policy,” January 23, 2012. Accessed March 16, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/pl/cwa/182470.htm>

our posts in every region of the globe work with faith-based organizations and religious communities to bolster democracies, protect human rights, and respond to the humanitarian need of citizens. So these groups are our natural allies on a multitude of issues, including advancing religious freedom, and we want to work with them wherever possible.”<sup>36</sup>

In October 2012, the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group submitted their “White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society.” Of four major recommendations for how to engage religion, one would eventually lead to the creation of the OFBCI.

The White Paper recommended the establishment of an official mechanism within State for religious engagement. Specifically, to “create an institutionalized mechanism through which the State Department and religious communities worldwide might better communicate and potentially collaborate, and that will improve understanding of religious dynamics relevant to foreign policy.”<sup>37</sup> According to the members of the working group, which included the current Special Advisor to the OFBCI, “understanding religion is imperative to understanding the local civil society.”<sup>38</sup> While they recognized that religion is a source for conflict, they believe that “those same forces of faith contribute much good to civil society, and when properly engaged can promote human progress and peaceful coexistence on a

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<sup>36</sup>Hillary Clinton, “Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society 2012 Summit,” May 16, 2012. Accessed March 16, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2012/05/190179.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, “Ensuring the Opportunity for Mutual Counsel and Collaboration: A White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society,” October 16, 2012. Accessed November 20, 2013. [http://globalengage.org/content/1300\\_Religion\\_\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Working\\_Group\\_Submitted\\_WP\\_16Oct2012.pdf](http://globalengage.org/content/1300_Religion__Foreign_Policy_Working_Group_Submitted_WP_16Oct2012.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

global scale.”<sup>39</sup> Of course, *proper* engagement is likely to be contingent with a particular conception of religion.

## THE STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICE OF FAITH-BASED AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Secretary of State John Kerry called the August 2013 launch of the State OFBCI a “singular, historic initiative.”<sup>40</sup> Recounting his many engagements with faith community members and leaders during his years as senator, he proudly acknowledged that “there is much more that unites us, and should unite us, than divides us.”<sup>41</sup> The creation of the OFBCI is meant to foster this understanding and strives to nurture the commonalities among faiths. After all, according to John Kerry, “all of these faiths are virtuous, and they are in fact, most of them, tied together by the golden rule, as well as fundamental concerns about the human condition, about poverty, about relationships between people, our responsibilities to each other. And they all come from the same heart.”<sup>42</sup>

According to Kerry, it was time to translate this understanding of religion into action and policy. It was now popularly understood that religions are inherently moral and concerned with human dignity. As such, they were valuable partners in advancing development, human rights, and aid. And while he recognized that there exist current offices concerned with issues

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<sup>39</sup> Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, “Ensuring the Opportunity for Mutual Counsel and Collaboration: A White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society,” October 16, 2012. Accessed November 20, 2013. [http://globalengage.org/content/1300\\_Religion\\_\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Working\\_Group\\_Submitted\\_WP\\_16Oct2012.pdf](http://globalengage.org/content/1300_Religion__Foreign_Policy_Working_Group_Submitted_WP_16Oct2012.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> From the State Department’s transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/212781.htm>

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

related to religion, like the OIRF, he announced that the OFBCI “will grow our ability to reach out to more communities and create greater understanding between peoples and countries.”<sup>43</sup>

Shaun Casey, the Special Advisor to the OFBCI, followed Kerry’s speech at the launch. Shaun Casey is a professor of theology at the Wesley Theological Seminary and teaches Christian ethics. In addition, during the 2008 presidential campaign, Casey served as National Evangelical Coordinator for the campaign’s faith-based community organizing. He is also a member of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group that recommended the creation of the OFBCI. During his speech at the launch he commended Kerry’s innovative approach to religious engagement

I remember thinking how unusual it was for a public figure to see the potential in and the power of religious groups tackling extreme poverty, convincing people to combat global climate change, fighting for global human rights, mitigating conflict and building peace, even at a time when others focused on those religious folk who committed acts of violent extremism, perversely claiming justice in the name of their own faith. From that day forward, I admired your willingness to defy the conventional wisdom that dictated religion was a purely private, personal choice, and thus communities bounded by faith must be entirely left outside discussions of policy. <sup>44</sup>

During an interview with Paul Rauschenbusch in November 2013, Shaun Casey described his position at the OFBCI as comprising of three jobs; first, to advise the Secretary concerning the role of religion in particular issues; to build a systematic strategy for religious engagement in the State; and third, to connect the State to faith-based groups and NGOs.<sup>45</sup> In addition,

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<sup>43</sup> From the State Department’s transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013.

<http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/212781.htm>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Shaun Casey interviewing with Paul Rauschenbusch, “How the State Department is Getting Religion,” Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, “Ensuring the Opportunity for Mutual Counsel and Collaboration: A White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society,” October 16, 2012. Accessed November 20, 2013.

Casey has been a guest teacher for the Foreign Service Institute religions course. His understanding and convictions concerning religion have been highly influential to the leaders of the State Department and to the overall agenda of the OFBCI.

The State OFBCI has now been present for several months. And yet, besides the occasional speech and meeting, which consist of the same language and content as always, not much can be said of its accomplishments.

In August of 2013 the State Department announced three objectives in the creation of the OFBCI. First, it hopes to “promote sustainable development and effective humanitarian assistance.” This would include addressing issues of global poverty both at the national and international level—through and with religious actors—“being mindful of the very important religious aspects in the context where these programs are administered, we hope to overcome some of the misunderstandings surrounding [U.S.] assistance.”<sup>46</sup> Second, they aim at fostering “pluralism and human rights, including the right to religious freedom.” According to the U.S. Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement, “the Administration will increase efforts to engage a diverse spectrum of religious leaders on the advancement of universal human rights, promoting core U.S. values like respect for human rights of members in minority and marginalized groups, pluralism, tolerance, and sensitivity to and respect for the beliefs and traditions of others.”<sup>47</sup> The idea is that the fulfillment of the right to religious freedom and the promotion of tolerance and understanding will intrinsically support religiously

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<sup>46</sup> From the State Department’s transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2013/08/212781.htm>

<sup>47</sup> “Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives,” U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in Action. Accessed April 15, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/s/fbci/>

diverse populations. Finally, the OFBCI will aim to “prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict and contribute to local and regional stability and security.” As the leaders involved in the creation of this office have proposed, the “understanding” that comes from engaging religious communities will inevitably decrease international conflicts with religious groups.

## CONCLUSION

Although the OFBCI is a relatively recent development in the State Department, its language shows continuity with the growing commitment to religious engagement within government. As sociologist Rebecca Sager stated in her book *Faith, Politics, and Power*, “policies are not just pieces of paper but ideas about larger meanings, recounted to the public with the stamp of authority on them.”<sup>48</sup> The language used in the discourse on faith-based initiatives suggests that religion is now legitimized as a source for promoting the common good. In other words, religion is lauded as fostering universal virtues.

During the launch of the OFBCI, Secretary John Kerry admitted that, were he able to return to college, he would major in comparative religion. In fact, I will argue in the next chapter that much of the language used by the Department is inherited from the study of comparative religion. As such, engaging the language used in the discourse on faith-based initiatives through concepts in religious studies is appropriate. In the following chapter I will argue and defend that the language presented in the discourse on faith-based initiatives illustrates a commitment to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*.

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<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Sager, *Faith, Politics, and Power: The Politics of Faith-Based Initiative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.



## CHAPTER THREE:

### A HUMANISTIC THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

This chapter will argue and defend that the language that shapes the discourse on faith-based initiatives, as introduced in chapter two, indicates a commitment to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. My thesis is that the State Department OFBCI uses the language of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* to support U.S. foreign interests. As such, the OFBCI will engage groups in so far as they fit their definition of religion. I will further argue that using the language of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* obscures the exclusive and coercive characteristics of faith-based initiatives. Or, more generally, I will argue that there is a selective impulse concealed within the language of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*.

To return to the original question of “what will the U.S. State Department OFBCI engage when they engage religion?” this chapter will respond by presenting a theoretical framework for the language used in the discourse on faith-based initiatives. This chapter will not present a list or catalogue all the religions of the world that will fall within the purview of religious engagement. While all the speeches, public dialogues, and strategic meetings invoke the concept of religion, or faith, typically synonymously, an explicit theoretical framework for the initiative was never provided. As such, it seems more appropriate to answer the question of “what will the U.S. State Department engage?” by establishing the theoretical framework through which the OFBCI operates. However abstract the language spoken by the proponents and architects of the OFBCI, I argue that its assumptions are inherited from the academic study

of religion; specifically, from the comparative study of religion. After all, J.Z. Smith once claimed, "it is the study of religion that invented religion."<sup>49</sup>

The ambiguity of a theoretical framework in the launch of the OFBCI, then, does not detract from the fact that there are inherent assumptions about religion supported in its language. In other words, within the language used by the OFBCI—including the rhetoric on faith-based initiatives in the years leading up to its creation—lays its theoretical assumptions. Understanding these assumptions, their implications and limitations, can better answer the question of "what will the U.S. engage?" than any extensive list could. After all, whom the Department of State OFBCI legitimizes, protects, and ultimately engages with will be highly dependent on discovering its theoretical assumptions concerning religion.

As stated in chapter one, most of the problems scholars have raised concerning the State Department's OFBCI are influenced by the contemporary academic debate on the category of 'religion.' The critical approach to studying religion, currently influenced by scholars like Daniel Dubuisson and Russell McCutcheon, are especially critical of the agenda of comparative religion. Although there are no works by McCutcheon on faith-based initiatives, the language in the discourse on faith-based initiatives contains the kind of universalizing statements that McCutcheon finds problematic. While the works of Dubuisson and McCutcheon will provide the majority of my argument, I will also apply the works of sociologist Rebecca Sager and other representatives of the critical approach, including Pamela Klassen and Benjamin Berger.

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<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "'Religion' and 'Religious Studies': No Difference At All," *Soundings* 71 (1988), 234.

Finally, a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* is both a description and a critique of the language promoted in the State OFBCI. It develops from two positions. First, *humanistic* comes from the belief that the human person is progressive, rational, and morally driven. Second, a *theology of religious pluralism* is derived from a critique by McCutcheon on the enterprise of religious studies. Specifically, McCutcheon argues in his book *Manufacturing Religion* that the comparativist approach to religion is “more akin to a theology of religious pluralism than the academic study of religion.”<sup>50</sup> The critique of the political strategy of the State OFBCI is ingrained in the use of *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* to describe its theoretical framework. This chapter will explain and defend this argument.

#### **A HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO RELIGION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?**

A humanistic approach to anything invokes imagery of the righteous social being striving for a cause. The fight for human rights, the struggle for justice, the dedication to human dignity for all—these are depicted as the particular values and motivations of the human person. The optimism for a better tomorrow colors the humanistic approach. The human person is envisioned as socially responsible, rational, compassionate, and just.

Anthropologist and historian of religion Daniel Dubuisson explains that, “the human being of the human sciences is a basically reasonable, rationally motivated creature, who lives in a rather hospitable world, which it is his duty to make better.”<sup>51</sup> In other words, a humanistic approach sees the human being as inherently concerned with the common good and with

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<sup>50</sup> Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 105.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel (Dubuisson) *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 181.

effecting positive changes in the world. Moreover, “what is monstrous, violent, coarse, and obscene in human beings escapes [humanistic approaches], along, logically, with everything that devolves from it.”<sup>52</sup> The merciless is, then, *not* human; a mistake; a grave exception. In short, it is inhumane.

The celebration of the religious person, and by extension ‘religion’, as virtuous and actively engaged in social change is therefore indicative of a humanistic approach. Daniel Dubuisson, in *The Western Construction of Religion*, argues that the human sciences are responsible for the invention of *homo religious*—religious man. More importantly, he says, “this human being, [is] progressively conceived of as free, tolerant, reasonable subject, committed to happiness, attached to human rights and to democracy.”<sup>53</sup> Former U.S. Ambassador-At-Large for International Religious Freedom, Suzan Johnson Cook represents it best when she states that we should “recognize the human spirit of acceptance and love that runs through us all.”<sup>54</sup>

Russell McCutcheon explains in his article “It’s a Lie! There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!: On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves” that the humanistic approach to religion is “one that understands religion’s significance—as well as the significance of the study of religion practiced as a form of

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<sup>52</sup> Daniel (Dubuisson) *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 182.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>54</sup> “Remarks to the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group,” U.S. Department of State, October 18, 2011. Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/jj176344.htm>

conversation—to have something to do with its being both deeply human and humane.”<sup>55</sup> This understanding embraces religion as humanitarian and as providing the religious person with an ethical system particularly beneficial to reducing social problems and conflict. Furthermore, the religious person is especially concerned with achieving the ethical goals of their religion for the sake of the common good. As Kerry stated at the launch of the OFBCI, all religions have “fundamental concerns about the human condition, about poverty, about relationships between people, our responsibility to each other.”<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, all individuals, perhaps especially religious individuals, are worthy of and supportive of, compassion, freedom, safety and the fundamental necessities needed for a happy, fulfilling life.

An example of the humanistic approach to religion is, then, the promotion of faith-based initiatives. As seen in chapter one, the project of faith-based initiatives is linked with participatory politics, in other words democracy, and the provision of social services. As Mary Seger discusses in *Faith-Based Initiatives and the Bush Administration*, a “faith-based initiative enforces the positive role of religion in society, recognizing that in many cases churches, synagogues, and mosques are the only institutions able to ‘suffer with’ the poor and act as the ‘voice of the voiceless.’”<sup>57</sup> Although it is worth observing that religion is here associated with institutions, the overall conviction is that faith-based initiatives, as manifestations of religion, are compassionate and caring. Similarly, in their White Paper recommendations, the Religion

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<sup>55</sup> Russell McCutcheon, “It’s a Lie. There’s No Truth in It! It’s a Sin!”: On the Limits of the Humanistic Study of Religion and the Costs of Saving Others from Themselves,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, September 2006, Vol. 74, No. 3, 726.

<sup>56</sup> From the State Department’s transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013.

<sup>57</sup> Jo Renee Formicola, Mary C. Segers, and, Paul Weber, *Faith-Based Initiatives and the Bush Administration: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 15.

and Foreign Policy Working Group endorsed religion as “a force for peace, human rights, democracy, and development.”<sup>58</sup>

As can be seen in chapter two, the State OFBCI and the overall discourse on faith-based initiatives promotes the vision of religion as synonymous with morality, virtue, justice, and peace. In other words, *humanistic*.

### **COMPARATIVE RELIGION AS ‘THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM’**

In the years leading up to the creation of the OFBCI there were many speeches declaring the shared virtues and ethical commitments of all religions. President Obama and his *deliberative pluralistic democracy* stressed this truth.<sup>59</sup> Unlike the Bush initiatives, he assured that the White House OFBCI would be inclusive in honor of America’s spirit of pluralism. This was especially poignant in his speeches which both assured that there were universal values in all religions, and urged communities to find them. So, rather than the Bush initiative which was often accused of exhibiting a partiality to Christian groups, the Obama administration promised to build interfaith and intra-faith partnerships of mutual cooperation. More importantly, he indicated that this was possible.

Again, although there was never any explicit mention of a particular theory or theorist of religion, the language of the proponents is consistent throughout the years and alludes to a mainstream conception of religion. Two specific themes will be the focus of this argument.

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<sup>58</sup> From the State Department’s transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Gaston Enrique Espinosa, “Barack Obama’s Political Theology: Pluralism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Christian Faith,” *Political Theology* Vol. 13 Issue 5 (Oct. 2012), p610-633.

First, “the challenge of simply *understanding* people,” the essential importance “to *understand* them and to bring them into our diplomacy” and “to improve *understanding* of religious dynamics relevant to foreign policy [italics mine].”<sup>60</sup> In the study of religion, understanding is a loaded word—it is laden with the ideologies and traditions of the mid-twentieth century American academic study of religion. An academic tradition represented by Mircea Eliade, considered by some the father of religious studies. Second, the reference to the study of comparative religions—both specifically during the launch of the OFBCI and implicitly in its objectives—is suggestive of a particular theoretical framework. Today, scholars of religious studies largely debate and critique the objectives and assumptions of that tradition.

According to Mircea Eliade, the unique purpose of the study of religion is that it should seek to understand religion not explain it away. A proponent of the phenomenological approach, Mircea Eliade claimed that religion was unique and therefore needed to be studied by its own unique terms. Phenomenology comparatively and systematically tries to observe, classify, describe and ultimately understand religious phenomena. The meaning of phenomena is *to manifest, to appear*. As such, phenomenologists proper believe that religion is autonomous and irreducible to fields such as psychology or economics. Neutrality, tolerance, and understanding are part of the basis of phenomenology. As Eliade argued, to attempt to explain religion away as the neurosis of the mind, or as the result of unsatisfactory economic

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<sup>60</sup> See the State Department’s transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013; Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, “Ensuring the Opportunity for Mutual Counsel and Collaboration: A White Paper of the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group of the Secretary of State’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society,” October 16, 2012. Accessed November 20, 2013. [http://globalengage.org/content/1300\\_Religion\\_\\_Foreign\\_Policy\\_Working\\_Group\\_Submitted\\_WP\\_16Oct2012.pdf](http://globalengage.org/content/1300_Religion__Foreign_Policy_Working_Group_Submitted_WP_16Oct2012.pdf)

conditions, is to ignore religion as a unique aspect of human experience; an experience that all human beings have and which needs to be understood in its own terms.

The comparative approach to the study of religion can easily be coupled with the attitude of the phenomenological approach which seeks to *understand*. In fact, Russell McCutcheon has often argued that comparative religion is concerned with “unification through essentialization” and the need to understand the Other.<sup>61</sup> According to this approach, to truly understand the Other is to better understand yourself. In other words, comparative religion abstracts features supposedly common to all religions in order to “learn about our own religious nature.”<sup>62</sup> Thus, the comparative approach is critiqued by McCutcheon as being a *theology of religious pluralism* in its concern with understanding, and perhaps legitimizing, our own religious tradition in the face of others. It is concerned with the problem of religious pluralism.

For Russell McCutcheon, the popular academic study of religion is devoid of theoretical sophistication. Rather than a field concerned with the questions which originally called the discipline into being, like what is the origin of religion, the study of religion has become a field concerned with the politics of neutrality or the problem of religious pluralism. For example, the United States, which sees itself as exceptional with regards to religious pluralism, promotes the idea that all religions can co-exist under the guise of neutrality, tolerance, and inclusion; the comparative approach supports this. In the words of McCutcheon, this approach envisions that “socio-historical and material issues are not to be studied but are problems to be

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<sup>61</sup> Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.



overcome, diffused, and minimalized for the sake of an abstract, ahistorical unity. The study of religion conceived in this manner is the mediation of religious difference; it is a form of religious pluralism; it is the discourse on *sui generis* yet again.”<sup>63</sup> The State OFBCI, then, if operating under the conceptual framework of comparative religion, is also concerned with the mediation of difference and the labor of unification.

Both the phenomenological drive to *understand* and the comparativist effort to find common features have found their way into the language of faith-based initiatives. Shaun Casey, the Special Advisor to the OFBCI, as a professor of Christian Ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary, must have some experience with it. After all, he, along with those he has advised concerning religion, applies the language often. In addition, that a Christian theologian was chosen for the project of the OFBCI, seems to, in itself, warrant McCutcheon’s criticisms that comparative religion is an ecumenical project; a *theology of religious pluralism*.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, I argue that the theoretical framework of the State OFBCI is a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. And more importantly, I argue that it is a problem.

## **A HUMANISTIC THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AS POLITICAL STRATEGY: OBSCURING THE FACTS**

In spite of the years of preparation through public dialogues, working groups, and strategy meetings, the launch of the OFBCI has raised many questions. Among them, the most persistent question remains: what will the State OFBCI engage when they engage religion? And to most scholars, the answer seems obvious and the question is posed rather rhetorically.

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<sup>63</sup> Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 183.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid 105.

After all, the State Department is first and foremost concerned with promoting the best interest of the American people abroad. However admirable the objectives of the State Department OFBCI might seem, there is no purely altruistic foreign policy. In other words, the State Department OFBCI will engage religion in partnerships that are beneficial to U.S. foreign interests. Again, it seems obvious and possibly should go without saying. So perhaps the question remains because the discourse on faith-based initiatives continues to claim otherwise. Or perhaps it is simply because it is not clear and explicit. It was just this February that President Obama, speaking of both the White House OFBCI and the new State Department OFBCI at the 2014 National Prayer Breakfast, urged that “in contrast to those who wield religion to divide us, let’s do more to nurture the dialogue between faiths that can break cycles of conflict and build true peace...”<sup>65</sup>

In continuously stating the question, scholars are rather than being genuinely curious, recognizing that there is a problem. They are recognizing that the religious engagements promoted by the U.S. State Department OFBCI are invariably limited. More importantly, they identify that the discourse on faith-based initiatives obscures this truth. What is obvious, then, is hidden. And this is what leads to the ever-pressing question: what will the State Department’s Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives actually engage?

My thesis is that the State Department OFBCI uses the language of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* to support U.S. foreign interests. In other words, religious groups will be engaged and legitimized so far as they both represent *and* pursue the common good.

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<sup>65</sup> Obama’s speech at the National prayer breakfast, February 6, 2014. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/06/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>

The language used in the discourse on faith-based initiatives makes this openly clear. So, the conceptual framework of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* becomes an issue of definition for religious engagements. Groups will be defined according to this *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. And yet, the use of language that promotes a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* obscures its limitations. As international affairs scholars Lee Marsden has explained, "The attempts by faith-based scholars [...] to inspire a faith-based US foreign policy emphasize the inclusivity of faith-based approaches. In doing so they presuppose a religious community that is prepared to work in inter- and multi-faith forums to an ecumenical agenda based on mutual understanding [...]"<sup>66</sup> So, the language of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*, is a concealed strategy that obscures the exclusive and coercive potential of government institutionalized faith-based initiative.

#### *Taking religion seriously*

The creation of the State OFBCI is meant to respond to demands, both foreign and domestic, that religion be taken seriously in U.S. foreign policy. The events of 9/11, the Arab Spring, and the continuing conflicts abroad have encouraged the recognition of religion as something worth engaging. The objectives of the OFBCI are, then, the promotion and advancement of democratically conceived-of ideals such as development, pluralism, human rights, security, and stability. Religious engagement at the State Department is meant to advance these ideals through what is now recognized as the true potential of religion. The OFBCI strives to build global collaborative partnerships between the U.S. government and

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<sup>66</sup> Lee Marsden, "Bush, Obama, and a faith-based U.S. foreign policy," *International Affairs* 88, No. 5 (2012): 972.

foreign religious groups. It is, in short, in the efforts to advance U.S. foreign interests. As such, religion is defined through the lens of those democratically conceived ideals.

During the launch of the OFBCI, Secretary of State John Kerry confessed that “we ignore religion at our peril.” More specifically, to ignore religion has two major possibilities. One, religion can be abused. This comes from the understanding that there are those who will, and have, abused of religion for extremist and hostile reasons. These groups are not true religions, so the thinking goes, but distortions of a religion. The U.S. government recognizes that engaging religion is somewhat of a preemptive solution to extremism and terrorism born abroad. It has been suggested by leaders that were the U.S. not to engage with these religious groups, someone else would; mainly, political extremists who would abuse and misinterpret the truth of religion. Second, to ignore religion is to ignore its powerful potential and force for advancing global progress. In the conceptual framework of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*, a religion is defined by its commitment to morality, compassion, and an ethic of service. So, those religious groups that the U.S. engages with are, and must remain, consistent with a conception of religion that promotes the common good. Those religions that the OFBCI ignores, or fails to engage with, are invariably understood as examples of bad religion, but more specifically, false religion. Like Chris Seiple, member of the Religion and Foreign Policy, claimed in his “Conversation with America,” the point of faith is for it to be good. The OFBCI commitment to religious engagements in foreign affairs addresses both these possibilities by taking religion seriously.

In *Manufacturing of Religion*, McCutcheon argues that the category of religion is not simply the product of processes of academia but is both constructed and used for material

interests. So while a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* is a conceptual framework present in the language of the initiative, it is language specifically selected and put to a particular use. Categories are first produced, accepted, and then managed. To engage religion is to engage a particular understanding of religion. Religion is a *useful* category. Meredith McGuire, in her popular textbook *Religion: The Social Context*, in addressing different definitions of religion, admits as such. She argues that a definition of religion is a *strategy*. Used as a political strategy, religion in faith-based initiatives takes the U.S. democratic agenda, and imposes it on the definition of religion. In the case of the OFBCI, its objectives and language suggests that a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism is*, in addition to the theoretical framework it operates within, the strategy of religious engagement in the State Department.

In an article titled, "Seriously, What Does Taking Religion Seriously Mean?," Elizabeth Pritchard analyzed popular demands that things be "taken seriously." From gender, to race, to religion, Pritchard argues that taking these concepts seriously is merely to legitimize a particular definition of them. In the case of religion, that religion needs to be taken seriously in the public sphere invariably means that religion needs to be welcomed; but even these claims often explicitly recognize limitations to the understanding of religion. For example, as Formicola acknowledges in the *Bush Initiative: the Good, the Bad and the Ugly*, initial requests that religion in the public sphere be taken seriously always conceded that it needed to be done within the confines of the Establishment Clause. So while religion is understood as a force for good that needed to be acknowledged, it is bound by specific rules. So, as Pritchard concludes, "even as religion is courted into the public square, its presence there is already constrained and

qualified in advance.”<sup>67</sup> Institutionalized engagement of religions, whether through funding or cooperation, with all its caveats and concessions, appears to be the engagement of a very specific understanding of religion.

The theoretical assumptions evidenced in the language of the State OFBCI suggest that the limits for the category of religion in foreign engagements lie within the confines of U.S. interests. In the language of “understanding” and universal values, according to McCutcheon, there is an imperialistic impulse. Specifically, he writes, “such expressions as “world understanding” and references to such abstract constructions as “global” or “universalizing cultures” can therefore function as euphemisms for domination—as a domination that is ultimately blameless, for we are passive, having been “impelled” to take such courses of action.”<sup>68</sup> In other words, alliances are made through a framework that suggestively assumes common values and interests. Formicola, in referencing the domestic OFBCI, argues that “governments are tempted to use religions to support their own legitimacy and, often with the best of intentions, to utilize the moral authority and outreach of religions to solve social problems.”<sup>69</sup> Of course, in the case of foreign engagements it is not just U.S. interests that are legitimized but the religious groups engaged as well.

### *The problem of religious pluralism*

Charged with advancing U.S. interests in foreign policy, the State Department must negotiate American principles in diverse global situations. While in faith-based initiatives,

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<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth A Pritchard, “Seriously, What Does “Taking Religion Seriously” Mean?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, No.4 (2010): 1090.

<sup>68</sup> Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, (New York City, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 180.

<sup>69</sup> Jo Renee Formicola, Mary C. Segers, and, Paul Weber, *Faith-Based Initiatives and the Bush Administration: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 78.

particularly in the Obama administration, diversity is promoted as strength—in reality differences must be managed. As the OFBCI carries out its mission, one of which is the promotion of religious pluralism, a history of American imperialism may shadow the initiative. Such a history, coupled with a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*, implicates that the OFBCI may be selective and coercive in its religious engagements.

As Courtney Bender states in “The Habits of Pluralism,” “the guise of religious pluralism, in which a multiplicity of individuals and communities recognize each other as parallel forms of the phenomenon called religion”<sup>70</sup> operates with the idea that all religions can be treated as equals. In other words, it suggests that religious pluralism is inclusive. Within the promotion of religious pluralism is the idea that a tolerant and inclusive society is more progressive and successful. However, a commitment to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* would only legitimize religion so far as it displays evidence of a humanistic impulse similar to that of the Good Samaritan in Christianity.<sup>71</sup> So, such a theoretical framework is preemptively selective. If at the launch of the OFBCI religions were presented as being “tied together by the golden rule, as well as fundamental concerns about the human condition,” then only those religions that display those qualities will be selected for engagement in foreign affairs. The OFBCI is, then, selective, rather than wholly inclusive.

During a recent interview, Shaun Casey claimed that “we’re going to talk to anybody who’s willing to talk to us. We’re not going to turn folks away because somehow they’re on a

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<sup>70</sup> Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>71</sup> “Obama’s speech at the National prayer breakfast,” February 6, 2014. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/06/remarks-president-national-prayer-breakfast>

nonexistent hypothetical list..."<sup>72</sup> However, the U.S. does have lists of groups it considers terrorist groups or extremist groups. Often these groups are depicted as abusing of a particular religion. In recent events, it has been Islam "taken hostage" by political extremists. The understanding of a good religion and a bad religion limits religious engagements. After all, "how pluralist assumptions and pluralist logics shape modes of public engagement and the various religious and nonreligious subjects that can take part within them" vary depending on the objectives.<sup>73</sup> If the agenda is to promote humanitarian interventions and conflict resolution, then only those religious groups that will aid in fostering those goals will be selected or accepted for engagement. Those religious groups that question the goals of the initiative, or question religious pluralism as a good, will be excluded and, by extension, delegitimized. In other words, while religious pluralism, in principle, is inclusive, it is rather selective and exclusive depending on the particular conception of religion that is projected. In the case of the OFBCI, the goals of religious engagement abroad are "in stark contrast to violent extremists who seek to destroy."<sup>74</sup>

Although the State OFBCI is promoting religious pluralism abroad, the standard of religious pluralism in the U.S. has often had the effect of coercing religious traditions to adapt to the normative definition of religion. There is a limit to religious pluralism and in a competitively religious environment, this limit may influence modifications. In America, the

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<sup>72</sup> Jerome Socolovsky, Shaun Casey in a segment of *Voice of America*, "New State Department Religion Office Provokes Concerns" August 16, 2013 . Accessed February 10, 2014. <http://www.voanews.com/content/new-state-department-religion-office-provokes-concerns/1731041.html>

<sup>73</sup> Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>74</sup> From the State Department's transcript of the *Remarks at the Launch of the Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives* press conference in Washington D.C., on August 7, 2013.



competitive religious environment pressures religions to develop or adapt the organizational structure essential for the successful growth of their communities. This reveals that although an environment of religious pluralism may be beneficial for some religious communities, it can also tend to cultivate normalization among others. Bender states that “the language of religious pluralism always embeds a normative goal: It is not merely descriptive of varieties but indicative of the proper relations that should take place between them.”<sup>75</sup> Coercion can take the form of imposing a norm for the sake of participation. For those religious groups abroad that see U.S. government collaboration as a necessity, adaptation to the initiatives conception of religion may seem essential. Courtney Bender in the collaborative book *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, notes that “our labors take shape in the wake of an ideology of pluralism that articulates and naturalizes the very boundaries of differences that it seeks to diminish, overcomes, or mediate.”<sup>76</sup> So, if a religion is too different, it can “overcome” this difference by adapting.

It is possible to describe the limit of religious pluralism as the proper distance a religion has between itself and Christian, specifically Protestant, norms. This is an example of the imperialistic impulse in the Western category of religion and specifically in a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. Stray too far from Western norms of religion and the values of religious pluralism—strength in multiplicity—becomes a disadvantage. As Klassen and Bender observe, “the critique of normativity asks us to consider the ways norms and power relations contribute to the construction and defense of ... hierarchies, whether we are speaking of

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<sup>75</sup> Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

individual human beings or of the autonomous religious communities presumed to be the basis of religious pluralism.”<sup>77</sup> While in diversity there can be strength, the strength of religious communities abroad will be in their relation to a Western conception of religion. There is a relationship between the different and the norm that must be balanced. There is a standard or center from which the distance, by others, is measured. More specifically, there is a concealed conception of legitimacy among certain groups. In order to be legitimized, a religious group must remain within the limits or boundaries of the conceptual framework of a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*.

Finally, the problem of religious pluralism is that it operates with a specific conception of religion. The belief of religious pluralism advocates inclusion but can also support exclusion and coercion. Once the limit within the conceptual framework of a *humanistic theology of pluralism* is reached, inclusion is checked and becomes exclusion. So while religious pluralism may foster inclusion of all religions, a religion is bound by certain characteristics and is thus, selective. These certain characteristics are the norm. To be included you either adapt or adopt. In other words, there are certain prerequisites to inclusion. The language used in the discourse on faith-based initiatives suggests that religious engagement at the State Department will within these limitations.

## **CONCLUSION**

As Richard Wood noted in his book *Faith in Action*, the question of whether religion should or should not be engaged with by the government is not the important question.

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<sup>77</sup> Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 41.

Rather, the question should be how and to what political ends. In order to answer those questions, the theoretical assumptions of faith-based initiatives, particular those institutionalized within government, must be understood. I have here argued that the language used within the discourse of faith-based initiatives suggests a commitment to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. The implications of such a commitment are that religion, as a category, is limited to a Christian, particularly Western, normativity. Religion in the OFBCI, in this sense, is a selective, strategic category. It is only a true religion if it is a good religion; if it displays qualities of humanitarianism and moral virtues that can unify then, and only then, does it have potential for engagement. However, if religious groups abroad desire to be engaged with, and subsequently legitimized, they may adapt to fit the necessary standards. In that regards, a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* is also a coercive category.

While the State Department, and most governmental agencies, does not make a conceptual framework of religion explicit, the language is suggestive. Although there is an imperialistic impulse in a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*, I do not argue that it is insidious. However, its ambiguity may appear sinister in places where U.S. intentions are held suspiciously. As an article on Al Jazeera America titled "Losing Faith in Faith-Based Initiatives" noted "governmental religious-outreach programs operate on the assumption that all religions can be treated equally. This can only be a pretense that masks power relations: the religions of the majority, of the orthodox, of the ruling class, of allies of the United States, the United

Nations, corporate interests or some other power broker will inevitably carry some political weight than others."<sup>78</sup>

In the end, the question 'what will the U.S. engage when they engage religion?' can be most thoroughly answered by understanding that the theoretical framework of the OFBCI assumes, and expects, that religion display humanistic values.

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Losing Faith in Faith-Based Outreach." *Al Jazeera America*, September 24, 2013. Accessed November 14, 2013. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2013/9/24/faith-based-communityinitiativesstatedepartment.html>

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### CONCLUSION

Federal agencies at every level implemented a faith-based initiative long before the State Department finally decided to institutionalize religious engagements in 2013. As such, the media hype that followed the introduction of the U.S Department of State OFBCI derived from the notion that religious engagement in foreign affairs was a novel and rather unprecedented commitment. In the wake of its creation, articles sensationalized the inclusion of religion into American foreign affairs through titles such as “How the State Department is getting religion” and “The State Department’s great leap faithward.”<sup>79</sup> Such titles and musings gave the impression that the creation of the OFBCI, but more importantly its objectives, was marked by a new approach to religion in foreign affairs. After all, the long history of the State Department has seemingly warranted the accusations of “religion avoidance syndrome.” However, such a view is rather simplistic.

It has been several decades now that the U.S. government has acknowledged, or perhaps validated, the importance in collaborating with religious. Former President George Bush believed there was positive potential in engaging faith communities for social change. As

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<sup>79</sup> See Paul R. Rauschenbusch, “How the State Department is getting religion” in *HuffPost Religion*, Nov. 18 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/state-department-faith\\_b\\_4267914.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/state-department-faith_b_4267914.html), accessed December 5, 2013; Judd Birdsall “The State Department’s great leap faithward” in *HuffPost Politics*, August 13, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/judd-birdsall/state-department-faith-based-office\\_b\\_3744290.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/judd-birdsall/state-department-faith-based-office_b_3744290.html), accessed December 5, 2013.

a result in 2001 he institutionalized, for the first time, faith-based initiatives in our domestic governmental agencies.

However, the original launch of the White House OFBCI wholly disregarded the limitations and obstacles in faith-based initiatives.<sup>80</sup> More importantly, the first governmental effort at engaging faith communities was unprepared for the difficulties in engaging with such a volatile word as is religion. I have argued throughout this thesis that the limitations, and subsequent problems, of our institutionalized faith-based initiatives are significantly influenced by theoretical assumptions concerning religion. In addition, it is these theoretical assumptions that considerably determine what religions the U.S. will be willing to engage in faith-based initiatives.

In chapter two, the decades leading up to the creation of the State OFBCI presented a more nuanced picture of the inclusion of religion in our foreign affairs agency. Rather than merely understanding the State OFBCI as a novel office concerned with engaging religion in foreign affairs, chapter two presented the language which is common to U.S. governmentally institutionalized faith-based initiatives. Statements such as “we believe in religion as a force good in the world -- and we are here to see how we can better leverage it in the pursuit of a stronger society -- a society that is unified in progress rather than divided by difference” have been consistent since the Bush White House OFBCI was created.<sup>81</sup> While the office may be novel, the rhetorical language used in the launch and subsequent publicity of the State OFBCI relies on the same assumptions and assertions typical of our domestic faith-based efforts. The

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<sup>80</sup> See *The Bush Administration and Faith-Based Initiatives: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*; and, *Faith, Politics, and Power: The Politics of Faith-Based Initiatives*.

<sup>81</sup> “Remarks to the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group,” U.S. Department of State, October 18, 2011. Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/jj/176344.htm>

contemporary discourse of faith-based initiatives in the U.S. government continues to avoid explicit theoretical reflections while simultaneously claiming to address the limitations of past faith-based efforts.

The Obama administration specifically claims to address the shortcomings of the Bush administration; mainly it claims to be deliberately concerned with honoring America's religious pluralism. I have argued that this concern with pluralism, while manifested more explicitly in the Obama administration than in the original Bush initiatives, marks continuity with the implicit theoretical tradition concerning religion found in the government's earliest shift towards faith-based collaborations. Although the domestic Bush initiative was un-excusably and rather blatantly biased towards Christian organizations, the Obama initiatives cannot help but function with that same Christian normativity. In other words, "rather than letting the chips, gaps, and chasms fall where they may, the possibility of dissent and conflict is preempted in advance" in the deliberative concern with religious pluralism. The attention to inclusiveness and diversity is, in other words, still operating under the same border control that the category of religion, as understood in American politics, supports. The conception of religion in both administrations remains the same; however, while the earlier initiatives were rather blatantly exclusive, the Obama initiatives obscure this fact.

The language in the discourse of faith-based initiatives suggests that the U.S. Department of State OFBCI is committed to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. While the political culture concerning faith has changed significantly—both in our domestic and foreign politics—the popular, traditional conception of religion remains the same. In chapter three I focus on the problems of this academic tradition particularly as it influences the

strategy and systemizing of our foreign faith-based initiative. Examining the language used to announce and support the State Department OFBCI yields rhetoric consistent with the comparative approach to religion in religious studies. This early and problematic approach to religion is conceived of and invented by Western academia. As such, a faith-based initiative in our foreign affairs agency merely universalizes a Western construct. More specifically, when this theoretical tradition becomes institutionalized in government agencies, it gives the U.S. government the power to authenticate and legitimize a particular religion by its willingness to engage with it. Likewise, it invalidates those groups it ignores.

Although there is a growing amount of literature on faith-based initiatives, they are mostly concentrated in the fields of political science and sociology. In addition, these studies tend to ignore or merely superficially address the theoretical assumptions concerning religion, as a category, involved in these initiatives. An institution, particularly one concerned with politics and religion, that neglects theoretical and methodological reflections will inevitably fail or create conflict where it meant to prevent it. Although the State Department OFBCI is ambiguous concerning its theoretical foundation, its ideas concerning religion do not exist in a vacuum. In order to understand the State OFBCI and, more generally, religious engagements in foreign affairs, a better understanding of the theory which influences it must be achieved.

## **MOVING FORWARD**

As chapter two illustrated, the general view of our contemporary faith-based initiatives is that “we have seen a shift in dialogue towards mutuality and partnership with religious communities. We have challenged discrimination and intolerance, and fought to protect



religious freedom, both at home and abroad.”<sup>82</sup> While this thesis does not argue the potential of engaging with religious communities, it does challenge the government’s ability to successfully tap into said potential without serious theoretical reflection. While the field of religious studies has begun to question the traditional study of comparative religion, the proponents and creators of the State OFBCI leave theory significantly neglected and ambiguous while still operating within its boundaries. In doing so, they do the so-called potential of the initiatives a disservice. They will remain wasted potential until religion, as a category, is taken seriously.

In 2006, the *American Political Science Review* published an article titled “Getting Religion: Has political science rediscovered the faith factor?” In this article, political scientists Wald and Wilcox used the publications of a popular political science journal, the *Review*, to measure the neglect of religion in the study of politics. They found that, in general, the topic of religion was very limited in its publications and that the few articles that were published with a reference to religion were mostly concerned with political philosophy and public law.<sup>83</sup> In other words, religion was a marginal topic of study in political science. Yet, while their findings suggested that religion had been historically ignored and underestimated in political science, they argued that this was due to the origins of the discipline rather than to any systemic hostility. As faith-based initiatives become more prominent and established at all levels of government agencies, the study of religion in political science will be all the more necessary and important. The U.S. government should be fostering and welcoming the inclusion of these

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<sup>82</sup> “Remarks to the Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group,” U.S. Department of State, October 18, 2011. Accessed March 20, 2014. <http://www.state.gov/j/176344.htm>

<sup>83</sup> Kenneth Wald and Clyde Wilcox, “Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 100, No. 4 (Nov. 2006), 523-529.

studies, particularly those theoretically concerned, within the strategy and education of faith-based initiatives and its foreign advocates.

In "Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics," Eva Bellin argues that there is plenty of literature illustrating the role of religion in international relations for matters of conflict and conflict resolution. However, these studies, according to the article, were completed in fields outside political science, such as history, sociology, and theology.<sup>84</sup> According to Bellin, "the problem is not that the question of religion has been *overlooked* in international affairs so much as that it has been *undertheorized*."<sup>85</sup> It is this issue of lacking theoretical reflections that must be addressed both within the academic study of foreign affairs but also within the institutional manifestations of religious engagements.

Timothy Shah in *Rethinking Religion in World Affairs* explains that "much classical thinking and practice in world affairs is... a form of border patrol."<sup>86</sup> Political scholars have historically endeavored to maintain a strict separation between the secular and the religious, both in study and in practice. Now that this separation has been breached in the practice of institutionalizing faith-based initiatives, it is time for multi-disciplinary considerations concerning the category of religion. In his chapter "Why Religion? Why Now?" J. Bryan Hehir explains as much. He writes, "the operative assumption has been that the influence of religious beliefs and communities on "high politics" is so marginal—and so opaque—that one can safely ignore religion altogether and still successfully interpret the international system

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<sup>84</sup> Eva Bellin, "Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics," *World Politics*, Volume 60, Number 2 (Jan. 2008), 339.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Timothy Shah, "Introduction" in *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

and the policies of states."<sup>87</sup> However, this assumption is no longer viable. It is arguable that it was never truly viable.

For example, during the Iranian Revolution of the 1970s, an analysis that suggested religion as the basis for the violent conflict and general animosity towards western powers was dismissed by the CIA as "sociology."<sup>88</sup> Put simply, irrelevant. And so, religion was neglected at all levels of political discourse, including international relations. But, unquestionably, it was present.

Now that a relationship between faith communities and government agencies has been legitimized, the move towards religious engagements must be seriously concerned with theoretical reflections. In addition, these theoretical reflections must not be bound by any specific discipline; they must be advanced across disciplines.

In chapter three I presented the ways that the critical approach in religious studies can unearth the possibility of conflict and limitations in the State Department OFBCI. Specifically, approaching the State Department OFBCI through the critical approach of religion, I argued that it was committed to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism*. The criticisms are not meant to disparage the potential of faith-based initiatives. Rather, armed with the awareness of these potential limitations and problems, the foreign diplomats engaging with religious communities can preempt and more effectively strategize against conflict and misunderstanding. It is armed with intelligence that the objectives of the OFBCI can be accomplished.

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<sup>87</sup> J. Bryan Hehir, "Why Religion? Why Now?" *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013),

<sup>88</sup> Thomas F. Farr, "Confounded by Religion" in *World of Faith and Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.

Theoretical reflection is the missing step in the shift towards institutionalized government and faith-based collaborations. If religion is to be taken seriously, faith-based initiatives must critically reflect on the systems of powers our specific conception of religion projects. A commitment to a *humanistic theology of religious pluralism* may potentially reflect systems of power—both exclusive and coercive—that, rather than nurture understanding and progress, creates undue conflict and animosity. *Theory* is the key to understanding how to approach and strategize for successful, result-driven religious engagements. Transparency in theoretical traditions must be present. Lee Marsden has criticized that “advocates of a faith based approach to US foreign policy rely heavily on anecdotal rather than empirical evidence.”<sup>89</sup> In order to effectively promote faith-based initiatives, and dissuade still-present skepticism, the U.S. government should show that it is not merely playing with words, but intellectually engaging with them. The State Department should shift to execute what the U.S. government’s domestic faith-based initiatives have consistently failed to do—theoretically engage with the words it constantly embraces.

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<sup>89</sup> Lee Marsden, “Bush, Obama, and a faith-based U.S. foreign policy,” *International Affairs* 88, No. 5 (2012): 956.

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