



Recommendations for the Biden Administration on Engaging With Religious Communities

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The Biden administration will face many challenges, including the urgent and overlapping crises of the coronavirus pandemic, systemic racism, a devastated economy, and climate change. America's diverse religious communities care deeply about these issues and have the potential to aid the new administration in healing the nation and the world. The Biden administration should seriously explore the opportunity to work with faith communities to advance human dignity and the common good. This issue brief outlines recommendations for robust engagement between religious communities and organizations and the administration to best lead this effort and champion specific policies to advance true religious liberty.

The following are top-line recommendations for the incoming Biden administration:

1. President Joe Biden should deliver a speech on religious freedom and religious pluralism early in his administration.
2. Together with Pope Francis, the Biden administration should organize a global gathering of religious leaders to discuss climate change and refugee issues.
3. The administration should work with Congress to pass legislation that will uphold religious liberty, including the National Origin-Based Antidiscrimination for Nonimmigrants (NO BAN) Act and Do No Harm Act.
4. The Biden administration should make it clear through its policies and public engagement that the federal government has a compelling interest in nondiscrimination and that there is no hierarchy of protected classes.
5. The administration should ensure that its outreach efforts reflect the religious diversity of American communities and engage them around a wide variety of issues.

6. The Biden administration should reestablish the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships (OFNP) as part of the Domestic Policy Council and ensure sufficient staffing for religious community outreach in the Office of Public Engagement (OPE).
7. The administration should revitalize America's international religious diplomacy.

The function of religious community outreach

The role of religious community outreach covers numerous issues, constituencies, and strategies. The Biden administration must recognize America's religious diversity and the myriad public policies affecting these communities when designing its outreach strategy. The administration must also recognize the need for deep authenticity in its outreach while engaging with politically diverse communities on areas of common ground.

Ensure that outreach efforts reflect the diversity of American religious communities

Religious outreach will be successful if it focuses on a wide array of religious communities in the United States and does so in a manner that seeks to consistently engage with and empower these communities. The Biden administration's efforts should reflect and affirm America's religious diversity, including diversity of thought, practice, and expression within religious communities. There is no one organization or leader who speaks for all Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or any other religious communities in the United States. Therefore, outreach to these communities will need to include a variety of representatives, while recognizing their limitations. Religious outreach efforts should also specifically include secular humanist or nonreligious groups, as well as faith-based or spirit-rooted communities who do not observe a specific religious tradition.

Importantly, the communities with whom the administration engages should be reflective of the overall religious landscape of America, which is growing in racial and religious diversity. Currently, public discourse on faith and politics too often focuses exclusively on white Christians—whether Catholic, mainline Protestant, or evangelical Protestant—while failing to recognize Christians of color, secular humanist and unaffiliated groups, and adherents of religions other than Christianity, all of which continue to represent an increasingly larger share of the population. The Biden administration should pay particular attention to these communities in its religious community outreach efforts.

TABLE 1

Americans identify with a diverse range of religious traditions

Share of American adults ages 18 and older who identify with a religious tradition, 2019

Faith group	Percentage of total U.S. adult population
Protestant	
White evangelical Protestant	15.2%
White mainline Protestant	14.7%
Black Protestant	7.2%
Hispanic Protestant	3.7%
Other nonwhite Protestant	3.5%
Catholic	
White Catholic	12.0%
Hispanic Catholic	7.8%
Other nonwhite Catholic	2.2%
Jehovah's Witness	0.5%
Latter-day Saints*	1.7%
Orthodox Christian	0.4%
Jewish	1.3%
Muslim	0.7%
Buddhist	0.8%
Hindu	0.4%
Unaffiliated	24.0%
Unitarian/Universalist	0.1%
Other religion	<0.5%
New Age religions	<0.5%

*The Public Religion Research Institute's American Values Atlas uses "Mormon" to refer to this group, but the authors opt to use "Latter-day Saints," per this group's preference.

Source: Public Religion Research Institute, "The American Values Atlas, 2019," available at <http://ava.prrri.org/> (last accessed November 2020).

Americans' religious identities intersect with their other identities as well. As the Biden administration engages in outreach to the LGBTQ community, women, people of color, and other identity-based coalitions, it should also look for opportunities to bring religion to the forefront. For example, tailored engagement to LGBTQ Christians, Jews of color, or Muslim veterans respects the ways in which religion intersects with other parts of Americans' identities.

Successful religious community outreach will involve approaching communities with this understanding of intersecting identities. Religious community outreach should not work in a vacuum, but rather engage a series of different public policy issues that are key parts of religious communities' identities. Effective engagement will find many ways of incorporating multiple issues that are important to these communities instead of separating them out.

Engage religious communities on a wide variety of public policy areas

American religious communities are deeply concerned with a variety of public policy issues, from poverty to gun violence to climate change and more. Each of these issues are of direct importance to their own communities' well-being as well as an expression of their deeply held values. Effective religious community outreach should provide a pathway for engagement across the many issues of concern and should not fall victim to the false narrative that religious communities are focused on only one or two issues. Effective outreach should not presuppose which issues are of greatest concern to religious communities but rather allow them opportunity to share their priorities.

The only exception to this may be the issue of religious freedom, a right upon which religious and nonreligious communities intimately rely. There are a number of pressing matters of religious freedom where the Biden administration will need to take immediate action. (see the "Protecting religious freedom in America" section below) These actions will also serve to correct the Trump administration's harmful distortions of religious freedom and its weaponization of religion in the public sphere, which has led to polarized assumptions in many communities.¹ It will be critical to engage diverse communities, particularly those whose religious freedom is most at risk, in the formation of new policies.

Prioritize authenticity in outreach while finding common ground with diverse communities

Engaging in outreach with religious and nonreligious communities who align with the administration is essential and should be prioritized. For example, during the Obama administration, religious leaders that advocated for accessible and affordable health care were critical to the successful enrollment of their communities in health care coverage under the Affordable Care Act.² However, outreach with religious communities who align with the administration on certain issues but have deep differences on other issues is also important, as it ensures that the administration's commitment to religious communities is broad and sincere. The Biden administration should look for opportunities for tailored engagement, such as the Obama administration's work with conservative evangelical Protestant leaders on comprehensive immigration reform.³

Engagement with conservative religious communities is critical as a means of finding common ground in order to achieve shared policy objectives. To ensure authenticity in this outreach, the Biden administration should exercise caution to avoid making religious community outreach a proxy for seeking the support of political moderates. The administration should also be careful not to overemphasize the influence or size of conservative Christians in the United States. While this group may represent some of the loudest voices in the country, they represent only a portion of Christians and an even smaller portion of religious Americans.⁴

If the Biden administration only engages particular religious communities in a time of crisis or political opportunity, it will jeopardize its perceived overall commitment to those communities. It is critical that the Biden administration regularly engage with representatives of religious communities in its work, such as by recognizing their religious holidays with White House celebrations and proclamations. The Biden administration should emphasize celebrating a diverse set of religious holidays and inviting a broad, diverse set of representatives of those communities to the White House. The administration should also utilize its convening power to build connective relationships across religious and demographic lines to develop broader interreligious coalitions of support for issues of common concern.

Providing leadership on issues at the intersection of religion and public policy

The Biden administration's engagement on the intersection of religion and public policy must be led by staff with substantial experience working with religious and nonreligious communities and on matters of religious freedom. The issues that will face a Biden administration at the nexus of religion and public policy necessitate immediate action in virtually every major federal agency and will require White House leadership to execute. This leadership must include experts in both outreach and policy, working hand in hand to ensure effective public policy that appropriately represents the needs and concerns of affected communities.

Establish religious engagement roles on the Domestic Policy Council and in the OPE

During the Obama administration, two separate offices in the White House were responsible for engaging with and on behalf of religious communities: the Office of Public Engagement, whose role was to interact directly with different community groups, including religious communities, and the Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships. The latter office was situated on the Domestic Policy Council and played a variety of roles: 1) coordinating the work of the agency-based partnership centers, whose mission was to facilitate partnerships and funding opportunities for community-based organizations, including those that are faith-based; 2) leading the White House's priorities related to religious freedom; and 3) engaging directly with religious communities in partnership with relevant staff at the OPE. The Biden administration can replicate this model, provided that efforts between these two offices and others are well-coordinated.

Maintain coordination in the administration's priorities at the intersection of religion and public policy

The White House OFNP is well positioned to lead this coordinating role and as a result will need dedicated staff with broad expertise, as outlined in the section below regarding policy priorities. Its staff should coordinate with the partnership centers of each federal agency and with relevant staff at the White House OPE. OFNP staff should also critically liaise on matters affecting religious and other community organizations with others on the Domestic Policy Council as well as the National Security Council, National Economic Council, Office of Management and Budget, and other White House staff. Perhaps most importantly, the OFNP staff should play a connective role among all of the above agencies and offices.

Ensure that staff is religiously diverse and has expertise on the intersection of religion and public policy

It is essential that the Biden administration's engagement on matters of religion be understood as having a dual mandate for advancing the policy agenda of an administration and building relationships with religious and nonreligious communities. This requires staffing the White House OFNP and OPE with personnel who have deep relationships with diverse religious communities. The experience that is required for such staffing is essential for this work to succeed; trust and understanding cannot be created overnight or learned on the job.

Furthermore, there are a number of complex issues at the intersection of religion and public policy that require careful and immediate attention. (see the "Protecting religious freedom in America" section below) OFNP staff must have particular expertise on First Amendment issues regarding religious freedom. This critically includes expertise in the separation of church and state and an understanding of the need to roll back harmful religious exemptions. The staff must also have expertise related to civil rights, hate crimes, and other public policy issues to ensure the safety and well-being of religious and nonreligious minorities. Maintaining this will be critical to the team's success. The staff will still need to coordinate with other White House staff on issues that intersect with these priorities, such as tax policy, LGBTQ rights, reproductive justice, and national security. The administration should ensure both that staff have the appropriate expertise and that staff within the White House OFNP and OPE and in each agency's partnership centers reflect America's religious diversity.

Revitalize America's international religious diplomacy

While most of the recommendations in this brief relate to domestic policy, it is worth specifying that a renewed effort by the Biden administration to engage with the United States' diverse religious communities should also extend to foreign policy. The U.S. Department of State should reinstate its Office of Religion and Global Affairs and restore senior positions dedicated to global religious outreach, including specific religious communities.

Facilitate organic relationships with and understanding of religious communities

Successful engagement of religious communities in advancing a policy agenda will involve a commitment to communities who have a diversity of views and forms of religious expression. This commitment should involve adequate support of staff and their time to work with religious communities who can be allies on a variety of issues, including those that are traditionally more contentious, such as reproductive rights and LGBTQ rights.

One final recommendation in this area is effectively equipping administration officials to talk about their own religious identities in a manner that honors America's religious pluralism. The Biden administration should build a Cabinet and a White House senior leadership team that reflects the religious diversity of the American people and empower them to serve as ambassadors to and from those communities if they so desire.

Protecting religious freedom in America

As stated earlier, religious communities may wish to engage with the Biden administration on a range of public policy concerns that affect their safety and well-being and in accordance with their values. A particular emphasis of the administration's religious community outreach should also relate to their concerns about matters of religious freedom, especially religious minority rights and the separation of church and state. Over the past four years, religious freedom has endured numerous attacks on each of these rights, and a new administration must work hand in hand with religious communities to establish explicit protections for these communities.

Protect the rights and safety of religious minorities

Numerous policies under the Trump administration have explicitly targeted the rights and well-being of religious minorities. One of the administration's first acts was to impose the Muslim ban, a clear attack on religious freedom through the U.S. immigration system.⁵ The ban remains in effect despite the lack of any evidence to support the claim that it is in the interest of national security. The Biden administration should immediately rescind the ban and work with Congress to pass the NO BAN Act to ensure that a religious litmus test may never be imposed again within the nation's immigration system.

The administration should also take seriously the concerns of religious minorities and communities of color, who have been targeted by rising white nationalist violence. In 2019, the Anti-Defamation League reported more than 2,100 anti-Semitic incidents in the United States in 2019, the highest ever recorded number.⁶ In 2019, the FBI reported that attacks against Jews accounted for 57.8 percent of all reported religiously motivated hate crimes, and attacks against Muslims account for

14.5 percent, despite the fact that these communities account for only 1.3 percent and 0.7 percent of the U.S. population, respectively.⁷ The Biden administration should also prioritize combating violent white supremacy and clearly identify it as the current greatest threat to domestic security. The administration should ensure that hate crimes are a priority of the FBI and should work with Congress to pass the Jabara-Heyer NO HATE Act and the Disarm Hate Act.

Religious freedom is only possible when all Americans are free from violence perpetrated against them because of their religion. Following this important step, the administration must prioritize the protection of religious freedom under the First Amendment and tackle urgent challenges regarding the separation of church and state and overly broad religious exemptions.

[Safeguard the separation between religion and government](#)

The separation of church and state prevents government interference in religion and prevents the establishment of religion within the U.S. government. The Trump administration has advanced numerous policies that undermine church-state separation. For example, it promised to repeal the Johnson Amendment, a law with broad and bipartisan support that prevents nonprofit institutions from endorsing political candidates.⁸ Although repealing the law would require an act of Congress, the Trump administration imposed a largely symbolic executive order to repeal it, which should immediately be rescinded.⁹

In another attempt to erode church-state separation, in early 2020, the Trump administration proposed nine new regulations to allegedly allow religious organizations to “compete on a level playing field for funding” without “discrimination” from the federal government.¹⁰ In reality, these regulations allowed them to maintain exemptions not afforded to secular organizations while also being granted additional exemptions from rules intended to prevent the violation of church-state separation. Governmental partnerships with religious and other community organizations should be for the purposes of serving their communities, not for serving the organizations themselves. The Biden administration must rescind the Trump administration’s guidance in these areas and reestablish clearer separation between religion and government, for the benefit of both institutions.

[Clarify that religious freedom is a shield and not a sword](#)

Last but not least, the Trump administration proposed or finalized at least 25 new regulations, including the nine referenced above, that seek to redefine religious freedom as a right to be exempted from all laws and regulations, including, bizarrely, prohibitions on discriminating against people based on their religion.¹¹ Several recent and ongoing cases before the U.S. Supreme Court will also inform the future of the nation’s approach to these overly broad religious exemptions.¹² Religious exemptions can play an important role in providing accommodations to individuals and

communities to protect their religious beliefs, such as allowing Sikh men to serve in the military while also maintaining their turbans and beards. This exemption has been exploited, however, by socially conservative groups that seek to permit employers, service providers, and others to claim religious freedom as a license to discriminate. The impact of this discrimination falls most heavily on women, LGBTQ people, and even religious minority and nonreligious communities.¹³

Fortunately, the majority of religious Americans oppose these overly broad religious exemptions and would welcome corrective measures to protect religious freedom.¹⁴ A new administration will need to play a leadership role in protecting the right to religious freedom and immediately issue guidance clarifying that this right is intended as a shield to protect from harm, not as a sword to harm others and one another. It must clarify that the government has a compelling interest in nondiscrimination and that there is no hierarchy of protected classes from discrimination. The administration must then work accordingly to rescind these harmful regulations, establish new regulations to prevent the continuance of their harmful policies, and work with Congress to pass the Do No Harm Act.

Emphasizing a positive role for religion as a Biden administration priority

The Biden administration should make it clear from the earliest days in office that religious outreach is a top administration priority. This will set the tone for the entire term in office and bring media attention to the administration's vision of religious pluralism. Two possible ways to accomplish this are a major speech by President Biden early in his term—ideally within the first 100 days—and convening a group of international religious leaders with Pope Francis to build global religious understanding.

The first 100 days speech should be used to announce new executive orders around religious liberty; lay out the administration's priorities for working with Congress to pass legislation such as the NO BAN Act and Do No Harm Act; and recommit the federal government to working with people of all faiths and no faith. Faith leaders from around the country should be invited to attend the event and have the chance to participate in private listening sessions with the president and senior staff.

The administration should also work with the Vatican to arrange for an international convening co-chaired by President Biden and Pope Francis. Religious leaders from around the world should be invited to dialogue about issues of collective concern such as climate change and refugees. Such a convening would highlight President Biden's extensive experience in foreign policy and the areas in which the administration's priorities are aligned with important religious leaders.

Conclusion

The Biden administration is assuming office at a time when the country is facing serious crises, made worse by uncertainty and deep polarization. Engaging leadership at the intersection of religion and public policy to help meet these challenges will be among the administration's urgent priorities, and it is critical that this agenda be cohesive and well coordinated.

The policy priorities detailed in this brief are critical to protecting the nation's long-standing principle of the freedom of religion and conscience. To that end, these policy priorities must be accomplished in partnership with religious communities, including religious minority and secular humanist communities, in order to ensure that their concerns are reflected in the administration's initiatives. The perspectives of religious minority and nonreligious communities are most critical given that their religious freedom rights are often most at risk. Outreach by the Biden White House to religious communities is key to addressing their concerns; for example, religious communities can help the administration achieve a broader understanding and acceptance of the difference between religious exemptions that are harmful and those that are not.

Moreover, the Biden administration has an opportunity to work with diverse religious communities as part of its efforts to unite Americans in support of a public policy agenda. Engaging with religious and other communities on common interests will be an important priority for its public engagement offices across the administration. Faith-based organizations are critical partners in serving the common good, and the administration has an opportunity to engage with them in this important work.

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