

Bridging the gap

Rabbi looks for 'core' interfaith values



Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff, new director of the American Jewish Committee, is comfortable with religious diversity.

By Larry Witham
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Rabbi Arnold E. Resnicoff, the first military chaplain to head interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, is in search of the "moderate Muslim" voice.

As the new director of an office that has gained prominence in U.S. interfaith activities over 50 years, he is also eager to work more closely with mainline Protestants, Hindus and even American Indians.

"I would say the Muslim relationships are the weakest," he said of the American Jewish Committee's (AJC) work. "Let's call it a challenge" but also an opportunity since September 11. Many of the Muslim organizations and institutions are in a state of flux, re-examining themselves."

On his second visit to Washington since taking the post in New York three months ago, the Navy line officer-turned-rabbi visited Washington's Catholic cardinal and the House of Representatives' chaplain, also a Catholic priest.

Jewish-Catholic relations are the strongest for the AJC, which has been active on that front since the 1960s when Vatican II recognized the Jewish faith as legitimate. Mr. Resnicoff has heard about new groups

forming such as the American Islamic Congress, which is likely to be based in Boston. "I want to make a meeting, I want to learn more about that organization," Mr. Resnicoff, 55, said in an interview Wednesday after arriving at Union Station. "I will feel comfortable talking to anyone."

That comfort comes from serving 28 years in one of the most religiously diverse American institutions: the military.

Stationed in the Mekong Delta on a reconnaissance boat, Mr. Resnicoff was made a "lay leader" of Jews by an Episcopal chaplain. Since his ordination, he has worked to offer soldiers who were Sikhs, Hindus, evangelicals or even Buddhists some semblance of religious accommodation.

He retired after 28 years on active duty in the Navy as head chaplain for military forces in Europe, most of Africa and some of the Middle East. A D.C. native, he was reared in Hyattsville.

"Chaplains are on the cutting edge of interfaith relations and church-state issues," he said. "In the military, we focus on free exercise of religion, since we take men and women away from their" local houses of worship.

But the challenges of diverse faiths on military bases, and God and man on the battlefield, may meet their match in some of the

most contentious religious divisions in America.

Some Muslim groups have denounced the AJC for publishing books critical of Islam and reports that question the true number of Muslims in the United States, suggesting fewer than 3 million rather than the Muslim-reported 8 million.

New Muslim groups such as the American Islamic Congress and American Muslims against Extremism, forming in New Jersey, do offer new opportunities for U.S. Muslim-Jewish talks, said M.A. Khan, a Muslim scholar and director of international studies at Adrian College.

But Mr. Khan, who has been active in interfaith exchanges for almost a decade, said so-called Muslim and Jewish moderates sitting around a table is nothing new, and that Jewish groups often bolt when a Middle East issue hits the headlines.

"Who gets to decide who are moderate Muslims? The AJC?" said Mr. Khan, an advocate of democracy and pluralism in Islam. "We need to have a dialogue between Muslims and Jews who are the so-called extremists. That would be an achievement."

Similarly, the growing evangelical churches often spar with Jewish leaders about prayer and religion in schools.

"The number of evangelicals involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue is minuscule, and that has been only on politics and religious freedom," said Richard Cizik, head of governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals.

"We are interested, but when you take ideas such as truth, evangelism or conversion off the table, then these talks have less interest to us," Mr. Cizik said.

Mr. Resnicoff clearly feels up to the task, even if he is filling fairly large shoes at an organization founded in 1906. The AJC interreligious office gained prominence in the 1960s under Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum, who attended Vatican II, when Catholic-Jewish relations began their breakthrough.

In 1983, Rabbi James Rudin took the job, participating in many papal meetings and weathering the rise of the religious right. The Christian conservatives wanted to declare Christ in America, but were also intensely loyal to Israel — an interfaith dilemma for Jews.

In that social setting, policy groups such as the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Congress often opposed the conservatives. But the AJC, Mr. Resnicoff said, tries to be a more moderating force.

"I like to think we have a reputation of being careful and nuanced, and thinking through the issues. We don't rush to a press conference or lawsuit," he said.

"But there are times to take a stand," he said, as the AJC did when Jewish Defense League members recently tried to bomb a mosque in Los Angeles. "Religious groups must stand up to their own extremists. Every religion has extremists."

Mr. Resnicoff believes that the time has come for a nation of diverse faiths to rely on a document like the Declaration of Independence in seeking values for cooperation.

"We are looking for core values, and I think those can be found in the Declaration's words: 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'"

In his first meetings with interfaith leaders, Mr. Resnicoff is proposing this three-part theme be covered over three years by a new interfaith project in the United States.

Meanwhile, while the AJC is officially for separation of church and state, it backs learning about religions in public education, and student free speech. "You can't have a good education without understanding religion," Mr. Resnicoff said.

He expects new projects with the National Council of Churches and envisions a Jewish-Hindu initiative that includes joint visits to India and Israel. "We've not done anything yet with Native Americans," he added.

U.S. interfaith work is frequently disrupted by conflicts abroad, such as violence in Israel, ethnic strife in the Balkans or debates on the Holocaust in Europe, says the rabbi, who knows from personal experience that religion can produce the best and worst in a society.

"During the terrorist attack in Beirut in 1983, I was 100 yards from the explosion," he said. "The Protestant minister was buried, and I and the priest were left standing."

It was 6:20 in the morning, he said, and the living used their undershirts and sleeves as bandages or as swabs to clear the blood from victims' faces.

Mr. Resnicoff finally used his skullcap. The story eventually reached Congress. "It may have had a small role in passing a religious accommodation law for the military," he said.