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State Department fires back at ambassador

by Daniel Burke by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON ? The State Department fired back at a prominent Catholic ambassador who said the agency has a "rigidly narrow" view of foreign policy that neglects the role of religion in world affairs.

"I can't imagine an agency that has a broader portfolio," State Department spokesman Evan Owen said April 18.

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

Douglas Kmiec, who announced on Sunday he plans to resign as ambassador to Malta on Aug. 15, aired his complaints in letters to President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton.

In a report made public this month, the State Department's Inspector General criticized Kmiec for spending too much time writing about religion.

Kmiec said the Inspector General has a "flawed and narrow vision of our diplomatic mission." Other foreign policy veterans have echoed Kmiec's complaints about a God gap at the State Department.

But Owen said religious freedom forms part of the department's annual human rights report, and is "a measure of the health of any pluralistic society."

"We've spoken out on the oppression of religious minorities in China, Egypt, and a whole host of countries," Owen said.

Kmiec, a former lawyer in the Reagan administration and onetime dean of Catholic University's law

school, helped shape the intellectual framework for President Obama's outreach to Catholics during the 2008 campaign.

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