City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Mandaville, P. & Silvestri, S. (2015). Integrating religious engagement into diplomacy: challenges and opportunities. Issues in Governance Studies, 67, pp. 1-13.

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/14084/

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to City Research Online policy.

City Research Online: http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/ publications@citystgeorges.ac.uk

Issues in
Governance Studies

Number 67 January 2015

Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges & Opportunities

Peter Mandaville, Sara Silvestri

INTRODUCTION

Peter Mandaville is a Professor in the School of Policy, Government & International Affairs at George Mason University. He is also a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

Sara Silvestri is Senior Lecturer in Religion and International Politics at City University London and Director of Research at the Von Hügel Institute, University of Cambridge.

The last few years have witnessed a flurry of interest and activity around religion and religious engagement in diplomatic circles on both sides of the Atlantic. In 2013, the US State Department established a new Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives as part of a broader national strategy on religious leadership and faith community engagement led by the White House's National Security Council.[1] Within the same year, the European Union issued new guidelines on the promotion and protection of freedom of religion or belief; the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development opened a new office focused on similar issues; and the French Foreign Ministry sponsored a major conference on the question of religion and foreign policy with a keynote address delivered by Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius.

These moves are but the latest in a much longer story of efforts on the part of foreign policy leaders to integrate greater attention to religion in the conduct of diplomacy. Since the end of the Cold War and the accompanying upsurge in world events driven by questions of identity and culture, observers of international affairs have been searching for answers and solutions in religion. In 1995, Doug Johnston and Cynthia Sampson published *Religion: the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, a pioneering book that sought to make a case for including a focus on religion within the practice of diplomacy.[2] Regarded at the time as somewhat radical, the fact that the volume's contents would raise very few eyebrows today speaks to just how prescient it was.

There is now a considerable track record of diplomats having worked both formally and informally to include a focus on religion and religious engagement in their work.

For example, the advancement of religious freedom has been a formal component of U.S. foreign policy since the late 1990s with the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which created a United States Commission on International Religious Freedom as well as an Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department.

Certain domains of foreign policy have seen more attention paid to the question of religion than others. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), for example, has had an office focused on faith-based actors in development since 2002. Since 9/11, the national security services of the United States and many of its European partners have devoted enormous time and resources to the question of religion and violent extremism—and almost exclusively with a focus on the Muslim world.

Similar patterns are visible in Europe. Beginning in the 1990s, an increased European concern with "intercultural dialogue" has driven attention, both at home and abroad, to religious and cultural traditions. This interest gradually became institutionalized within Europe's borders through the establishment of an office in the European Commission devoted to "Dialogue with churches, religious associations or communities and philosophical and non-confessional organisations." The UK Department for International Development (DFID) launched its *Faith Partnership Principles* in 2012, as an acknowledgement of the crucial contribution of faith groups in development projects. The UN has also long recognized the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in the provision of services in the development context, but it struggles to appreciate the relevance of religion in the day-to-day work of its numerous agencies.

Overall, however, discussion of religion in the context of the European Union's external relations remains timid. For example, the recent EU Council Guidelines for Freedom of Religion take the form of an essentially non-binding declaratory measure, while the European Parliament Working Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief, launched in December 2012, is merely a discussion forum of like-minded individuals.[3] Overall, the EU voice and capability as a foreign policy actor remains weak and fragmented; in this context, religion is perceived as "an exotic and esoteric business at best," as one EU official has observed.[4]

As US and European policymakers seek to develop more systematic approaches to the integration

Informed by consultations with dozens of policymakers working on the front lines of religion and diplomacy—some of them for decades—this brief provides an overview of the major challenges and opportunities facing efforts to build awareness and capacity around the intersection of religion and foreign policy.

of religion and religious engagement into a wider range of diplomatic activities, it would seem worthwhile to step back and consider what has been learned to date. Informed by consultations with dozens of policymakers working on the front lines of religion and diplomacy—some of them for decades—this brief provides an overview of the major challenges and opportunities facing efforts to build awareness and capacity around the intersection of religion and foreign policy.[5]

A SECULAR BIAS WITHIN WESTERN DIPLOMACY?

One major impediment to making sense of religion in the world today and for integrating greater attention to religion in the foreign policy process is the prevalence—by and large—of secular norms within elite, policymaking institutions. Although some scholars have recently observed in Western society a "desecularization" process or a "resurgence of religion" with some even suggesting we now live in a "post-secular" world, most large, bureaucratic institutions (such as foreign ministries) represent bastions of secular sentiment.[6] Most national and international institutions still operate under the impression—often seemingly a stubborn conviction—that secularism is a permanent, eternal, and appropriate configuration for the relationship between religion and public life. Yet this ideal is just over two centuries old. As explained in the next section, even the legal frameworks within which states and international organizations operate contribute to reproducing the myth of secularism as a neat and settled account of two clearly demarcated realms—the spiritual and the political—when, in fact, social reality is far more complex.

The practical result of this secular bias has been that our bureaucracies have become trapped in their individual frameworks of understanding and an operationalized form of secularism filtered through their own specific cultures, histories and philosophies. In short, most governments conduct themselves with a tacit set of assumptions about what religion is, where it belongs (and where it most definitely does *not* belong), and who or what speaks on its behalf. One of the most important challenges associated with better appreciating the role of religion in world affairs is therefore also one of the most difficult. This important challenge involves recognizing that most Western diplomats engage these issues from a distinct disadvantage insofar as they tend to operate in the realm of *realpolitik* in which issues of identity, culture, and faith are largely irrelevant, compounded by a normative bias towards secularism.

Properly undertaken, any effort to better appreciate the role of religion in foreign affairs must involve at least some modicum of willingness to examine the assumptions we hold about the place of religion in society. This is not about advocating for diplomats to accept as correct or appropriate a more expansive role for religion in society. Rather, it is about pointing out that it may only become possible to see and appreciate the bigger picture of religion's role in some societies if we first set aside our own particular set of lenses on this issue.

LEGAL DEBATES & CONSTRAINTS

For some—particularly in the United States—the aversion to mixing religion and diplomacy arises not out of an ideological commitment to secularism but more from concerns about the need to respect the legal sense of secularism embedded in the US constitution. The key question here is about whether the so-called "establishment clause" of the First Amendment, which prohibits any act that would indicate a specific religious preference on the part of the federal government—applies overseas. Case law history is mixed on this issue, but the overall trend is one that suggests a tendency in American jurisprudence to view the establishment clause as indicative of a universal principle.[7]

Properly undertaken, any effort to better appreciate the role of religion in foreign affairs must involve at least some modicum of willingness to examine the assumptions we hold about the place of religion in society.

In recent diplomatic practice, legal concerns tend to be raised most frequently in connection with programs organized and run by the State Department and other foreign policy agencies such as USAID. Most of these involve US foreign assistance funds being used to support activities by faith-based organizations or the participation in US government programs by religious leaders. Further complicating matters is the fact that the legal guidance provided to US agencies asking about this kind of work tend to varies widely from agency to agency and, within the same agency, from case-to-case. Fear of falling on the wrong side of the law has sometimes had a chilling effect on State Department officers contemplating new programs with a large focus on religious engagement. In other cases, the relevant program leads have moved forward and opted for a "better to ask for forgiveness later" approach.

Among those who follow and work on these issues, there is a division of opinion about how to address the question of legal constraints to religious engagement. Some have argued that the problem would be best solved by having White House lawyers issue clear legal guidance that would apply to all federal agencies. Others disagree, arguing that such an approach would likely invite even greater scrutiny and new legal challenges and thus potentially exacerbate the chilling effect. They prefer to preserve the current ambiguous but potentially more flexible arrangement, arguing that if the relevant programs are carefully described and explained, it is in fact very difficult to raise First Amendment objections to most of the activities involved. Indeed, this debate was at the heart of a difference of opinion between some members of the taskforce that wrote the Chicago Council on Global Affairs' 2010 report, *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad*.[8]

On an abstract level, European countries espouse a common similar notion of secular neutrality towards religion. In practice, however, they diverge considerably both from each other and from the United States, mainly due to different histories, political cultures, constitutional systems, and models of religion-state relations. This is further complicated by the growing supranational powers of the European Union, which interfere with, but not necessarily always substitute, the domestic laws and policies of its member states. If European countries appear to be behaving in rather schizophrenic ways vis-à-vis engagement with religion in their individual foreign policies, this dilemma is further exacerbated when they are addressing the same topic but working through the auspices of the European Union.

Yet in practice, when addressing the issue of religion, staff members who compose the vast, complex multinational bureaucracy of the European Union tend to rely on their own backgrounds, and the histories, philosophies, and narratives of their own countries of origin. Therefore, it is highly likely that their subsequent actions will reflect the widespread secular skepticism that makes Europe considerably different from the United States. In the absence of clear guidelines and competences, much is left to individual interpretation and personal disposition towards written and unwritten legal codes and norms.

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

While some challenges facing efforts to integrate religion into foreign policy may be a function of institutional norms and culture (as discussed above), others stem from issues common to all, large modern bureaucratic environments. These obstacles can be doubly onerous when, as in the case of religion, the issue at hand is controversial by nature. With respect to the interface of religion and foreign policy, one of the most relevant institutional challenges is the sheer complexity of integrating a cross cutting issue such as faith into an already labyrinthine and heavily stove-piped bureaucracy. We can add to this the risk averse nature of diplomatic institutions and the inevitable financial considerations associated with building out a new domain of capacity. Finally, the relatively short tenure of many diplomatic and civil service postings means that just as a given individual has developed the necessary skills for religious engagement, he or she is likely to transfer to a new position where such knowledge may or may not be relevant.

Figuring out how to introduce a focus on religion into a vast institution such as the US State Department is a major challenge. For many, religion does not sit intuitively or comfortably alongside a diplomat's conventional focus on things like political affairs, public diplomacy, trade and economy, or international security—although faith bears in very important ways on all of these issues, a point we take up below. Prior to the establishment of an office with a broad religion function in 2013, existing units linked to faith matters (such as the Office of

International Religious Freedom and the Office to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism) mostly fell within the remit of specific departments—in these cases, the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.[9] This made good sense given that advancing religious freedom and combating anti-Semitism are both functions related to a broader human rights mission. But more challenging is the task of figuring out how—or where—to place a focus on religion when the goal is to build cross-departmental buy in. This is a challenge that has plagued the Office of the Special Representative for Muslim Communities since its establishment in 2009. While the office enjoys an "S" suite designation—meaning that it is organizationally part of the Secretary of State's Office—it is also by the very same token somewhat disconnected from the regional and functional bureau machinery that carries out most day-to-day diplomatic work.

One approach to this problem that has been suggested by advocates of bringing religion into the State Department involves the creation of a cadre of dedicated religious affairs officers who could be embedded within regional and other bureaus. This model resembles a previous effort to heighten the frontline profile of the State Department's public diplomacy work by creating a dedicated Deputy Assistant Secretary position with a specialized public diplomacy focus within each regional bureau. However, creating such positions and dropping them into environments that have not first been primed to understand the value they potentially add to a bureau's mission and priorities is unlikely to bear fruit. In creating the new Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives, the State Department seems to have opted for an approach at the other end of the spectrum—namely the creation of a coordinating hub responsible for working with all bureaus and offices within the department to help them build awareness of how religious and religious engagement bear on their respective functions. With the appropriate support from department principals, sufficient staffing and resources, this approach provides a high-profile platform from which to raise awareness and social capital throughout the building. On the downside, however, it could suffer, as did the Office of the Special Representative for Muslim Communities, by keeping it divorced from the stuff of daily diplomatic life. The creation of a single, dedicated religion office also potentially allows the leaderships of other bureaus to avoid taking up the issue of religion because someone else is doing it—or at the very least contributes to a "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) effect whereby senior officials acknowledge the importance of religion in diplomacy but expect someone else (preferably some*where* else) to carry the burden.

The sources of this reluctance to engage with religion or religious actors vary considerably. Some simply do not see the relevance, while others believe an emphasis on religion to be inappropriate in a modern governmental setting—a sentiment that arises, perhaps, from one or a combination of the points discussed above with respect to secular bias and legal sensitivity. But there is also a more simple explanation that derives from the nature of the incentives and disincentives surrounding career advancement in an environment such as the State Department. Foreign Service officers, and their civil service counterparts (particularly

where junior) are unlikely to do anything that may potentially jeopardize their career paths. Unfortunately this means that risk-averse sensibilities often take precedence even where some diplomats see the value of religious engagement or want to be more forward leaning with respect to religion.

One final challenge relating to institutional capacity has to do with the structure and relatively short timelines—often two years—that govern diplomatic postings. This is not a new problem, and it is not at all uncommon for Foreign Service officers to complain that such brief tenures make it difficult for diplomats to develop sustained competencies. They arrive in a new position or posting, spend the better part of a year acculturating and getting up to speed, and then deliver at full capacity for only a few months before starting to focus on the next assignment and a new transition. This problem is particularly pronounced when it comes to specialized skill sets such as those required for effective religious engagement. Rather than cultivating institutional memory about how a focus on religion can help to advance the objectives of a particular bureau or overseas post, it is far more common for the departure of a foreign affairs officer competent in religious affairs to create a situation where that office has to start over from scratch when the next designee comes into position.

TRAINING AND "RELIGIOUS LITERACY"

The fact of the matter is, however, that very few Foreign Service officers and other diplomats possess either sufficient understanding of religion or the necessary skillsets to effectively undertake religious engagement. This fact speaks to the need for any serious effort at integrating religion into foreign policy to do more than just create new functionaries or offices with a religious designation. Rather, it is crucial to build an awareness of religion and the many ways it bears on foreign policy and national security objectives into the systems and curricula used for training and preparing professional diplomats.

In recent years, diplomatic training schools in the United States and some European countries have begun to offer courses and seminars on religious engagement. The State Department's Foreign Service Institute (FSI) now regularly offers a week-long seminar on religion and foreign policy. This course, however, is offered on an ad hoc, elective (i.e. non-mandatory) basis and tends to be taken by Foreign Service officers who are already comfortable with and committed to religious engagement. This means the capacity of such courses to significantly widen the ranks of those equipped to do such work is limited.[10] Similar efforts run by the British government also operate on an exclusively voluntary basis. The topics covered in such classes also tend to reinforce existing paradigms for religion in foreign policy—such as international religious freedom and interfaith work—and as such do not serve to broaden the aperture or take in sectors and issue areas less commonly associated with religion.

The training on religion offered by EU member states and EU institutions for their respective officials tends to be even more ad hoc than in the United States. For instance, training on Islamism—which generally takes the form of guest lectures by outside speakers—has been regularly provided to EU officials since Islamic radicalization became a major issue in the mid-2000s. Yet there is a risk that for lack of experience or bandwidth, European countries end up uncritically adopting initiatives and approaches created in Washington D.C. or London, without re-adapting them to different cultural and social system and, simultaneously, importing the many oversimplifications and blind spots that characterize government approaches to the quite distinct issues of countering violent extremism (CVE) and Islamist engagement.

For training and professional development efforts around religion to truly make a lasting difference, they would need to be baked into the mandatory preparation that all diplomats receive.

For training and professional development efforts around religion to truly make a lasting difference, they would need to be baked into the mandatory preparation that all diplomats receive. The US State Department has tentatively started a process to explore ways that this can be achieved via the A-100 Class, the basic training platform for all Foreign Service officers regardless of eventual postings or career specializations. Providing "religious literacy" as a fundamental diplomatic competency is a complex and fraught undertaking. What are the appropriate approaches and modalities for teaching these issues given the legal sensitivities and institutional culture concerns raised above? What, precisely, is to be taught?

It is unrealistic and inappropriate to think that purpose of such training would be to teach foreign services officers to think and talk like theologians, or to use religious reasoning to justify foreign policy or national security interests. Rather, a "religious literacy" paradigm for training diplomats would have three core components:

1. *World religions and global religious demography* – A basic overview of major world religions including history, core beliefs, and key contemporary institutions/leaders. Introduction to major trends in religious demography

2. *Religion and the advancement of foreign policy interests* – A module to introduce diplomats to the varying roles that religions play in different societies and to develop analytic capacity to better understand where religion is (and, conversely, is not) relevant to various issues and topics in diplomatic practice. This should also include coverage of policy areas not previously or conventionally associated with religion.

3. *Religious engagement in diplomacy* – An introduction to the practical aspects of engaging with religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and other religious actors. In addition to protocol issues and questions of cultural sensitivity to faith requirements for example, this module would also help diplomats develop a capacity to engage the subject matter of their work in terms that relate to values, culture, and philosophy.

The pedagogy here would be informed more by the sorts of questions and debates typical of the humanities—meaning, morality, and purpose—than by theology, per se. At a time when higher and professional education place an increasing premium on science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) subject areas, the clear centrality of religion to international affairs reminds us that the fields comprising the humanities—philosophy, history, literature, the arts—continue to be of vital importance for the advancement of foreign policy and national security interests.

Policymakers will have the greatest chance of reaping benefits from closer awareness of and engagement with religion if they are able to institutionalize this issue as part and parcel of mainstream diplomacy.

The introduction of such a curriculum as a core aspect of diplomatic training faces numerous challenges, not least of all the likelihood of certain objections being raised on principle. Given time pressures and scarcity of resources, any new subject area competing to enter the fray of a major governmental training system has to compete with other new priority areas as well as well-established topics that already feel they get short shrift. Such training will also have maximum impact in the shortest amount of time if accompanied by aspects of mid-career training and professional development tailored for middle managers and senior officials. The more those in positions of authority are able to appreciate the importance of religion and religious engagement to fulfilling the mission of the units they lead, the more likely they are to help those who serve under them to feel incentivized and "safe" in taking some of the risks associated with religious outreach and engagement.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS MAINSTREAMING RELIGION IN DIPLOMACY

The overall thrust of our analysis and assessment suggests that, in the end, policymakers will have the greatest chance of reaping benefits from closer awareness of and engagement with religion if they are able to institutionalize this issue as part and parcel of mainstream

diplomacy. In practical terms, a "mainstreaming approach" to religion in diplomacy would mean moving away from a model whereby religion is viewed as being relevant only to certain specialized functions such as the advancement of international religious freedom. It also means departing from approaches to engagement with religious leaders and faith-based organizations that view those entities as having a limited role around a specific set of policy issues (e.g. peacemaking, development, humanitarian disasters). And finally, it most certainly means getting beyond the all-too-common practice of using "religion" as a shorthand or euphemism for referring to Islam.

The mainstreaming approach we advocate is one that would recognize the central importance of religion as a societal force around the world, and the major role that religious actors and organizations play in a wide range of issues in the daily lives of global populations.

The mainstreaming approach we advocate is one that would recognize the central importance of religion as a societal force around the world, and the major role that religious actors and organizations play in a wide range of issues in the daily lives of global populations. Our preferred approach is one that involves making the case that awareness of and engagement with religious actors can play a constructive role in advancing even policy issues that, on the face of it, seemingly have little to do with religion, faith, or spiritual matters. Small business development, public health initiatives, the arms trade and counter-proliferation: all of these are policy areas in which the perspectives, expertise, and social influence of religious actors are of crucial importance.

There are of course pitfalls associated with the mainstreaming approach, a lesson learned the hard way by advocates of "gender mainstreaming" from the 1990s.[11] Done incorrectly, efforts to mainstream a given issue can actually serve to reproduce the very marginalization they purport to address. So, just to provide a modest example, mainstreaming does not mean organizing a separate meeting that brings together religious leaders when addressing a particular issue. Rather, it means making sure that those figures have a seat at the table when all the key stakeholders are consulted and possible solutions devised.

Finally, a proper approach to religion in diplomacy is one that—even while it advocates for the importance of religion as a force in world affairs—also avoids *over*-stating the importance of religion. This is as much about helping those who might be inclined to define a particular issue or problem in terms of religion to better understand that religion is usually only one facet of a given issue in foreign affairs. For example, just as the Northern Ireland conflict—ostensibly pitting Catholics against Protestants—seemed to have a strong religious dimension, it was at root a conflict involving the disparate allocation of political power and resources between

minority and majority demographics. Likewise, much of the sectarianism in the contemporary Arab world that pits Shi'a against Sunnis is often characterized as being animated by centuries-old theological debates and inherent religious differences when, in fact, the similarities to the underlying dynamics in Northern Ireland are striking.

The foreign policy community has an opportunity today to address a major deficiency in terms of its ability to appreciate and engage religion as a central force in contemporary world politics. This paper has sought to identify the key challenges and many of the enormous opportunities that governments face as they feel their way towards greater comfort with and capacity for religious engagement in their day-to-day work. The signs of increased interest are highly encouraging, but the proof will be in the implementation—and here, as we have seen, there are many challenges to confront.

ENDNOTES

1 See http://www.state.gov/s/fbci/
2 Douglas Johnson and Cynthia Sampson (eds.), *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
3 As of Jan 2015 this group was renamed Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance
4 Author conversation with Brussels-based EU diplomat, February 2014.
5 This paper draws extensively on meetings and consultations conducted by the authors as part of their 2013-2014 project "The Role of Religion in Foreign Policy and Societal Transformation: Bridging Scholarship and Policymaking" with support from the Bridging Voices program of the British Council. The paper also reflects observations made by the authors over more than a decade of engagement with diplomatic and foreign policy agencies as consultants and advisors.
6 Peter Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics,* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999; Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations,* New York: Palgrave, 2005; Jürgen Habermas, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, Cambridge: Polity, 2010; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007.
7 See Jesse Merriam, "Establishment Clause-trophobia: building a framework for escaping the confines of domestic church-state jurisprudence," *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, Vol. 41, 2010, pp. 699-764.
8 See The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy, Report of the Task Force on Religion and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy,* Chicago: Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2010.
9 At the time of writing, the Office of the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism was in the process of being merged into the new Office of Faith-Based Community Initiatives
10 We make this point based on one co-author's multiple observations and direct participation in FSI's "Religion and Foreign Policy" course over several years.
11 See Jacqui True, "Mainstreaming gender in global public policy," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2003, pp. 368-396.

Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20036
Tel: 202.797.6090
Fax: 202.797.6144
brookings.edu/governance.aspx

Editor
Christine Jacobs
Beth Stone

Production & Layout
Beth Stone
Nick McLellan

EMAIL YOUR COMMENTS TO GSCOMMENTS@BROOKINGS.EDU

This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.