VOLUME III
ISSUE 2
2024

R/D

Religion & Development

BRILL | SCHÖNINGH

Religion & Development Contents VOL. III NO. 2 2024

SPECIAL ISSUE
RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN GLOBAL AFFAIRS. A NEW INTERRELIGIOUS DYNAMIC FOR THE GOOD OF HUMANITY

Edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen

EDITORIAL

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ISSN: 2750-7947 E-ISSN: 2750-7955
BRILL.COM/RND

Religion & Development

IN//RCSD
International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development

Religion & Development is published in collaboration with the International Network on Religious Communities and Sustainable Development (www.in-rcsd.org).

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Religion & Development publishes peer reviewed research and analyses in the emerging field of religion and development. It seeks to foster critical investigation of the intersection of religion and development in global perspective. The journal is transdisciplinary and welcomes contributions from across the humanities and social sciences as well as reflections from policy and practice.

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Until an online submission system is in place, please contact the Editorial Office: journal@religion-and-development.org

Author instructions can be obtained from the journal's website at www.religion-and-development.org.

Typeface for the Latin, Greek, and Cyrillic scripts: "Brill". See and download: brill.com/brill-typeface.

Religion & Development (print ISSN 2750-7947, online ISSN 2750-7955) is published 3 times a year by Brill, Plantijnstraat 2, 2321 JC Leiden, The Netherlands, tel +31 (0)71 53535000, fax +31 0(71) 5317532.

Subscription Rates
The electronic version of this journal is available in Open Access. Institutional customers can subscribe to the print version of Volume 3 (2024, 3 issues) at EUR 331 / USD 380. Individual customers can subscribe to the print version at EUR 110 / USD 127. Please check our website at brill.com/rnd.
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Religion & Development

VOLUME 3 (2024)

ISSUE 2

Special Issue

Religious Engagement in Global Affairs.
A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity

Issue Editors

Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen

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Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: a New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity?

Editorial

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This editorial introduces the *Religion & Development* Special Issue *Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity?* Over the last twenty years, "religious engagement" has become a key concept for the study and practice of global affairs, creating new opportunities, strategies, and practices for multireligious collaboration with international institutions in the fields of peace, development, and humanitarian aid. It has also raised questions about the effectiveness of this new approach, including about its ideals and values as well as its limits and risks. This editorial presents some of the key efforts by these international community organizations to engage religious actors in the field of humanitarian development, with particular attention to the growth of religious engagement efforts within the various offices of the United Nations. It also presents some of the key questions scholars have explored regarding the nature, meaning, and context, both religious and political, of these new practices of religious engagement. In doing so, the editorial introduces the research and policy and practice notes of the present volume, highlights the new case studies they chronicle about religious engagement in global politics, and reflects on the contributions and themes raised by the scholars and practitioners throughout the volume.

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302001
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

Keywords

interreligious engagement – interfaith dialogue – global development – international cooperation – Sustainable Development Goals – United Nations

1 Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: a New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity?

Over the last twenty years "religious engagement" has become a key concept for the study and practice of global affairs (Appleby, Cizik, and Wright 2010; Mandaville 2021; Petito, Berry, and Mancinelli 2018; Petito, Daou, and Driessen 2021; Marshall 2021; Karam 2015; Abu Nimer and Nelson 2021; Driessen 2023, USAID 2023). At the turn of the new millennium, faced with a new set of international challenges, policymakers and scholars increasingly recognized the contributions of religious actors and communities to the fields of peace, development, and humanitarian aid (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011; Tomalin 2015; Mubarak 2023). The nature of these contributions was seen as creating new opportunities for multireligious collaboration with international institutions and as providing benefits not only for religious ends but for the common good of humanity. In response, numerous governments and international organizations have adopted a religious engagement approach in their work, including international development institutions like the World Bank, UN agencies and international programs in support of human rights and the environment, global multifaith organizations such as Religions for Peace, and multilateral policy platforms like the G20 Interfaith Forum.

The new role for religions in the public sphere implied by this approach raises a series of questions for scholars of religion and politics, as well as policymakers and faith-based and civil society actors. What are the principles, limits, and risks of a global religious engagement approach? Does interreligious engagement represent a new form of interfaith dialogue? Or is it a consequence of it? What are the reciprocal expectations of engagement that have been formed by international and religious organizations? What are the potentialities, challenges, and resources required for effective multi-stakeholder collaboration between them?

This special issue, which draws on a conference of the same name held at the University of Geneva in June 2022, gathers together a multidisciplinary set of scholars and practitioners to respond to these questions. Following the approach of *Religion and Development*, the edited volume includes scholarly research on these questions paired with reflections by key policy practitioners

in the area. Thus, the volume begins with four research articles by social scientists and theologians. Their articles help to trace out the religious and social backgrounds that have accompanied the rise of interreligious engagement across diverse religious and geopolitical contexts and offer theological framings to help interpret its meaning and consequences. The second half of the volume then presents six policy and practice notes written in large part by policy practitioners who have helped build or lead religious engagement initiatives within the international community. The roles and reflections of these practitioners embody the institutionalization of a religious engagement approach within the international community, especially in pursuit of the various pillars of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, the policy and practice notes offer new case studies that chronicle and present the recent efforts of the international community to engage religious actors and communities in order to facilitate international cooperation for humanitarian and development ends. The rest of this introduction reflects on some of the contributions and themes raised by both sets of scholarship in conversation with each one another.

For their part, the research articles by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen reflect on the political and religious dynamics animating new forms of interreligious engagement in global affairs from the perspective of the social sciences. Thus, Daou offers a critical review of the development of religious engagement as an approach within international relations and its relationship to earlier forms of interreligious dialogue (Daou and Tabbara 2022). He argues that the broad and recent adoption of religious engagement policies requires major conceptual clarification if it is to overcome the risks associated with religious action in the public sphere, including political instrumentalization and religious extremism. He develops an analytical framework using the concepts of religious social responsibility and pragmatic pluralism to help generate ethical and practical religious engagement policies for public and global affairs. The article also includes a new typology of faith actors that goes beyond the institutional religious realms and Western development narratives, identifying key qualifications for effective partnerships.

In his work, Driessen also examines recent interreligious engagement efforts emanating from the Muslim majority world, including through the work of new organizations like the King Abdullah International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) and the Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace, as well as landmark interreligious declarations like the Marrakesh Declaration and the Human Fraternity Document. He connects these efforts to the recent "post-secular" turn in theories of international relations and the combinations of geopolitical, ideational, and social dynamics which undergird it. These theories help to identify and evaluate some of the perils and possibilities wrapped

up in contemporary interreligious projects and their aspirations for international cooperation, development, and peace.

Beate Bengard and Adnane Mokrani's articles then explore, respectively, some of the Christian and Islamic theological dimensions of interreligious action as it has moved from more classic forms of interreligious dialogue to common engagement on development and public policies. Bengard, for example, considers the theological foundations for religious engagement from the perspective of Protestant theology and the growing contribution of Protestant organizations like the Lutheran World Federation and the World Council for Churches to international development cooperation. She interprets the theological roots of these commitments and their ecumenical and interfaith dimensions by reflecting, in particular, on the evolving relationship between the Christian ideal of hope and the social responsibility that hope entails in the context of political modernity in postwar Europe.

Mokrani similarly considers the theological foundations for Islamic engagement in global affairs, international development, and peace. In his contribution, Mokrani stresses the need for profound spiritual reform and theological contextualization in order to sustain interreligious engagement on a range of problems that have emerged out of modernity. He focuses especially on the development of a theology of nonviolence among a number of contemporary Muslim theologians as a key example of the hermeneutical possibility of Islamic theology to generate a positive Islamic approach to religious engagement in global affairs (Mokrani 2022).

Several themes link these scholarly articles together even though they draw from different disciplinary sources and concerns. For example, all view the growth of interreligious engagement efforts as a historical development, one that emerges alongside religious concerns and responses to the challenges of political modernity. Relatedly, all of them connect interreligious engagement to the development of new political perspectives from within these various religious traditions. Thus, Bengard reflects on Charles Mathewes' concept of "critically hopeful citizenship" and the attitudes it implies about social responsibility (Mathewes 2007). Driessen articulates the emergence of "inclusive citizenship" as a central goal and concern of recent interreligious declarations in the Middle East. Mokrani connects his work on dialogue and nonviolence to the development of positive definitions of democracy within recent Islamic thought, and Daou considers that religious engagement responds to a theological quest for ethical authenticity and public legitimacy as well as new political needs evolving out of late modernity. In doing so, all of the research articles also draw links between theological developments on interreligious dialogue in various religious traditions and the public witness of religions to peace,

justice, and development. They also outline the challenges and complexities – both ethical and political – that religious engagement has posed for religious actors and policymakers.

The conceptual framings of the research articles provide a helpful theoretical foundation for the policy and practice notes. Here, the authors offer reflections on the actual religious engagement efforts of a number of prominent international organizations and initiatives, including the World Health Organization (Fabian Winiger), the UN Environment Programme's Faith for Earth initiative (Iyad Abumoghli), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' Global Compact and faith actors (Safak Pavey), the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights' Faith for Rights initiative (Ibrahim Salama and Michael Wiener) as well as the multireligious humanitarian work of Religions for Peace (Azza Karam) and PaRD, the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (Khushwant Singh).

These articles paint a vivid portrait of the recent adoption of religious engagement strategies by the international community. In doing so, they also trace a longer genealogy of religious concerns within the origins of modern international institutions (Abumoghli, Salama and Weiner, Winiger). Salama and Wiener, for example, recall the work of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld to link multilateral diplomacy, religious beliefs, and human rights in the 1950s (Salama and Wiener 2022), and Winiger highlights debates about the centrality of spirituality to the World Health Organization going back to the inaugural World Health Assembly in 1948.

The meaning and importance of religious engagement within these institutions, however, have changed greatly over time. Thus, some of the authors argue that international organizations and international policy work remain ensconced in the biases of the secular paradigm in which they were formed. Multiple authors, including Karam and Singh, cite the oft-reported Pew Research finding that eight in ten people worldwide describe religion as having a role in their lives, and argue that major gaps remain between the work of development and the religiously shaped societies where that work often occurs (Pew Research Center 2012). In incorporating this religious dimension to their work, they invite these institutions to take holistic definitions of development more seriously.

As in the theoretical articles, these authors also reflect on the various challenges and failures of interreligious engagement efforts. Multiple authors raise concerns about gender issues, and the ongoing tensions between the ideals of gender equality promoted by international development agencies and those of various traditional religious actors they seek to work with in their development assistance projects (Abumoghli, Safak, and Singh). Others articulate the

need for more accountability of and by religious authorities and communities in their development work (Karam). Some of the authors also worry about the risk of instrumentalization of religious communities that the institutionalization of religious engagement by these organizations has seemed to create, even as they seek to do so as part of a more holistic approach to development. Winiger, for example, argues that a pragmatic, utilitarian approach has tended to dominate religious engagement efforts, one which risks engaging religious organizations for merely strategic ends.

Despite these risks and challenges, most of these authors view religious engagement efforts by the UN and other international institutions as a positive step and applaud their efforts to collaborate with local religious actors and communities to respond to what Singh refers to as our time of "global polycrises," which includes, among others, the crisis of the environment, of human rights, of migration, of world poverty, and of armed conflicts. In the face of multiple global crises, these policymakers call for more interreligious collaboration, for deeper, multi-stakeholder partnerships both between religions and between religions and international institutions. Karam evocatively refers to this call as the new "multi-religious imperative."

The research and policy experience collected in these articles offers much in terms of presentation and analysis of the new dynamics of religious engagement in global affairs. They are at once hopeful, critical, and historically revealing, and they outline the possibilities for a multireligious imperative that could, indeed, offer hope for common humanity. It is for future research to continue to conceptualize and assess religious engagement models to do so.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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Research Articles

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Religions beyond Borders: the Ambivalence and Effectiveness of Religious Engagement in Public and Global Affairs

Research Article

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This article explores the evolving dynamics of religious engagement in public and global affairs, responding to the dual acknowledgment of religion's significance by secular actors and the proactive involvement of religious leaders in broader societal contexts. Through critical review of existing literature, the paper highlights the complex conceptual and political frameworks and ambivalent understanding of religious engagement, probing on the one hand its intrinsic and generic relationship with inter-religious dialogue and on the other the academic conversation about the public role of religion in postmodern societies. The article introduces two key concepts: religious social responsibility and pragmatic pluralism, to navigate, amid diverse cultural narratives, the ambivalence and avoid the instrumentalization of religious roles in public and global affairs. Through an interdisciplinary approach integrating theological and social sciences perspectives, the article addresses critical queries on the rightsizing of religious engagement, and proposes a new typology of faith actors that goes beyond the institutional religious realms and the western development narratives. Moreover, the article identifies key qualifications for effective partnerships, such as the autonomy of faith actors vis-à-vis the political power, their legitimacy and credibility towards their constituencies, their integrity, in addition to the mutual literacy required from them and political actors. Despite the ongoing risks of religious instrumentalization, radical secularism, proselytism, and ethno-religious nationalism, the article attests that religious engagement remains more than ever essential in addressing public and

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global development and peace challenges, and in enriching the humanitarian narrative with inclusive and fraternal values.

Keywords

pluralism – religious engagement – interreligious dialogue – development – peace

1 Introduction

Religious engagement is at the crossroad, on the one hand of the acknowledgment by secular actors in development and politics for the impact of religion on their work and the need for partnering with faith actors to advance their own agendas and, on the other hand, the engagement of religious leadership in the public sphere, beyond their communities' borders, with other religious and secular stakeholders, and from a non-proselytizing perspective. Al-Azhar Declaration on Citizenship and Coexistence eloquently states this novel dynamic by affirming that:

> we are in the same boat since we constitute one society; we face serious dangers that threaten our lives, countries, and religions. Therefore, we want to work hard together to save our societies and countries and to correct our relationship with the whole world by virtue of our common will and the fact that we share the same destiny. Only by doing this we shall provide bright future and a better life for our children. (Al-Azhar 2017)

Mandaville speaks about a shift within the policymakers' community provoked by the understanding that "engaging religious actors can make positive and often uniquely valuable contributions to solving problems in diplomacy and development" (Mandaville 2021, 95).

However, the abundant literature on the subject, since approximately ten years, gives the impression as if the pendulum has swung quite rapidly from a posture of marginalization of religion to a situation of chaotic engagement. Olivier criticized the rush to advocacy about religions in development, based unduly on the limited evidence then available (Olivier 2016). Salama and Wiener confirm that "engagement with religious factors and actors in the multilateral arena are neither well defined nor systematically fulfilled in a coherent manner" (Salama and Wiener 2022, 252). Therefore, the rightsizing

of the role of religion in public and global affairs has become an academic and policy necessity to investigate the ambivalence and elucidate the relevance of the concept and its practical implications. The present article undertakes this task, and intends to achieve it from an interdisciplinary approach, crossing theological and social sciences perspectives. The task poses a multilayered epistemic challenge caused by the divergence between theological and political metanarratives and the occurrence of multiple cultural and conceptual frameworks for religious engagement. The following three parts offer an analysis of these points, answering the following questions: is religious engagement a new form of interreligious dialogue or its substitute? Does religion have an active role in religious engagement or is it the subject of a political enterprise? Does postmodernity constitute the hermeneutical and political framework for religious engagement? How can we develop a common understanding of religious engagement while considering multiple forms of modernity and pre or post-modern realities?

The answers to these questions are quite complex and require continuous reflection for the development of a shared narrative and the elucidation of zones of tension. I put forward two key concepts to deconstruct this complexity: religious social responsibility, and pragmatic pluralism. In the last two parts, practical and ethical questions are considered. Who are the actors of religious engagement? And what are the key qualifications and ethical considerations required for their engagement? Answering these questions entails context-sensitive approach, where context means both religious and political frameworks. It also requires non-ideological analysis that acknowledges multiple narratives guiding the same development action and purpose. Hence, the principles of humanitarian action (OCHA 2010) can be mirrored with and enriched by parallel principles rooted in religious narratives. In brief, religious engagement is all about novel public-religious partnership managing diversity and complexity of global affairs for the common good of humanity.

2 The Recent Metamorphosis of Interreligious Relations: from Dialogue to Engagement

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed an abundant activity of interreligious dialogue, which led to the emergence of a post-apologetic paradigm for interreligious relations, based on understanding and collaboration (Swidler 2013; Driessen 2023). This has been strongly reflected in the Catholic Church's declaration about its relation with other religions, *Nostra Aetate*, published in 1965. In the paragraph on Islam, it says: "Since in the course of

centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for *mutual understanding* and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind *social justice* and *moral welfare*, as well as *peace* and *freedom*" (Catholic Church 1965, §3, emphasis added). In their work, Merdjanova and Brodeur mapped out different contemporary definitions and typologies of interreligious dialogue (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 15–39). They concluded by proposing a definition which presented interreligious dialogue as "all forms of interactions and communication through speech, writing and/or any kind of shared activities that help *mutual understanding* and/or *cooperation* between people who self-identify religiously in one form or another" (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 23, emphasis added).

This understanding-based paradigm in interreligious relations has increased the awareness about the social implications of the theological perceptions of and teaching about the other. The mutual understanding effort led to the acknowledgement of the harmful consequences of historic misunderstandings. Therefore, it has become insufficient to "forget the past" as the Catholic declaration states above, and has pressed the concerned communities for more self-review and criticism, to implement necessary adjustments to their concepts and narratives. The most prominent example might be the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. The World Council of Churches openly acknowledged that: "As Christianity came to define its own identity over and against Judaism [...] such patterns of thought in Christianity have often led to overt acts of condescension, persecutions, and worse (1.5) [...] Teachings of contempt for Jews and Judaism in certain Christian traditions proved a spawning ground for the evil of the Nazi Holocaust (3.2)" (World Council of Churches 1982).

From a mutual understanding and collaboration approach, thus, interreligious relations and dialogue have become generative of self-criticism and transformation. Grung emphasizes that "the aim of the dialogue should be a possible *mutual transformation* of the people engaged in the dialogue, not that one party should try to convince or influence the other according to its own perspectives or convictions" (Grung 2015, 68, emphasis added). The concept of mutual transformation proposed by Grung requires the capability of the protagonists to perform self-criticism, and to be ready to share ownership and power (Grung 2017, 37). In fact, this mutual transformation approach has helped religious institutions to manage their challenging realities without being singled out and stigmatized. It has led to lessen the competition between ahistorical or apologetic religious narratives and encouraged actors to assume their religious social responsibility vis-à-vis the harmful interpretations and

actions in the name of their respective religions. The Al-Azhar international and interreligious conference for countering extremism and terrorism, held in Cairo in 2014, leading in 2015 to the creation of Al-Azhar Observatory for combating extremism and promoting a moderate understanding of Islam, reflects this type of multireligious solidarity in proactively facing the instrumentalization of religion for extremist purposes. Although continuous critical analysis is required to avoid religious solidarity for "faith washing", and further instruments and mechanisms for accountability are also needed when it comes to religious involvement in public affairs, this novel dynamism of mutual transformation is worth being observed and considered as a determining factor in the move from dogmatic and identity-based approaches, towards further interreligious engagement based on the growing awareness about and recognition of what I call "religious social responsibility" (Daou 2023, 133). Some scholars are still sceptic about the capacity of religions to engage in an authentic process of dialogue and transformation. Akah and Ajah (2022) argue that the imperative to convert and witness to one's religious convictions, which is rooted in a sense of epistemic authority that one holds the best version of truth, precludes interreligious dialogue. In a subtler analysis, Cornille (2008) acknowledge that religions are not naturally inclined to dialogue with each other. However, she argues that a dialogue for mutual understanding and enrichment is still possible if it is practiced with: humility, conviction, interconnection, empathy, and generosity.

In fact, a comprehensive framing of interreligious dynamisms should include its manifold process of understanding, transformation, solidarity, and collaboration. In this framework, I argue that the concept of dialogue has become insufficient to reflect the rich interreligious dynamics which go beyond the intellectual sphere and include emotional, spiritual, existential, social, and even political dimensions (Daou and Tabbara 2022, 217). Therefore, I propose the following typology that aims to encompass interreligious dialogue, encounter, and engagement together, under four categories:

a) ***Understanding:*** dialogue for mutual understanding and living-well-together
b) ***Transformation:*** transformative interreligious dialogue and comparative theologies
c) ***Solidarity:*** experiences of reconciliation and spiritual solidarity
d) ***Engagement:*** partnership and collaboration for religious social responsibility

It is important to note that these four categories are interrelated. Mutual understanding processes engage theological discussions and transformations, while it lays the ground on the one hand for spiritual initiatives for reconciliation

and solidarity and, on the other, for trust-based shared commitments for peace and justice. Furthermore, each of the four categories operates on many levels and in different settings, from the grassroots and local communities to national interreligious frameworks and initiatives, to the global platforms, and multilateral policy systems. For instance, under the first category, we can find an organization such as Coexister, working in France and Europe on the very local level for mutual understanding and living-well-together through popular youth education (Grzybowski 2018), and the UN Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) working on the multilateral level to reduce global cross-cultural tensions and to build bridges between communities (UNAOC 2025).

In this metamorphosis framework, initiated in its contemporary form by the theological challenges related to World War II and the Shoah, September 11th has constituted another turning point in the current history of interreligious dialogue. To face the rise of islamophobia in the West, related to the extremist narratives and violence in the name of Islam, governments, Islamic institutions and scholars have taken initiatives that transformed the interreligious dynamic,[1] bringing Islamic actors of dialogue to the forefront, contributing to shaping the process and its agendas (Daou 2011). As stated by the Algerian scholar Mekia Nedjar at the Madrid World Conference on Dialogue (2008): "It is said that Christian theology is not the same since the holocaust, and indeed Muslim theology is not the same since 9/11" (Driessen 2023, 83). The key message of the subsequent Islamic initiatives has been refusing any correlation between the teachings of Islam and violent extremism. The "Amman Message" has summarized this renewed interpretation as follow: "Islam rejects extremism, radicalism and fanaticism [...] The source of relations between Muslims and others is peace" (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan 2004). The open letter "A Common Word between Us and You" has rooted this interpretation in the command of love of God and the neighbor, considered as the core of Islamic and Abrahamic religions' teachings (The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought 2009).[2]

Another momentum in the twenty-first century developments of interreligious relations has been the reaction to the institutionalization of Islam by the Islamic State established in Iraq and Syria (ISIS 2013–2018). Beyond the

1 Such as: the Doha yearly interreligious conference since 2003 and the creation of the Doha Centre for interreligious dialogue in 2008; "Amman Message", 2004; "A Common Word between Us and You", open letter from 138 Muslim scholars to Christian leaders, 2007; The international conference on interfaith dialogue organized by the Muslim World League in 2008, and publishing the Makkah Call for dialogue.

2 For further review of interfaith dialogue in the Middle East, see: Abu-Nimr 2013, and Al-Saif 2023.

first reaction of rejecting this abject form of violence and persecution in the name of Islam, the atrocities which ISIS committed and religiously-legitimized ignited a theological and interreligious dynamic promoting a faith-based claim for pluralism and inclusive citizenship. In 2016, the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies[3] launched with the Kingdom of Morocco "The Marrakech Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in the Muslim World", offering an Islamic theology for citizenship and religious freedom, endorsed by a wide range of Islamic scholars from all over the world. Al-Azhar, in collaboration with the Muslim Council of Elders, and with the participation of Pope Francis and other prominent Christian leaders, launched in 2017 the "Al-Azhar Declaration on Citizenship and Coexistence" (Al-Azhar 2017). Between 2018 and 2021, Wilton Park, in partnership with the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, and the Adyan Foundation, hosted a pioneer "International and Interreligious Dialogue on Inclusive Citizenship" (Daou 2021). This process and its report inspired the Abu Dhabi declaration on inclusive citizenship in 2021. Driessen considers that the shift in language from protecting religious minorities to promoting citizenship represents an important change of narrative and the development of a new phase of dialogue activity, one which emphasizes the positive role and responsibilities of religious actors and communities to building inclusive, stable and socially-cohesive societies. "Inclusive citizenship" is hence seen by Driessen as a way to name a new model for multi-religious collaboration (Driessen 2023, 256). In this context, Grung invites to further distinguish between interfaith and interreligious dialogue as a political tool and dialogue as community-building and emancipatory processes. According to Grung, interreligious dialogue can be used as a political and diplomatic tool at a top international level, even if the political and diplomatic interests can use the label of interreligious dialogue as a protective or legitimizing shield (Grung 2017, 38). Rosen (2016) considers that interreligious dialogue can play a critically valuable role in preventing the violent abuse of religion that threatens peaceful coexistence everywhere. With the spread of an ethno-religious nationalist narrative related to the war in Russia/Ukraine (Gallaher and Kalaitzidiz 2022) and Israel/Palestine, we may be at the dawn of a fourth transformative momentum, after the Shoah, September 11, and ISIS, for religious engagement and interreligious relations.

Cosigned in 2019 by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, the Document on "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together" represents a high-level interreligious endorsement for the role of

3 Renamed: Abu Dhabi Forum for Peace.

religions, and more specifically Christianity and Islam, in universally promoting pluralism, social justice, and inclusive citizenship. The document encapsulates the theological outcomes of interreligious dialogue in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, offering an integrative framework and narrative for interreligious engagement calling for the adoption of "a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard" (Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019).

3 Religion as Public Subject and Actor

It is not new for religions to be involved in the public sphere and in peace and development matters. In many countries, religious communities have played a major role in providing social services to the national community, in key sectors such as education, health, or poverty alleviation. The first and oldest universities were born within religious frameworks such as the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco (IXst Century); while the religious orders played a major role in the flowering of European Universities in the medieval and Renaissance periods. Caritas, for example, which is the major worldwide humanitarian arm of the Catholic Church, was founded in 1897, to serve the poor and to promote charity and justice throughout the world (Caritas 2025). The Islamic Relief is another faith-inspired humanitarian aid and development agency, established in 1984, working to save and transform the lives of some of the world's most vulnerable people (Islamic Relief 2025). These and other similar organizations have far reaching services and important economic capacities. The ACT alliance, for instance, represents a network of 145 church-related agencies, working in 127 countries, mobilizing each year two billion USD (ACT Alliance 2025). On the local level, temples, mosques, churches, and monasteries, have always been hubs for cultural, humanitarian, and socioeconomic activity.

Although historically rooted, religious engagement in public affairs recently emerged in the academic and policy narratives as a new conceptual framework for recognition, understanding, interaction, and collaboration between mainly the public and religious authorities for justice, peace, and sustainable development. In the introduction of the significantly entitled book: "The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere", Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen argue that: "Just as, in an earlier period, feminists and other scholars raised fundamental questions about the meaning of the public and its relation to the private, today the very categories of the religious and the secular – and of secularism and religion – are being revisited, reworked, and rethought" (Mendieta and Vanantwerpen 2011, 1). Indeed, in this context, religion became perceived

and recognized not only as an actor in the public sphere, but also as subject of studies, and more importantly as a factor of reinterpretation of the public engagement in societal and political issues (Tomalin 2015; Clarke and Jennings 2008).[4] The concept of "religious engagement" has hence emerged at the conjuncture of two momentums: on the one hand the incremental metamorphosis of interreligious dialogue pushing forward the religious social responsibility and interreligious collaboration and, on the other hand, the rethinking of the concept of secularization in the western academic field, meaningfully represented by the book edited by Peter Berger in 1999: "The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics".

This novel approach to "religious engagement" has offered a new framing for the role of religions and religious actors in the public sphere, and introduced them into the policy sphere. They have become perceived not only as a source of guidance for their followers, based on their respective belief systems, but also as public actors who have an impactful power in mobilizing their constituencies, beyond religious matters and community borders. This reflects a double awareness: first that religions are not disappearing, and even, on the global scale, the percentage of religiously unaffiliated is decreasing (Pew Research Center 2022);[5] secondly, that faith-based actors are indispensable stakeholders in certain public affairs. Certainly, the importance of religion in people's daily life and public thoughts and choices substantially varies between societies. It reaches the percentages of 98% in Ethiopia, 94% in Pakistan, 93% in Indonesia, 88% in Nigeria, 80% in India, 72% in Brazil, 68% in Türkiye, 56% in Greece, 53% in the USA, but 10% in the UK and Germany (ibid). Nevertheless,

4 As examples of the academic engagement in this field: the "Religions and Development Programme", led by the University of Birmingham (2005–2010); the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex launched in 2018 "The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID)" https://www.ids.ac.uk/programme-and-centre/creid/; Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs has supported a research program on religion and development for fifteen years: https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/; while Notre Dame University in Rome, with many partners, launched in 2023 the Rome Summer Seminars on Religion and Global Politics: https://rome.nd.edu/research/projects-activities/rome-summer-seminars-on-religion-and-global-politics/; The Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) adopted the topic of religious engagement in its yearly policy conference, leading in 2021 to a collective publication on the topic in the Mediterranean framework (Petito, Daou, Driessen 2021).

5 The Global Religious Landscape Report, published in 2012 by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, claims that worldwide more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group (Pew Research Centre 2012); a more recent survey indicates that the percentage of "religiously unaffiliated" will decrease from 16.4 (in 2022) to 13.2 in 2050 (Pew Research Centre 2022).

these examples suggest that western Europe is more of an exception rather than a global reference in this matter. A recent report of the World Economic Forum has clearly stated: "For global leaders, underestimating the ongoing influence and role of religion in society can lead to missed opportunities for greater positive impact in multi-faith societies and significant oversights in understanding how religion and spirituality interact in the complex societal challenges happening today" (World Economic Forum 2024, 4).

This strong statement from the global hub of liberalism instills the rapid change in the policy frameworks vis-à-vis religions. It also reflects the gap at the policymakers' side, who are still struggling with religious engagement for their secularist, suspicious, or ambivalent views about religion. Azza Karam, has noticed in 2017, in her capacity of Coordinator of the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development, that at the beginning of this century, it was still "difficult to get Western policy makers in governments to be interested in the role of religious organizations in human development." The secular mind-set was such that "religion was perceived, at best, as a private affair. At worst, religion was deemed the cause of harmful social practices, an obstacle to the 'sacred' nature of universal human rights, and/or the root cause of terrorism. In short, religion belonged in the 'basket of deplorables'" (Karam 2017). Furthermore, Katherine Marshall argues that this neglect of religion as integral to development reflects in large part the early dominance of economic analysis and the more technically focused sector disciplines in development strategies and practical work. It also denotes a lack of knowledge and unease or suspicion surrounding some religious traditions and entities that many saw as a brake to modernization (Marshall 2021, 13). For Peter Mandaville, even though the dam holding back diplomatic engagement with religion seems well and truly to have broken, much of the work associated with this new-found governmental awareness of religion often still proceeds from a position of significant knowledge deficits (Mandaville 2021, 93).

Hence, considering religion as an influential reality on peace and development, as well as faith actors as potential partners in these fields, embody a major yet controversial change in the perception of religions in the public sphere. Henceforth, despite the "almost unanimous opposition from the World Bank's 184-member country governments" the World Bank president, James D. Wolfensohn launched in 1999 the World Bank's "faith initiative" (Marshall 2021, 15). This decision introduced the faith-based organizations (FBOs) under the section of Partners at the World Bank, launching with them in 2015 the "End Extreme Poverty" initiative (Barne 2015). Moreover, the United Nations created in 2010, the UN Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development (IATF), with 27 participating agencies, to support their work and sustained engagement

with key partners in the faith-based world. In 2018, the Multi-faith Advisory Council (MFAC), was established as an informal and voluntary entity that consists of more than 40 religious leaders and heads of FBOs, and which serves as a unique space for convening faith-based partners as advisors to the United Nations, in their human rights, peace and security, and sustainable development efforts. In 2012, at the initiative of the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect, a "Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes" (UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect 2012) was adopted, recognizing the role of religious leadership in peacebuilding and social cohesion. Co-founded in 2015 by officials from the European External Action Service and the U.S. Department of State, the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD) aims to equip participants to more effectively analyze religious dynamics and engage religious actors in the pursuit of shared policy objectives. Pasquale Ferrara, senior Italian diplomat, reminds that contrary to the dichotomy that portrays religion either as that which is responsible for the conflict or that which can resolve the conflict, religion is simply part of the process (Ferrara 2023). Thus, "understanding and strengthening the links between religious and secular peacebuilding theories and approaches is key" (Frazer and Owen 2018,108).

Having gained the public recognition in their role in development and peace, outside their own respective boundaries, faith institutions and actors became welcomed and even wanted in different types of partnerships and multistakeholder collaborations. Abu-Nimer and Nelson consider that "this rapid growth in partnerships, collaboration on platforms and networks linking faith-based organizations and secular entities has been advancing a systematic linking of religion and religious actors to peacebuilding and development processes, thus pushing interreligious dialogue, religious and interreligious peacebuilding more front and center on the policy makers' and public agenda than ever before" (Abu-Nimer and Nelson 2021, 5). Hence, in 2012 the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities was established, with the aim to create and share evidence on religions in development and community work, and to strengthen partnerships between and amongst faith and non-faith actors, internationally and locally. Moreover, based upon a report by former UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki Moon, which revealed that religious actors play a key role in conflict mediation processes, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers was initiated in 2013. The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) was also launched in 2016 by the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), convening more than 170 members, being governments, multilateral entities, academia as well

as religious, traditional, indigenous and other civil society actors to better inform policy and practices in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda. According to Khushwant Singh, "multistakeholder partnerships have gained attention in global affairs since the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002" (Singh 2024). This strategy is indeed echoed in the 17th SDG, "Partnerships for the Goals", which explicitly highlights the need to strengthen partnerships to ensure that no one is left behind. Although the SDGs do not explicitly mention the faith-based actors, Singh thinks that the interpretation of SDG17 "includes more systematic and more long-term collaboration with religious actors" (Ibid). It is noticeable that "The Pact for the Future", adopted in 2024 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, recognized, in its Action 55 on Partnership, that the challenges we face require cooperation not only across borders but also across the whole of society. Hence, the Pact explicitly mentions the engagement with faith-based organizations, among other partners such as the Civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and the Scientific and academic communities (United Nations 2024, 35).

Empowered by this new framework of public recognition among other stakeholders, and the strategy of religious engagement adopted by international organizations, faith-based actors have also taken initiatives themselves to share their views and engage policymakers on some key issues at the global political agenda. Pope Francis, for example, has been very vocal on global crises such as those on the environment and refugees, and he has been invited to address the leaders of the Intergovernmental Forum of the G7, concerning the effects of artificial intelligence on the future of humanity (Francis 2024). The interfaith Rainforest Initiative is also an eloquent example and model of interfaith collaboration for a shared public cause. The Initiative reflects the commitment, influence, and moral responsibility of religions to protect the world's rainforests and the indigenous peoples that serve as their guardians.[6] Moreover, tens of faith-based or interfaith initiatives have been engaging policymakers on the global warming and climate change related issues,[7] as well as on other global affairs, targeting global policy platforms such as the G20[8] and the COP.[9]

Hence, religious and interreligious engagements represent two different yet interrelated dynamics making from religion both subject and actor in

6 See: https://www.interfaithrainforest.org/.

7 See the Globethics publication on: Interfaith statements for environmental justice 2008–2023. https://repository.globethics.net/handle/20.500.12424/4300420.

8 The G20Interfaith Forum: https://www.g20interfaith.org/.

9 The Faith Pavilion at the COP28: https://faithatcop28.com/.

the public sphere. On the one hand this reality reflects the initiatives of faith actors who engage policymakers, based on their religious social responsibility and related religious or interreligious ethical agenda, advocating for better governance of global challenges. On the other hand, the religious engagement also reflects the initiative of policymakers engaging religious actors in public affairs, especially in humanitarian and development areas.

4 The Equivocal Framing of Religious Engagement

It is critical to acknowledge that the concept of "religious engagement", in its current academic and policy predominant usage, was born and nurtured within the western cradle. This cultural framework presents a first challenge and source of ambiguity for the concept, especially when it is applied to global or non-western contexts. It is also important to consider that religious engagement has been developing in conjuncture with multiple paradigmatic transitions and fundamental controversies, such as: modernity / multiple-modernities / post-modernity, secularization / desecularization, globalization / clash of civilizations, nationalism / post-nationalism, global citizenship / identity politics, etc. In this complex framework, it is not surprising to face certain conceptual ambiguity in the related narrative. Furthermore, the geopolitical framing of religious engagement, between global and domestic politics, increases its vulnerability to misunderstandings and misuses. In fact, those three facets of cultural, theoretical, and political framing of religious engagement are interrelated and, together, generate an equivocal situation which requires deconstruction for intelligibility and constructive usage of the concept.

Jürgen Habermas considered that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of religiously expressed extremism and terrorism at the turn of the twenty-first century, religious traditions and communities of faith have gained a new, hitherto unexpected political importance (Habermas 2006). Habermas sees this reality especially in the Muslim and Southeast Asian countries. He concludes that "the hopes associated with the political agenda of multiple modernities are fueled by the cultural self-confidence of those world religions that to this very day unmistakably shape the physiognomy of the major civilizations" (Ibid, 1). He has identified three consequences to this phenomenon: first, the rise of religious fundamentalism forming the seedbed for the decentralized form of terrorism; second, the change on the Western side in the perception of international relations in light of the fears of a clash of civilizations; third, seen in terms of world history, Max Weber's Occidental Rationalism now appears to be the actual deviation (Habermas 2006).

In this framework, Mavelli and Petito consider that this new concept of religious engagement could well represent a significant manifestation of the emergence of a post-secular turn in global affairs and of a postsecular sensibility in foreign policy (Mavelli &, Petito 2014). However, Petito expresses his concerns about the fact that "the predominant understanding of this new policy strategy and practice – especially among policy-makers – has, unfortunately, been an instrumentalist one. In other words, religious engagement has mostly been conceived of as an addition to the toolkit of foreign policy instruments with which states can achieve their aims" (Petito 2020). He rightly considers that this perspective fails to understand an important radical (or prophetic, in religious language) normative dimension embedded in this new post-secular development. Petito contends that religious engagement in foreign policy has the potential "to stretch the political imagination and create new practical innovations with which to respond to global policy challenges" (Ibid). Scott Appleby adopts a more radical approach and advocates for a "post-secular paradigm of religious engagement". Post-secular sensibility allows, according to him, to avoid using religious actors as a tool of official diplomacy, and to build true partnerships, based on listening, sharing and dialogue (Appleby 2021, 75). Appleby considers that this paradigm requires moving away from a top-down, state-driven, state-controlled engagement strategy to a religiously pluralist, cross-cultural dialogue that addresses the failed instrumentalist approach to religious actors (Ibid, 85).

Habermas speaks about "a post-secular society that is epistemically adjusted to the continued existence of religious communities" (Habermas 2006, 15). Therefore, he acknowledges that there is a need for a new epistemic mindset that would originate from a "self-critical assessment of the limits of secular reason" (Ibid). Recognizing that religious traditions have a special power to articulate moral intuitions, especially with regard to vulnerable forms of communal life, and to provide key resources for the creation of meaning and identity, he then considers that the state has an interest in the political participation of religious organizations and in unleashing religious voices in the political public sphere, expressing themselves in a religious language if needed (Habermas 2006, 10; Ratzinger, Habermas 2006). Francis Fukuyama also considers that "religion remains an important source of cultural rules, even in apparently secular societies" (Fukuyama 2000). Driessen sees in the Human Fraternity Declaration (Pope Francis and Ahmad Al-Tayyeb 2019), jointly signed and launched by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayeb, "the insights of post-secularism and post-Islamism, especially in its interreligious advocacy for religious authorities, communities and individuals to publicly contribute to the construction of viable projects of citizenship and political solidarity" (Driessen 2023, 172).

The post-secular framing of religious engagement requires according to Habermas two prerequisites. He argues that democratic legitimacy stands on two essential pillars: on the one hand, being inclusive to all, and, on the other hand, preserving its deliberative character (Habermas 2006, 12). Inclusivity means in this context that, besides those who hold a public office subject to the obligation to remain neutral, within state institutions, in the face of competing world views, the state cannot expect of all citizens to justify their political statements independently of their religious convictions or world views (Ibid, 8–9). Nevertheless, this first prerequisite cannot be dissociated from the second one, which entails that religions must accept truth claims beyond their own assertions in order to enter into real dialogue with others. In this account, Driessen concludes that the establishment of peaceful external pluralism in the world is made to be dependent on the adoption of at least some degree of internal theological pluralism (Driessen 2023, 122). In his attempt to reconcile modern secularism and religious plurality, Berger calls for an authentic pluralism which is not simply a side-by-side diversity, but includes sustained and amicable interaction, allowing "cognitive contamination" (Berger 2014, 2), maintaining a middle ground between two extremism: fundamentalism and relativism (Ibid, 15). Pluralism is indeed the indispensable framework for enriching religious engagement and peaceful societies. However, I think that it is somehow unrealistic and against the liberal principle of freedom of thoughts and speech to expect from religious communities to adopt theological pluralism to be able to engage in public deliberation. Communities, even with radical and exclusivist theological views, could still adopt pragmatic pluralism and openly engage in public dialogue. By pragmatic pluralism I mean the ability to genuinely recognize the others as partners in the public sphere, and be open to their views while looking for the common good, even while maintaining opponent stance on the theological and belief level, which makes inclusive citizenship the framework for religious engagement and the integration of pluralistic worldviews within a cohesive and creative public order (Daou 2007; 2023). This is crucial to be able to engage with groups, ideologically considered more radical than others, and whose inclusion in the public deliberation is essential for social cohesion and preventing segregation and violent extremism.

Moreover, religions are not only ambivalent (Appleby 2000), but also, in most societies, entrenched in the dynamics of political power, which requires vigilance and accountability, alongside dialogue and inclusivity. Therefore, in an era where we are witnessing the rise of religious nationalism, we shall be concerned not only about the risk of instrumentalization of religion in foreign affairs, but also about the instrumentalization of political power by religious groups. The instrumentalization of ethno-religious identities can nurture

authoritarianism or deviate democracies towards illiberalism. Some experts or policymakers can also adopt hazardous openness in the engagement with certain religious groups, driven by some kind of postmodern triumphalism. A clear example of this risk can be found in the "*Chicago Report*" that played a critical role in shaping the US foreign policy agenda during the Obama administration. The Report stated that: "Evidence from the past decade indicates that religious political parties often place pragmatism and problem solving over ideology. Indeed, no Islamist party elected to national parliament has sought to put greater emphasis on Sharia laws as the source of legislation" (Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2010, 11). This assumption was substantially contradicted by the conduct of Islamist parties during the so-called "Arab Spring" (Bâli and Lerner 2017). In other contexts, such as in Iraq or Lebanon, the entrenched sectarian politics can transform the public engagement of religious communities into a competing mechanism over the state and its services, usually leading to high levels of corruption and clientelism and diminishing the citizens' agency and leaders' accountability.

Hence, the political framing of religious engagement remains equivocal and requires further research to embraces the complexity of integrating cultural, theoretical, and political parameters, while ensuring their validity in different contexts, or at least clearly defining their boundaries. Empirical assessment needs to accompany theoretical assumptions, especially in contexts where certain forms of premodern systems, with prevalent traditional forms of authorities, coexist with modern or postmodern realities. Thus, acknowledging this complexity of frameworks of religious engagement is necessary to identify and safeguard the boundaries between the political and religious spheres, optimize the impact of their collaboration, and prevent mutual instrumentalization.

5 Typologies of Faith Actors in the Public Sphere

I have been deliberately using in this article different terms to speak about the agents identified as religious, in the process of engagement in the public sphere. The reality is indeed polysemant and complex according to different contexts and religions. They can be individuals or institutions, local or international organizations, movements or networks, formal or informal communities, religious, multireligious, or interreligious bodies, etc. They can have religious, political, or social legitimacy for their authority. Within the same religious group, they may also compete, due to divergent agendas, narratives, or interests. Consequently, Marshall considers that clarifying what is meant by religion and learning how to navigate dangerous shoals of vocabulary and

frameworks for analysis is one of the main challenges for religious engagement (Marshall 2013, 3). She thinks that the term "faith-inspired organizations" can better express than FBOs, the widely different forms in different world regions, and the "vast difference between global giants like Caritas Internationalis, World Vision, and Islamic Relief and the rather fluid and generally under-resourced emerging networks of, for example, Muslim women's organizations or groups engaged in grassroots work for peace" (Ibid, 8). Moreover, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities Report states that "context and tradition-related factors can greatly influence the positions and roles that different FBOs [Faith-based organizations] take up, especially in relation to other actors" (Joint Learning Initiative 2022, 24).

Despite this diversity of situations and complexity of roles, the Joint Learning Initiative report (2022) uses the term "faith actors" to represent all those who have religious agency in the public sphere. The report differentiates between three main categories of faith actors: faith-based organizations, religious communities, and religious leaders. It proposes a typology that crosses institutional and scope patterns, leading to three main groups: first, International, including international FBOs and religious bodies, networks, and leaders; second, National and regional, including national and regional FBOs and networks, religious bodies, and religious leaders; third, local, including grassroots FBOs and local religious bodies (Ibid, 24–25). Although "the evidence points towards the reality that international development actors are more likely to want to engage with formalized faith actors that operate in the same ways as NGOs" (Ibid, 24), the merit of this typology is in widening the understanding of faith actors beyond its organizational and institutional dimensions, and not restricting it to the international FBOs and official religious leadership who are more visible than others in this field, but not necessarily more impactful.

I, nonetheless, believe that the Joint Learning Initiative's typology is somehow influenced by the western post-modern narrative of religious engagement, which perceives faith actors through the lenses of the development agenda. This approach misses to take enough account the key factor of power dynamics in the religious landscape, either within traditions themselves or throughout their public engagement. Ehsan states that "as power is constitutive of public space, it also serves as a precondition for agency, since one's identity as a religious actor, for instance, can only be fully achieved through action in public" (Ehsan 2021, 101). Ehsan rightly asserts that we need to understand the constraints and limits imposed by the systems of which faith actors are a part. Appleby warns from the risk taken by some state or development actors of limiting the faith-based stakeholders to those "religious communities whose beliefs and behaviors are least scandalous to the secular mind", and to those

"religious actors at the grassroots level who are least resistant to compromising their singular religious worldview in order to collaborate with religious rivals or secular development agencies and imperatives" (Appleby 2021, 72). Since religious engagement is in principle oriented towards the public common good, it is critical to encompass in such delicate enterprise the largest categories of faith actors, even those who walk different ways to reach the same goal.

Therefore, I would like to propose a different typology of faith actors who could be involved in religious engagement situations, insisting on the fact that there is no single typology that applies to all religions and contexts. Still, this typology with ten categories of faith actors, has the advantage of being inclusive to both development and religious realities, as well as mindful of different cultural settings and diverse political and legal frameworks. It includes:

1. **Official head of religious institutions and related governing and executive bodies:** usually religious denominations have one, or in some cases more, institutional leader(s) on the global, regional, or national levels. These leaders reach their position through very diverse mechanisms. It is important to avoid projecting one institutional system on other religions, such as searching in Sunni or Shiite Islam an equivalent to the catholic system with one elected head.
2. **Humanitarian and development faith-based organizations (FBOs):** usually these organizations are the most adapted to partner with governmental, multilateral, and global development initiatives, where their advocacy role is growing in parallel to their implementing capacity and responses to emergencies. They can have global, regional or local scope; and in many cases they are affiliated to large networks that increase their engagement capacity in operating according to the development standards. In the development frameworks, FBOs can sometimes be associated or strongly collaborating with NGOs (Non-governmental organizations).
3. **Governmental officials with religious portfolio:** even though their engagement might not be related to their personal belief, they are highly influential actors in the religious field. They are ministers of endowment or religious affairs (present in most of the Islamic countries), or head of religious engagement departments either on the domestic or foreign levels. In many cases, they control the training, and sometimes the preaching, of community leaders. Recently, a growing number of special envoys for freedom of religion and belief have been appointed by more than forty governments. Their diplomatic agendas are strongly related to religious engagement, especially with minorities.

4. **Interreligious organizations and networks:** they represent multiple forms of initiatives and institutions, from the global to the regional or local levels, setting shared goals and frameworks for collaboration and joint engagement. One of the major networks, "Religions for Peace", defines itself for example as a platform "where the world's religions join together to ensure that all people enjoy peace, harmony, and prosperity."[10]
5. **Spiritual and faith-inspired movements:** these movements have their own structures and can be related or not to the official religious institutions. They can have far reach capacity, and in some cases, they can be inclusive to more than one denomination or religion, and have important spiritual, cultural, and ethical impact. They are sometimes socioeconomic or political drivers in their context, such as Buddhist or Christian monasteries or orders, and Soufi constellations.
6. **Local communities and community leaders:** they are considered among the most effective stakeholders in religious engagement, since they have direct contact with and impact on the grassroots level. A recent report presented empirical data from Nigeria showing that development and peacebuilding activities are perceived more effective if they have been inclusive to local faith actors (Yusuf 2023, 12). Local faith actors can also be subject to mistrust because of their privileged relations to local politicians or for being in situations of conflict of interest (Ibid, 11).
7. **Scholars, and charismatic and thought leaders:** religions' legacy is rooted in and nurtured by their respective scriptures, but is also shaped by the multiple interpretations and vulgarizations of their teachings. Therefore, scholars who contribute to developing the orthodox and heterodox religious narratives have a great influence on the believers and their way in engaging with public issues. They are usually labelled as being moderate, charismatic, radical, reformist, conservative, extremist, modern, liberal, etc. This wide spectrum of qualifications reflects the complexity of the religious narrative, wrongly reduced by some to its minimalist conformist or normative public statements. It also reflects the crucial role this category of faith actors has in orienting religious engagement in divergent, even conflicting directions within the same tradition.
8. **Faith virtual influencers:** in our times, the question of how digital culture may be reshaping notions of whom or what constitutes authority is incredibly important; and this is also true for religion (Campbell 2020). Most of the religious institutions are aware of this crucial shift and they

10 See: https://www.rfp.org/who-we-are/.

have been populating the web with their teachings and guidance, to prevent their respective constituencies from deviating towards dissident or unorthodox online influencers. The creation in 2015 of the "Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism" is a prominent example of this battle on the narrative on the web.

9. **Religious bodies with political instruments:** it is challenging, yet crucial, to differentiate between this and the following category, even though in some case the reality does not allow this exercise. Some religions have formal instruments for public and political engagement, such as the secretariat of state of the Vatican with a diplomatic corps representing the Catholic church; others might have informal ways of engagement. Many religious institutions and organizations have created departments or offices for advocacy and international relations. Together, they sometimes constitute a network of policy influencers for common causes.
10. **Political bodies with religious agendas:** some political leaders and administrations instrumentalize religion to advance their agendas or seek popular support during crisis or conflicts. Others may engage religions to foster their humanitarian or development missions. But, there are also situations where religion is not perceived as a partner or an instrument, but as a goal. This is the case of some "messianic" movements or even States, such as Iran or some political parties in Israel, whose strategy is to advance the realization of a messianic momentum or prophecy. Moreover, some religious-political movements, such as the Muslim brothers, can be considered part of this category, since their political structure and agenda is based on their religious identity and ideology.

6 Qualifications for Impactful Partnerships

After having set the religious and sociopolitical frameworks and defined the actors of religious engagement, I would like to conclude by presenting five key qualifications that are critical for the success of this endeavor. In fact, since religious engagement is experienced in complex and ambivalent frameworks, and most of the time associated to power dynamics and conflicting interests, there is a critical need for robust monitoring and review mechanisms based on clear compliance and effectiveness matrix. Hence, I consider that the five following factors need to be carefully considered for successful religious-public partnerships, and assessment of faith actors' roles in global affairs.

a) The autonomy of faith actors vis-à-vis the political power: in secular contexts, this issue may be overlooked, though it is determinant for securing

safe and democratic spaces for partnership, criticism and mutually challenging positions. It also affects the impact and credibility of faith actors towards their constituencies. In some cases, the head of religious communities and related leadership are appointed and paid by governments. Sometimes they might have constitutional, administrative, educational, or judicial roles. In other contexts, despite the formal separation between the governmental and religious institutions, some faith actors might have a dominant role due to historic or cultural ties with the political power (Triandafyllidou and Magazzini 2021). At the opposite, in some countries, faith actors of certain or all religious groups might be under pressure, or endure discrimination and persecution (Pew Research Center 2024). This wide range of situations needs to be carefully considered for accurate understanding and practie of religious engagement.

b) The legitimacy of faith actors vis-à-vis their respective constituencies: encompassing wide range of faith actors implies the challenging fact of understanding the legitimacy those actors might or might not have among their constituencies. Who speaks for religion? And to whom believers listen more? It is obvious that having religious official titles or roles, or being endorsed by public authorities is not enough to ensure religious legitimacy. In many cases, the public authorities choose to collaborate with those who are ready to religiously legitimize and support their political agendas (Khemilat 2018), leading to the alienation of these faith actors towards at least part of their communities. However, the monopole of representation of a religion is a myth, taking into consideration that the power dynamics that influence the believers are beyond the institutional realm of their community (Al-Sayyed 2005). Driessen talks about "the global democratization of religious authority, religious practices and religious ideas, even in the authoritarian political settings" (Driessen 2023, 27). Informal, charismatic, electronic, or more radical and marginal faith actors can have a critical role in shaping religious narrative and mobilizing believers towards public causes. Hence, the success of religious engagement for specific causes largely depends on the identification and involvement of the most impactful actors in the related field.

c) The credibility of faith actors: the spiritual identity of faith actors, rooted in principle, in unshakable ethical grounds, provides them a priori with a trustful reputation, at least inside their communities. "Religious leaders are seen as trusted insiders and this trust and authority can lead to strong results when the aim is to change knowledge, attitudes, and practices on a topic" (Joint Learning Initiative 2022, 17). However, the growing expectation of transparency on the one hand, and the ethical scandals affecting some religious leaders on the other, have diminished the unconditional trust and stressed the need for openness and accountability among faith actors, especially when they

assume a public role and manage public resources. Rather than being generated by spiritual identity, credibility of faith actors has been shifting toward an evidence-based reality. The trust is then conditionally provided to those who have gained their credibility through transparent engagement, increasing the importance of their role compared to more closed leaders. Religious organizations are also increasingly adopting the development standards of monitoring, evaluation, and accountability, due to their partnership with and expectations of governmental and other secular stakeholders. This learning curve makes from those faith actors catalysts within their communities for societal reforms, such as women empowerment or inclusive development. The same experience can also put them under pressure and limit their agency or credibility when the public agenda they engage with comes with strings attached, such as promoting LGBTQ+ rights which might be far from being endorsed by the mainstream narrative in their communities.

d) The integrity of faith actors in the framework of their religious public engagement: faith actors are not neutral agents, and they come to the public sphere equipped with a worldview which unfolds in ethical, political, or missionary goals and strategies. The Joint Learning Initiative Report (2022) noticed that faith actors have been perceived, and have at times acted, as proselytizing actors in humanitarian and development processes, offering conditional assistance in exchange for the chance to convert the recipient to their religion. At the contrary, the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality have inadvertently fostered an avoidance of religions (Ibid, 17). I would like to flag here that integrity requires from both faith and secular actors the recognition of their different value-systems in which their common engagement is respectively rooted, and accept to serve the common good avoiding conflict of interests. In this context, the four principles of humanitarian action need to be translated into a narrative that resonates with ethical and religious values, hence:

– Humanity translates into dignity
– Neutrality translates into inclusivity
– Impartiality translates into fraternity
– Independence translates into partnership

e) The mutual literacy: with their senior experience in the field, Salama and Wiener, affirm that "the lack of mutual literacy and an acceptable methodology for engagement with faith actors delays any effective collaborative progress" (Salama and Wiener 2022, 253). This assumption has been confirmed by most of the experts in the field. Marshall also defines the need on both sides, being "religious literacy among development institutions and "policy literacy" in the religious institutions that seek to engage on development policies and

strategies" (Marshall 2021, 22). Mtata wonders how any development effort can be conceived without considering the basic self-understanding of the recipients. "Unless it is meant to perpetuate dependency and foster inferiority among the recipients of development efforts, development must be adapted to the thought systems of the local populations, which is religious" (Mtata 2013, 31). On their side, faith actors learn from the development experience and engagement with policy issues, how to acquire new ways of interpreting their realities and challenging structural injustices, while addressing their material needs. Mtata calls this learning curve the hermeneutic role for development or "the science of meaning making" (ibid).

7 Conclusion

This article aimed to establish that religious engagement is not the sole result of emerging strategies in foreign policy agendas or of the surge in instrumentalization of religion for political purposes. A real paradigm shift attested within the global religious narrative has generated a new religious consciousness making from the interreligious and multistakeholder engagement for the good of humanity an integral part of religious being and acting. Hence, I stated that religious engagement reflects two interrelated dynamics: the religious social responsibility and agency on the one hand, and the initiative of policymakers engaging religious actors in public affairs on the other. This complex reality is challenged by the need of navigating pragmatic pluralism in diverse cultural and civilizational settings.

Moreover, the abundant and rich recent theological and social sciences literature on religious engagement reflects the growing interest for the concept from both political and faith actors. However, the concept is still in a development phase, which requires to be in a continuous learning process and search for the rightsizing of its scope, especially from the evidences collected from the field. In 2020, the USAID held its first "Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement (SRE)" which proceedings constitute a special issue of the Journal: "The Review of Faith & International Affairs" (2021/Vol 19 – Issue sup1). Furthermore, the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities announced in their 2022 report on "The State of the Evidence in Religions and Development" that it will update it every two years.

Finally, religious engagement represents a wide spectrum of faith actors. For their comprehensive understanding, I proposed a typology composed by ten categories, responding to both theological and development perspectives, while considering the related power dynamics. More importantly, the

success of faith actors' engagement in public and global affairs depends on a list of key qualifications, being: their autonomy vis-à-vis the political power, their legitimacy and credibility towards their constituencies, their integrity, in addition to the mutual literacy required from political and faith actors. With these qualifications, religious engagement could enrich the humanitarian principles, becoming humanistic and dignifying, neutral and inclusive, impartial and fraternal, independent and in partnership. On its rich and enriching path, religious engagement is still facing major external and internal pitfalls such as religious instrumentalization, radical secularism, proselytism, and ethno-religious nationalism, that entail permanent vigilance with preventive measures. Ethno-religious nationalist narrative related to the war in Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine/Middle-East might indeed be a fourth transformative momentum, after the Shoah, September 11, and ISIS, for religious engagement and interreligious relations. The near future will confirm or not, and eventually be the scene for this upcoming new form of engagement.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs. A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity," edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 156–179

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Interreligious Engagement in Global Politics: Some Conceptual Considerations

Research Article

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This paper traces the recent growth of interreligious engagement initiatives from the perspective of political science theories about the return of religion to international affairs. It argues that this body of scholarship provides an important conceptual background for understanding the proposals which have developed within these initiatives for political development and international cooperation. The first half of the essay places the growth of interreligious engagement strategies within the larger development of debates in political science and philosophy about the global crisis of liberalism and its implications for the "return" of religion to global politics. In order to do so, it revisits the work of Samuel Huntington and Jürgen Habermas, two seminal scholars in the field of religion and politics whose scholarly trajectories personify larger trends within the field. The second half of the essay then considers the specific form that interreligious engagement efforts have taken across the broader Middle East, a region which has experienced a particularly active period of interreligious growth over the last two decades, also in response to geopolitical dilemmas in the post-9/11 era. The essay ends with an analysis of the political concepts which have been developed within these engagement initiatives and the extent to which they respond to the crises described in the first half of the essay.

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302003
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

Keywords

religious engagement – interreligious dialogue – global politics – politics of the Middle East – inclusive citizenship – human fraternity

1 Introduction

The last twenty years have registered a significant increase in state-sponsored interreligious dialogue initiatives which have brought together international policymakers, governmental ministries, civil society organizations, and religious actors and movements. To highlight the policy-centric nature of these initiatives, and the formal interactions they create between political and religious authorities, some scholars have defined these initiatives as new forms of "interreligious engagement" (Petito, Berry, and Mancinelli 2018; Petito, Daou, and Driessen 2021). States across the broader Middle East region have taken a leading role on a number of these initiatives, including the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration and the Human Fraternity Document signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al Tayeb, in the United Arab Emirates in 2019.

This paper traces the growth of these interreligious engagement initiatives from the perspective of political science theories about the return of religion to international affairs (Thomas 2005; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011; Hurd 2015). It argues that this body of scholarship provides an important conceptual background for understanding the political proposals which have developed within these initiatives for their own societies and for global politics as well. The paper interprets the growth of interreligious engagement initiatives as responding to crisis dynamics which political theorists began to associate with liberalism in the late 1990s and early 2000s, at the level of both domestic and international politics. The articulation of these crises led to new, post-secular thinking about the role of religion in the public sphere and its importance for the regeneration of social solidarity and international cooperation (Habermas 2008; Mavelli and Petito 2012; Rosati and Stoeckl 2016; Barbato 2012; Kulska and Solarz 2021). It also led to calls by scholars and policymakers for states to engage and partner with religious actors in new ways, including, especially, in the Middle East. Over time, interreligious engagement efforts in the region have developed a language which reflects the concerns and hopes raised by this body of thought and directly responds to them. At the same time, the work of these initiatives has produced significant proposals for social and political development which

charges religious actors and communities with an important role in building more inclusive societies in the region.

The first half of the essay places the growth of interreligious engagement strategies within the larger development of debates in political science and philosophy about the global crisis of liberalism and its implications for the "return" of religion to global politics. In order to do so, it critically reviews the work of Samuel Huntington and Jürgen Habermas, two seminal scholars whose scholarly trajectories personify larger trends within the field of religion and politics and connects them to the adoption of new religious engagement strategies by policymakers seeking to mobilize international action on a range of development goals. The second half of the essay then considers the specific form that interreligious engagement efforts have taken in the Middle East, the political concepts which have been developed within them, and the extent to which they respond to the crises described in the first half of the essay. It introduces three levels of analysis in order to account for the multiple (and sometimes contradictory) forces driving forward these initiatives, which include (1) geopolitical interests; (2) ideational changes; and (3) religious and social practices. In reflecting on these developments the paper seeks to better decipher the political meaning of recent interreligious initiatives as well as the religiously rooted models of political development and international cooperation that they propose.

2 The Return of Religion to International Affairs

This section revisits the work of Samuel Huntington and Jürgen Habermas to reflect on the return-of-religion trend within political science and its importance for the construction of a religious engagement strategy in international politics. Huntington's analysis of the growing role of religion in global conflict and Habermas' scholarly innovations on the role of religion in the public sphere were seminal for the religious turn in political science. Although in very different ways, both scholars linked their recognition of what was then an unexpected growth of religion in global politics to what both deemed to be the limits of liberalism which had been laid bare by turn-of-the-century international and domestic politics. For Habermas, liberalism as a system of thought and governance had entered a period of crisis, one which had torn open space for new kinds of religious interventions in domestic politics. For Huntington, global resistance to the West offered evidence of the limits of liberalism's claims to universality and indicated new roles that religiously

identified civilizations were assuming as globalization transformed the liberal world order.

Reflection on these limits of liberalism led both scholars to incorporate religious considerations more directly into their scholarship and adopt what Habermas would describe as a post-secular framework of analysis. This framework has been influential both for the development of the subfield of religion and politics and for the new policy approach adopted by states and international organizations toward religious actors and communities over the last twenty years. The development of international engagement initiatives, in this light, can be usefully seen to be responding to and evolving alongside this conceptual framework.

2.1 *Religion and the Limits of the Liberal World Order*

Samuel Huntington's work represents something of a cornerstone for scholarship on religion in international relations. Although not particularly central to his earlier, influential work on political modernization in the late 1960s (see, for example, Huntington 1968), religion increasingly took center stage in his analysis of the changing global order in the 1990s (Huntington 1991, 1993, 1996). Huntington's religious-cultural shift became most apparent in his (in)famous 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?" The article and subsequent book would inspire twenty-five years of criticism, backlash, and policymaking which continue to influence scholarship in the discipline today.[1]

Huntington could be thought of as making at least two major claims in his Clash of Civilizations thesis, both about the emerging role of religion in global politics. His first claim was that the transnational forces set in motion by accelerated processes of globalization had sparked a crisis in the international order of nation-states. Huntington understood the world system as transitioning away from an international order dominated by single nation-states and toward one made up of larger aggregate civilizational units. Religiously identified civilizations, he argued, not nation-states, would determine the lines of conflict and cooperation in twenty-first century global politics.

Huntington's second claim, related to the first, was that these religiously identified civilizations had built up, over a period of centuries, incommensurable systems for organizing their internal political and social orders. These mutually

1 For recent reviews of the ongoing relevance of Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis a quarter century later see Orsi (2018) and Haynes (2019). By one crude metric, Google Scholar's citation count puts Huntington's 1993 article at 45,000 citations (at the end of the year 2022). For comparison, Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis, set out in his 1992 book, has less than 30,000 citations.

exclusive modes of political organization, in turn, were largely codified in macro-religious practices, identities, and theologies. As a result, Huntington was skeptical about the claims of universality which Enlightenment thinkers had attached to liberal democracy. For Huntington, liberal democracy did not represent a universal regime type, but a specific political product of the West which reflected its particular Judeo-Christian (and largely Protestant) history and values. This meant that other civilizational blocs, including what he labeled the Eastern Orthodox, Islamic, and Confucian civilizations, were likely to reject liberal democracy over the long run as a foreign cultural imposition. For Huntington, liberal democratic ideas and practices did not reflect the history or scriptures of these civilizations. As a result, he argued that it was improbable that sustained international cooperation or a liberal international order could be built on the basis of shared democratic values.

It is interesting to recall how bold Huntington's claim was. In 1993 he was writing at the peak of global democratic expansion and what appeared to many as the triumph of Enlightenment modernity ideals that went along with it, as captured in Fukuyama's End of History thesis. Fukuyama had predicted the end of large-scale conflict on the basis of universally adopted, rational-legal, liberal principles. Precisely at a moment of peak liberal expansion, therefore, Huntington called into question both the universality and the inevitability of liberal democracy as a political project. Rather than creating a world characterized by liberal cooperation among democratic nation-states, Huntington saw globalization as acerbating religious-political differences among civilizations and making global conflict between them more likely.

Huntington's thesis would attract virulent, sustained debate, including over the inevitability of international conflict which he predicted (Fox 2002; Norris and Inglehart 2011) and the rigid, Western-centric nature of the civilizational lines which he drew (Said 2001). At the same time, Huntington's bold thesis – that global religious cultures greatly mattered for international politics – stuck. A new generation of international relations scholars would build on Huntington's analysis in innovative and divergent ways, seeing it as opening myriad global political possibilities. In particular, a number of scholars would draw on more flexible and evolving conceptualizations of civilization to mine the potential of global religious traditions to construct more cosmopolitan and egalitarian political orders, as well as strengthen international cooperation and dialogue (Katzenstein 2009; Mavelli and Petito 2012; Barbato 2012; Thomas 2005). As later sections will argue, the work of these scholars advised policymakers to directly engage religious actors and communities, and they recommended a series of actions they could take to that end.

2.2 *The Crisis of Liberalism and Religion in the Public Sphere*

Although Huntington is often considered to be one of the first mainstream scholars of political science to bring religion back into the analysis of global politics, he was certainly not alone in diagnosing troubled waters ahead for liberal democracy. In fact, as events in the 1990s progressed, culminating in the tragedy of 9/11 and the subsequent American wars in the Middle East, an increasing number of political philosophers turned their attention to what could be described as a crisis of liberal democracy from within. Liberal democracy, they argued, had not simply come up against the limits of its international expansion, but it also actively risked cracking from within its own spheres. As with Huntington, this growing reflection about the limits of liberalism would open new space for thinking about public religious engagement within democratic societies.

For the study of religion and politics in the field of political philosophy this critique has been aptly personified in the evolution of Jürgen Habermas' positions on religion and the public sphere. Habermas had built his career as a late Enlightenment rationalist who had largely understood religion as a problem for the public sphere and for processes of democratic deliberation which were made within it. And yet, Habermas dramatically shifted this position in response to social and political changes over the early 2000s. Habermas had become especially worried about the decline of citizen engagement in European politics and the lack of citizen motivation to participate in democratic decision-making processes. Channeling German political theorists including Carl Schmitt and Ernst Böckenförde, he fretted that the pre-political moral bonds which had contributed to an actively practiced civic solidarity in Germany (as elsewhere in Europe) had eroded in dangerous ways. Such erosion fueled a European-wide political crisis characterized by patterns of social fragmentation and individual isolation which made the practice of democracy difficult to sustain. As Habermas wrote,

> What is at issue is the question of how – in light of the diversity of our cultural ways of life, of the pluralism of our worldviews and religious convictions – we want to understand ourselves as citizens of the Federal Republic [*Bundesrepublik*] as well as Europeans. Certainly, looking back historically, a common religious background, a common language, and most of all, a newly awakened national consciousness were conducive to the emergence of a highly abstract civic solidarity. But republican sentiments have, in the meantime, largely broken away from these prepolitical anchorings – that we are not prepared to die "for nice" is simply no longer an objection to a European constitution. (Habermas 2006, 254)

Habermas, thus, came to the conclusion that Western liberal democracy was in trouble and that this crisis was the result of increased levels of individual political apathy, declining levels of political solidarity, and weakening attachments to the common good. Although it had produced very "nice" political structures like the EU, Habermas argued that its institutional reliance on secular and scientific reasoning processes had not come up with wholly compelling answers to the new political challenges facing Europe – from bio-ethics to immigration, economic decline, and the ecological crisis – nor had it been capable of sparking collective social mobilization in response to them.

In making these observations, Habermas argued that the moral commitments and values which were in decline in Europe, especially around social solidarity, were the sorts of commitments and values that religion was particularly good at generating in citizens. Therefore, rather than advocating for the removal of religion from the public sphere (as an earlier generation of political philosophers had supported, himself included), Habermas now appeared to argue that liberal democracy needed religion (Rosa 2024), at least on some level, to make it through its current crisis. As he wrote in his dialogue with the future Pope Benedict XVI in 2004,

> Thus, the theorem that only a religious orientation toward a transcendental reference point could help a remorseful modernity out of its impasse again finds resonance today. (Habermas 2006, 256)

In making this shift, it should be observed, Habermas did not give up on the universality of liberal democracy, nor did he seek to minimize the risks that public religious forces, unfettered, posed to it. In this he has remained committed to a model of rational, consensus decision-making within a (mostly) secular state. To clarify his position, Habermas theorized that only *certain* kinds of religious engagement were possible in the democratic public sphere, namely, by those religious forces whose "public consciousness" had been sufficiently modernized. Religious mentalities in the West, Habermas thought, had undergone an important process of transformation as they had evolved alongside the Western political tradition. For Habermas, this transformation included a shift away from dogmatic religious authority and thinking and toward forms of religious reasoning and religiosity that placed greater emphasis on individual freedom and choice; that were more humble about truth claims; and more open to "mutual learning" and correction by others. These changes made it possible to speak about democratic religious reasoning as opposed to (simply and always) authoritarian religious reasoning, and democratic public religious

engagement as opposed to authoritarian public religious engagement. As Habermas wrote,

> In post-secular society, the realization that "the modernization of public consciousness" takes hold of and reflexively alters religious as well as secular mentalities in staggered phases is gaining acceptance. If together they understand the secularization of society to be a complementary learning process, both sides can, for cognitive reasons, then take seriously each other's contributions to controversial themes in the public sphere. (2006, 258)

Habermas' understanding of the modernization of religious public consciousness, therefore, assumes the existence of deep sociological and ideational changes over a lengthy period of time, changes which enabled the construction of new forms of religious democratic politics, or what Miguel Vatter (2021) has termed as the construction of a political theology of democracy.

In European political history, we might especially associate this development with the tradition of Christian humanism and, particularly, the work of Jacques Maritain, whom Vatter and others continue to return to as a key intellectual source animating the tradition of Christian democracy (Driessen 2014, 2023; Moyn 2015; Taylor 2020; Invernizzi-Accetti 2019). Christian democracy concretely manifested the possibility that a third way existed between the ends of secular liberalism and traditional authoritarian religious politics. It anticipated the post-secular by announcing the arrival of a democratic religious modernity which was capable of orienting both domestic and international politics in social contexts marked by pluralism. The fertile period of Catholic modernity which stretches from the earliest experiences of Christian democracy (at the level of domestic politics) to the postwar construction of the European Union (at the level of regional politics), to the theological synthesis of the Second Vatican Council (at the level of political theology), and to the global Catholic wave of democracy (at the international level of politics) all give a sense of the internal/external dynamism wrapped up in the making of this new religious synthesis. In part it was the persistence of these religious dynamics in favor of democracy construction through the post-Cold War period which influenced Habermas and other political philosophers to rethink the role of religion in the public sphere in the early 2000s.

Taken together, the analyses of Habermas and Huntington about the limits of liberalism in the early twenty-first century express the major concerns animating post-secular approaches in contemporary scholarship and policymaking. This includes the wide range of geopolitical and security worries

associated with religion in global politics, as Huntington's work indicated. It also includes the search for new founts and forms of social solidarity that could motivate stronger cooperation for the common good in domestic as well as international politics, as Habermas' work indicated. Critically, both analyses came to be read as advocating for states and international organizations to engage religious communities abroad and at home.

3 Engaging Religious Communities

That was the takeaway of an influential report published in 2010 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, entitled *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy* (Appleby, Cizik, and Wright 2010). While the report was not the first to use the term "religious engagement," its wide circulation, influence, and arguments can be seen as capturing a moment in time when the term began to describe a cohesive new religious approach within global policymaking. Prior usages of the term included a 2007 Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) report on engaging religion in conflict situations,[2] a World Bank report from the same year on engaging religion in development assistance,[3] as well as a 2008 United Nations Population Fund report about engaging faith-based organizations on a range of development goals.[4] The reports name a number of overlapping consultants and scholars in their credits, including Scott Appleby, Katherine Marshall, Azza Karam, Thomas Farr, Douglas Johnston, David Saperstein, Karin von Hippel, and others, all of whom might be considered as some of the pioneers of the policy school of religious engagement.[5]

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs report outlined the religious engagement approach in several ways. First, it formalized the critique of the long-held tendency in Western policymaking circles to ignore religious dynamics and religious communities on account of secular political biases (see also Haynes 2018). Second, channeling insights from both Huntington and Habermas, the report linked the need to engage religious communities abroad with the need to engage religious communities at home. Thus, the report

2 Entitled *Mixed Blessings: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict-Prone Settings*.

3 Entitled *Development and Faith: Where Mind, Heart, and Soul Work Together*.

4 Entitled *Lessons from a Legacy of Engaging Faith-based Organizations*.

5 Ferrara and Petito (2016); Petito and Thomas (2015); Petito (2020); Mandaville and Seiple (2021); Petito, Daou, and Driessen (2021); Mandaville and Silvestri (2015); Mandaville (2017); Karam (2015, 2016); and Marshall (2021) can all be seen as further developments in this vein. For a history of this trend in US foreign policymaking, see Bettiza (2019).

encouraged governments to better partner with religious communities internationally in order to avoid religious conflicts and a clash of civilizations (i.e., Huntington's concerns). At the same time the report affirmed the potential for religious communities to restore/construct democratic development from within domestic politics (i.e., Habermas' concerns). The report described its approach to religion in the following terms:

> Religion should not be viewed only as a problem, but also as a source of creativity, inspiration, and commitment to human flourishing that can and often does provide enormous opportunities. (Appleby, Cizik, and Wright 2010, 8)

The report, thus, brought new attention to the varied capacities of religious forces in multiple spheres of international action and political development. Beyond religion's importance for geopolitics, the report embraced a dialogue-among-religions approach which sought to foster more efficient and regular partnerships between religious communities and policymakers on questions of sustainable development, conflict resolution, common humanitarian efforts, political stability, and solidarity. It made numerous recommendations as to how the United States government could achieve this, and urged the United States, among other things, to:

- "Establish religious engagement within the government bureaucracy" (Appleby, Cizik, and Wright 2010, 9).
- "Provide mandatory training for government officials on the role of religion in world affairs" (Ibid., 10).
- "Engage on the societal level, not just the governmental or diplomatic level" (Ibid., 11).
- "Embrace a comprehensive approach to democracy promotion and human rights in order to accommodate the legitimate aspirations of religious communities" (Ibid., 12).[6]
- "Work with multilateral organizations – for example, the United Nations, UN agencies, the World Bank, the G-20, and the G-8 – to expand and deepen their engagement with religious actors" (Ibid., 13).

In terms of timing, the Chicago Council report, along with the CSIS, World Bank and UN reports, also coincide with the concrete institutionalization of these ideas. In the years surrounding their publications, numerous international

6 Notably, in a line that many interpreted as referencing religiously inspired political parties in the Middle East, the report also recommended that the US should "tackle extremism by engaging religious political parties, under certain conditions, even if they may oppose U.S. foreign policy" (Appleby, Cizik, and Wright 2010, 69).

organizations and foreign ministries across the globe set up new offices and programs specifically mandated to build institutional partnerships with diverse religious communities. The United States State Department, for example, appointed a new Special Envoy to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (2008), a Special Representative to Muslim Communities abroad (2009), and a Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs (2013). Religious literacy training became more commonplace at the US State department, at European diplomatic agencies like the European External Action Services, and at various European foreign ministries as well at the United Nations, which created an Inter-agency Taskforce on Engaging Faith-based Actors for Sustainable Development (2010). Finally, a swath of offices for coordinating partnerships with religious communities or promoting interreligious dialogue and religious freedom were established in foreign ministries and international organizations across the globe throughout the decade, from the UN[7] to Indonesia[8] and the UAE.[9] Engaging religious communities abroad, in other words, became a global ministerial trend.

4 Interreligious Engagement in the Middle East

The last sections outlined the development of a post-secular perspective in the field of international politics which would influence the construction of new institutions for engaging with religious communities in the realm of foreign policy. This section turns its attention to the institutionalization of this religious engagement perspective in the Middle East through the development of a series of major interreligious initiatives sponsored by states in the region, often through the offices of their foreign ministries. These initiatives, it could be argued, were designed to respond to concerns raised by Huntington and Habermas about the role of religion in the public sphere and contemporary global politics, as well as to guide political and religious developments within the region. The institutionalization of these initiatives, therefore, is emblematic of the broader international trend to engage religious communities, including on account of Western security concerns (of the sort formulated by Huntington) that implicated states in the Middle East. The development

7 In addition to the United Nations Inter-agency Taskforce on Engaging Faith-based Actors for Sustainable Development (est. 2010), the UN has established, among others, a Faith for Rights (2012) and Faith for Earth (2008) program within the UN's Human Rights Office and Environment Programme, respectively.

8 Through the creation of diplomatic positions like the Special Envoy of the President for Interfaith Dialogue (est. 2017).

9 Through its creation of a Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence (est. 2016).

of interreligious initiatives can be read in this light as part of the response by states in the region to these concerns. At the same time these initiatives were also developed within the context of specific and evolving domestic challenges which the initiatives were also built to respond to.

As such, and as hinted throughout the sections above, these initiatives contain multiple political and religious valences as well as multiple political and religious audiences. In recent work, I have employed three levels of analysis to sort out the multidimensionality of these dynamics (Driessen 2023). A first level of analysis considers the dynamics of state power and geopolitics framing the growth of these initiatives; a second level of analysis considers the ideational and theological dynamics influencing the content of these initiatives; and a third level of analysis considers the social dynamics surrounding these initiatives and the religious changes from below which they attempt to respond to.

All three of these levels were on clear display in the 2019 signing ceremony of the Declaration on Human Fraternity[10] between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed al Tayeb, an event which was formally hosted by (then) Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the UAE in Abu Dhabi. In Arabic media coverage of the event, bin Zayed, often known by his initials of MBZ, was featured prominently, and on what appeared to be equal or near-equal footing with the two religious leaders. In many of the photos of the signing ceremony, in fact, bin Zayed seems to be signing a document alongside Pope Francis and the Grand Imam (who are, however, the only two official signatories to the document). Various political commentators have read these MBZ-centric images through a geopolitical analysis of the story, one in which the host of the event, the UAE, essentially holds the document hostage to its own devices, namely, to increase the religious and political legitimacy of its regime.[11] In Vatican coverage of the event, on the other hand, and in other religious media reporting on it, MBZ's image was not central at all. Rather, photos of the embrace of the Pope and the Grand Imam took center stage, speaking a common religious message to religious believers and conveying a message of religious authority to them.

In many political science accounts of interreligious initiatives in the Middle East, the geopolitical story dominates analysis of its political significance. While understanding the strategic logic of interreligious dialogue is important,

10 Formally entitled the *Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*.

11 Following Derrida's (2000) articulation of the host/hostage dilemma in his reflections on hospitality, we may remark that in the action of being hosted by the Crown Prince, Pope Francis and Ahmed al Tayeb also held MBZ hostage to their own designs, namely, presumably, to convey an interreligious message of human fraternity to him and the world.

incorporating an ideational and sociological perspective into the analysis offers a more comprehensive portrait of these initiatives and places the growth of interreligious engagement in the region within larger processes of global religious change. Seen from this perspective, the recent evolution of dialogue in the Middle East is not unique to Islam, or merely the result of strategic interests, but rather can be interpreted as part of a global religious development in response to globally experienced dynamics of modernity (Driessen 2023). The following sections briefly outline these three layers of power, ideas, and social change at work in the growth of recent interreligious engagement initiatives in the region and how they help us better decipher the religious and political meaning of these initiatives.

4.1 *The Geopolitics of Interreligious Dialogue in the Middle East*

A number of scholars have adopted a strategic lens to analyze the growth of interreligious engagement initiatives in the region (Wolff 2017, Fahy 2018). In doing so, these scholars have focused attention on the consequential impact of security interests which have led states to invest in interreligious engagement schemes and downplayed their religious or social meaning. In this analysis, Mohammed bin Zayed, not the Pope or the Grand Imam, is the most important character in the story. These scholars have named a number of strategic interests animating the growth of interreligious engagement in the region, including the Jordanian-led Amman Message and A Common Word projects in 2004 and 2007 (Wolff 2017; Markiewicz 2018), the construction of the Doha International Center for Interfaith Dialogue in 2007 (Fahy 2018), the Saudi Arabian-led King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID) in 2012, as well as the Marrakesh Declaration in 2016, the Al Azhar Declarations of 2012 and 2017 (Fahmi 2021), and the Human Fraternity Document in 2019 (Barbato 2020).

In all of these cases, scholars have understood states as investing in interreligious engagement as part of an effort to rebrand Islam in the eyes of the West, particularly following the events of 9/11 in the early 2000s and the rise of the Islamic State in the 2010s. States were read as using interreligious efforts throughout these periods, under the aegis of their foreign ministries, to reassure Western audiences of their continued reliability and relevance as both security and financial partners. States were also seen as using interreligious initiatives to rebuild religious authority toward the purposes of the state, particularly in a post-Arab Spring political context, and to manage or counteract perceived threats of religious challengers to political control from Islamist political parties like the Muslim Brotherhood and from armed revolutionary Islamist groups like the Islamic State. In this context, states sought to reassert

control over domestic religious markets and champion moderate religious authorities to do so (Laurence 2021), including through interreligious declarations by high-level religious leaders against the use of religious violence, as in the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration[12] or the 2014 "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi."[13] Both declarations sought to delegitimize the religious rhetoric employed by the Islamic State to justify its violence against religious minorities and fellow Muslim citizens. Finally, states also appeared to be employing interreligious engagement initiatives to gain religious soft power and religious leadership as leverage in regional political competition (Mandaville and Hamid 2018).

This geopolitical analysis of interreligious engagement is helpful in many ways. By foregrounding national and regional interests, it raises important questions about the transfer of political power which might occur through these initiatives, both between and from religious authorities to state authorities. It also places the growth of these initiatives within the broader framework of state development within the region in terms of both cooperation and competition with rivals. As Hurd (2015) has argued, state sponsorship of religious initiatives has often elevated big "R" official religion over small "r" lived religion, extending political and religious authority to particular religious elites and the ideas they define as orthodox.

Finally, this first layer of analysis also highlights the challenges of cooptation which face interreligious engagement efforts that seek to work with the state. The case of Turkey, in this sense, has become a cautionary tale within this political analysis of interreligious engagement. For a number of years in the early 2000s, Turkey was a global leader, if not *the* global leader, of investing in state-sponsored interreligious dialogue efforts (Kayaoğlu 2012, 2015). This was particularly apparent in the ruling AKP party's close alliance with the Gülen community, which was seen as a religious avatar for the new kind of Muslim democratic synthesis which the AKP seemed to represent (Nasr 2005), and which was closely linked to the community's support of interreligious dialogue programs both nationally and internationally. Over time, the Turkish state, led by President Erdogan and the AKP, came to see interreligious dialogue as a hostile site that foreign powers instrumentalized for their own interests. Following the 2016 coup attempt and an acrimonious split with the movement, Erdogan redefined the Gülen community as a terrorist organization and shut down support for dialogue activity through its Ministry of Religious Affairs, i.e., the Diyanet (Kayaoğlu 2015; Yilmaz and Barry 2018).

12 Formally entitled *On the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim-Majority Communities*.

13 Formally entitled "Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi and to the Fighters and Followers of the Self-Declared 'Islamic State.'"

For a number of scholars writing within this perspective, the geopolitical concerns highlighted in this analysis make interreligious engagement religiously suspect as a project and too easily tarnished by the authoritarian rulers who support it for their own ends. Although they share an emphasis on the security concerns animating Huntington's analysis, these scholars tend to see sovereign states rather than religious civilizations as determining the shape, context, and use over time of dialogue initiatives. It is worth observing here that from an interreligious engagement perspective, building cooperative partnerships with the state is essential to its aims and purposes. The very idea of interreligious engagement is predicated on a perceived need for religious and political leaders to coordinate efforts in order to reduce religious violence or mobilize support for humanitarian aid. As a result, as long as this perception remains, some of the risks highlighted by the scholars above may remain inevitable.

4.2 *Toward a Political Theology of Interreligious Engagement*

At the level of political theory, a number of scholars of religious studies, noting the dynamic growth in dialogue activity in the Middle East over the last twenty years, in addition to the substantive theological content of the declarations it has produced, have referred to this period as approaching an "Islamic Vatican II" (Swidler 2013). In this analysis, Francis and Al Tayeb, not the states that host them, are the protagonists of the story.

Such a direct comparison between this current period of Muslim-led dialogue declarations and that of the Second Vatican Council is problematic for a number of reasons. It glides over critical differences between Islam and Catholicism (or Christianity more broadly) as well as the theological and political frameworks in which they have operated over the centuries. It could be seen as part of ongoing attempts to retrofit Islam to the Christian experience, blotting out differentials and trying to contain the Islamic experience within a Christian model of history. At the same time, at least in this case, there are useful elements to the parallel. Critically, the comparison recognizes that both sets of declarations (Vatican II and recent Muslim-led dialogue declarations) are linked together within the broader story of modernization, and to the common attempts by religious traditions and authorities to develop new readings of freedom, citizenship, and pluralism from within their religious matrices. At the very least, comparing the contemporary period of interreligious growth in the Middle East to the events of the Second Vatican Council highlights similarly dense periods of religious innovation and connects them to other important waves of religious-political reform.

Conceptually speaking, these developments can especially be seen in the creative adoption of ideas like inclusive citizenship and human fraternity, both of which were highlighted in the Human Fraternity Document but were important for other major recent documents in the region as well, including the 2016 Marrakesh Declaration and the 2012 and 2017 Al Azhar declarations on freedom and citizenship.

4.2.1 Inclusive Citizenship and Human Fraternity

Inclusive citizenship, as it is often used in interreligious discourse in the region, reaffirms basic commitments to citizen rights and liberties, but it also places particular attention on cultural and religious diversity and seeks the more active inclusion and participation of the various religious and social "others" in public life (Petito, Daou, and Driessen 2021; Driessen 2023).

Ideas of inclusive citizenship and support for more active citizen participation in states and societies across the Middle East have become central to recent interreligious narratives in the region.[14] Strikingly, inclusive citizenship has often been posed as a solution to religious crises in the Middle East. The Marrakesh Declaration, for example, ends by issuing a

> Call upon Muslim scholars and intellectuals around the world to develop a jurisprudence of the concept of "citizenship" which is inclusive of diverse groups. Such jurisprudence shall be rooted in Islamic tradition and principles and mindful of global changes. (Marrakesh Declaration 2016)

In part, this shift represents an evolution in the response of religious authorities to interrelated political and religious crises in the region. Faced with

14 And beyond the region as well. The Humanitarian Islam movement in Indonesia represents an important example in this regard, one which draws on Indonesia's constitutional support of pluralism and inclusive citizenship and links it to human fraternity and interreligious dialogue from within an Islamic framework (Abbas 2021; Kersten 2015; Lohlker and Ivanyi 2023; Hefner 2023; Driessen 2022). A number of scholars have linked the Humanitarian Islam movement and support for religious pluralism to the Indonesian state's official Pancasila ideology, but also to the important *reformasi* period of religious and political reform in which leading religious actors and intellectuals in Indonesia came to embrace democracy, dialogue, and citizenship and play a vital role in Indonesia's democratization process in the late 1990s (Hefner 2023; Kersten 2015). Abdurrahman Wahid, a leading figure of the time who was chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama and became President of Indonesia in 1999, embodied and articulated many of these ideas and asked that on his tomb be inscribed the words, "Here Lies a Humanist." Scholars have also noted the longer-run international engagement of some Indonesia activists in interreligious dialogue since the post-war period (Abbas 2021).

the question of violence against religious minorities, of religious and political instability, of the Arab Spring, and of religiously identified conflict, the strengthening of citizen rights and support for citizenship formation has been increasingly posed as the answer. In the Marrakesh Declaration, as in other recent documents emanating from the region, inclusive citizenship is seen to protect the dignity and freedom endowed by God to all human beings. As such, developing a stronger practice and understanding of citizenship becomes a way to respond to these crises, both religious and political, and work toward a durable peace. Critically, in these documents, inclusive citizenship is also understood to be a political ideal which is coherent with and might lead to religious flourishing and religious renewal.

For its part, as a concept, human fraternity broadens this understanding of religion in the public sphere by holding up religious traditions and communities as sources of solidarity for more inclusive political societies, as the religious commitments or duties that individuals owe to others as fellow human beings and for the common good. In Francis and Tayeb's formulation of human fraternity, they might be seen to be reclaiming a classic, public function of religion in society, namely, that of mobilizing social solidarity, as Habermas pled for religious forces to do in Europe. In the Human Fraternity Document, religious communities are seen as providing a moral base from which to respond to the challenges of pluralism, fragmentation, and isolation through their capacity to motivate solidarity beyond the individual or the sect. While the document sees pluralism as religiously desirable, as "willed by God in his wisdom," it simultaneously deplores social fragmentation and isolation, which it associates with individualism. As Francis and al Tayeb write,

> This Declaration … believes firmly that among the most important causes of the crises of the modern world are a desensitized human conscience, a distancing from religious values and a prevailing individualism accompanied by materialistic philosophies that deify the human person and introduce worldly and material values in place of supreme and transcendental principles. (Human Fraternity Document 2019)

For al Tayeb and Francis, therefore, the political crises created by liberal modernity require human fraternity, and human fraternity, in turn, requires spiritual renewal. Political renewal, in other words, requires religious renewal.

Given the centrality of "religious awakening" in the declaration, and its positive vision of religious activity in global modernity, a number of scholars have read the Human Fraternity Document as reflecting a confidently post-secular approach to global politics (Barbato 2020). The document seems to claim Habermas' "theorem" for its own, namely that only a religious orientation can

help a "remorseful modernity out of its impasse." Such an approach has indeed found resonance for a range of religious leaders, public intellectuals, and policymakers in the Middle East. Perhaps not surprisingly, the UAE awarded Habermas with their prestigious Sheikh Zayed Book Award in 2021 which recognized him as the "cultural personality of the year." Habermas' initial acceptance and then about-face on the award (which he ultimately declined to receive) has illustrated some of the mutual incomprehension surrounding his conceptualization of post-secularism. Clearly, as reflected in the Human Fraternity Document, a number of religious leaders in the Middle East have come to understand their public action within an ideal of post-secularism, one which relies on a religious society to rebuild virtues of political participation, cooperation, and mutual responsibility. Clearly, Habermas came to see that the public sphere in the UAE was insufficiently protective of the political rights and freedoms which could enable participation and cooperation among citizens in the first place.

4.3 *Social Bases for Interreligious Engagement*

Finally, it is important to recognize the social bases framing interreligious engagement initiatives in the region. The first section already began to note a correlation between the growth of interreligious dialogue initiatives and the evolution of political events in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. As a number of regimes fell under the pressure of mass-based movements in the early 2010s, religious and political leaders sought ways to respond to the emerging social aspirations and religious concerns which these movements expressed.

Multiple surveys from that time period (Driessen 2014, 2018; Ciftci 2010; Tessler, Jamal, and Robbins 2012) indicated strong support within societies across the Middle East and North Africa for some combination of democratic governance and religious piety, what Bayat (2013) referred to as the emergent post-Islamist sensibility in the region, one that simultaneously sought "religiosity and rights, faith and freedom." Other scholars saw this data as indicating support for some form of Muslim democracy (Nasr 2005; Ghannouchi 2013; Driessen 2018). The increasing attention within interreligious engagement initiatives to questions of citizenship rights and participation, to religious freedom and pluralism, and to social solidarity and cohesion must be read within this broader social context. Theological development in support of citizenship, religious freedom, and pluralism in the region, at both official and scholarly levels, is linked to these shifting preferences within society and a generalized support for more political and social rights and freedoms.

The combination of these multiple impulses helps explain the shift in content over time in interreligious initiatives, which have moved from a more defensive initial position, one which was emergency driven and primarily

focused on disassociating religion from violence and conflicts, to an increasingly positive and confident position which has outlined a more comprehensive proposal for political development. The 2016 Marrakesh Declaration, the 2012 and 2017 al Azhar Declarations, and the 2019 Human Fraternity Document are particularly emblematic in this regard. It is interesting to note the reversal inherent in this shift. In a moment of religious crisis, when religious leaders were being accused of facilitating religious conflict and violence, religious and interreligious leaders have responded, over time, with the construction of thicker proposals for development and examples of multireligious collaboration which have inspired policy work in the region. The embrace between the Grand Imam al Tayeb and Pope Francis in 2019, and the positive global echo it sounded, captures this reversal well.

5 Conclusion

The international system appears to have entered into an extended period of religious and political turmoil. Across the globe, there is a deepening sense that the liberal model of politics is in crisis, both domestically and internationally (Deenen 2019). With respect to global Christianity, and perhaps especially global Catholicism, this crisis has reopened old arguments about the very desirability of religious modernity and has led to the recuperation of intransigent positions and the emergence of strong forms of Christian nationalism that have been built upon them (Driessen 2021, Taylor 2020).

In the Muslim majority world, it is not clear what political model will emerge triumphant in the coming years, nor what lessons states and religious leaders will learn from this present round of conflict, or the depths of Western decadence which they interpret in this moment.[15] To what extent will an open political project defined by democracy, citizenship, and freedom be specifically associated with the current global crisis and be rejected as a result? To what extent will authoritarian regimes assume more potent levers of control over religious authority as part of any such reaction?

All of this could be seen as making more urgent the further development of interreligious engagement as a model, especially for the way in which it holds out an alternative pathway and response. As Huntington and Habermas anticipated, religion has returned to global politics, carrying with it the potential to shape the nature of international conflict and peace. In this moment of global and domestic political crisis, interreligious engagement initiatives have offered

15 On the theme of conservative religious nationalism as a post-secular response to Western decadence, see, among others, Stoeckl and Uzlaner (2022).

multireligious resources to support a paradigm of political development centered on ideas of freedom and pluralism, in partnership with religious communities, and advocating religious renewal and religious social responsibility. These initiatives, in other words, model how religious forces might sustain international cooperation and help mobilize societies toward human fraternity and solidarity from better-anchored moorings.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

Many thanks to Fadi Daou and all of the participants of the 2022 University of Geneva international conference on Religious Engagement in Global Affairs for their comments and feedback on this article.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 180–199

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The Theological Foundations of Religious Engagement in Global Affairs. A Protestant Perspective

Research Article

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This article presents the theological foundations for "religious engagement" from the perspective of Protestant theology. When Protestant churches engage on a global level, this is not an additional activity, but an expression of their ecclesial existence. The hope for the Kingdom of God and the conviction that humanity is created as imago dei motivate Protestant churches to engage in development cooperation. After presenting the theological foundations, the article gives examples from the work of the Lutheran World Federation and describes the challenges associated with "religious engagement": the Christian hope for the world must be expressed in a contemporary way and the recognition of theological motives by non-religious actors is not always given. The appreciation of "citizenship" on a theological and political level could promote mutual understanding.

Keywords

protestant theology – religious engagement – development cooperation – Kingdom of God – imago dei – Lutheran World Federation – hope – citizenship – public theology

1 Introduction

The term "religious engagement" has been used for several years to describe the involvement of religious communities in global affairs (Marshall 2021, 42). The purpose of this contribution is to present the theological foundations of religious engagement from a Christian perspective. As there is a considerable diversity of denominations in Christianity, it is necessary to clarify from the outset what the special focus of our presentation is. The reflections that follow are made from a Protestant perspective and therefore we will use literature from authors of the Protestant tradition to present the theological motives for religious engagement. The "religious engagement" we are talking about relates primarily to the activities of the Protestant community in the field of development cooperation.

"Development" became a common goal for actors with different ideological backgrounds from the 20th century, more precisely from the 1960s, onward, and in addition to state actors many religious initiatives became involved in this field. But the presence of different actors does not automatically mean cooperation between them. It has taken a long time for religious communities to be recognised at the international level as partners in implementing political, social and economic goals and take part in the development programmes of the United Nations (UN). It was not until the beginning of the 2000s with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (United Nations 2015a) and even more so with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015b), in which religious actors were directly involved, that the importance of religious non-governmental organisations (or RNGOs) for global affairs became more visible (Haynes 2021, 65). After decades of only marginal initiatives to join forces, religious partners belonging to a variety of religious communities have now become important partners for secular, globally active organisations. This is not least due to their specific social function in a world where according to the findings of the Pew Research Centre (2012) more than 80 per cent of all human beings have a religious affiliation.

In a first step, we will analyse a sample of positions in order to present the motives of religious engagement from a Protestant point of view. Although we will limit ourselves to Christian theology, and to a Protestant perspective by considering the contributions of Reformed, Lutheran and Anglican theologians, we are well aware that religious engagement in global affairs is by no means restricted to actors from this background. However, the contribution of Protestant organisations to international development cooperation is considerable and justifies our special interest in the theological reflections of this tradition. After the theological foundations, we will give some examples

from practice through a closer look at the activities of the Lutheran World Federation. As we will see, "religious engagement" alongside non-religious actors also changes the theology of the Christian community. The paper attempts as far as possible to offer an "inside view" of the theological positions of Protestant churches. Staring from this "inside view", we will also try to answer the question to what extent such theological foundations are recognised by their non-religious partners.

2 Religious Engagement from a Protestant Perspective

2.1 *The Fourfold Mission of the Christian Church*[1]

When we speak of the theological basis for religious engagement in political and economic affairs, our starting point must be the theological framework according to which the Christian church orients its existence. When the Christian church reflects on its place in the world and its mission, it is becoming a question of *ecclesiology*, the doctrine of the church. From a Protestant perspective, this doctrine is not concerned with the structure of a single uniform institution and hierarchy, but with the Christian community and the various institutional forms it takes in the world. According to Christian understanding, there is no area of life that is beyond God's purposes and so the whole of life comes under the mandate of service to and worshipping God. Within this one service, we can distinguish four different commissions to the Christian community, traditionally referred to by their Greek names as *leiturgia, martyria, diakonia* and *koinonia* (Hüffmeier 1996, 104–108).

Leiturgia refers to worshipping God liturgically. As a commission of the Christian community, it refers to the church's spiritual character: communion with God is at the centre of the Christian community as the spiritual source for all its internal and external activities. By celebrating, listening to God's Word and sharing the sacraments, the Christian community experiences the renewal of this liberating communion with God and receives comfort and encouragement.

Martyria refers to the mission of the Christian community to bear witness of the Christian faith to the world. But such witness is not limited to evangelisation in the form of a doctrinal discourse. Rather it stands for existential attitude. The testimony of faith is never to be separated from a person's or the

1 Our theological considerations in this paragraph are based on Hüffmeier, Wilhelm, ed. 1996. *Die Kirche Jesu Christi / The Church of Jesus Christ: Der reformatorische Beitrag zum ökumenischen Dialog über die kirchliche Einheit.* Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck.

community of believers' ethical activity. The mission of martyria is therefore also the call to act in such a way that the gospel becomes visible through every Christian's attitude of hope, serenity, justice and peace.

Diakonia means the Christian mandate to love one's neighbour and to serve the neighbour in practical action. It can be expressed in many ways – in service to the members of one's own community as well as in service to the world.

While the first three commissions – leiturgia, martyria and diakonia – have been used as a hermeneutical framework to describe the church since the Reformation of the 16th century, the fourth commission – koinonia – has been developed only in the 20th century. The Christian community, especially the Protestant community, discovered a new commission in the 20th century – the commission of koinonia, which can be translated from Greek as fellowship, community or communion.

Koinonia has been emphasised particularly since the emergence of the ecumenical movement in the 20th century, not least because of the involvement of Orthodox churches, and especially since the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order in 1993 themed "On the way to fuller koinonia" (Best and Gassmann 1994). Koinonia points to the awareness of the universal reconciliation of humanity with God, which also implies the reconciliation of human beings with each other and with creation. To do justice to this dimension, the Christian community is called to practise openness and reconciliation across national, ethical, social and religious boundaries.

Given these four fundamental dimensions we might intuitively assume that the theological justification for the religious engagement for peace and development is in the area of diakonia, the active love for the world. The reason seems to be obvious: whenever Christians join with representatives of other religions and political actors to struggle against armed conflicts and corruption, to improve the social situation in the Global South, or to provide protection and support for refugees, it becomes evident that the Christian community is serious about its mission to provide practical help and assistance to people in need, because their own relationship with Christ liberates them to serve their neighbours.

However, the motivation for religious engagement arises not only from the desire of the Christian churches to act with love towards their social environment. Religious engagement on a global level is an activity in which the church fulfils all dimensions of its fourfold mission of worship, witness, love and fellowship.

When looking at the role of worship and liturgy in religious engagement our thesis might still need some clarification. According to the Protestant view, the church has a social form, where its real essence comes from its relationship

with God, which is why the Reformers spoke of the church not as an earthly hierarchy, but as the "body of Christ". The Christian community therefore only receives its identity by liturgically attuning itself to the relationship with the triune God. This takes place in sermon and sacrament, but also in prayer, in which believers bring their own existence before God and ask for comfort and encouragement. Prayers of Christian communities for peace in social or political conflicts are therefore actions in which the Christian community realises its liturgical mission in a way that can be referred to as religious engagement. At this point, the Christian community takes the brokenness of the world (whether Christian or non-Christian) into its relationship with God and prays for divine attention to and healing of these global problems as a part of its own identity as a spiritual community.[2]

At the end of this first section, we can conclude that when Christian churches get involved politically and economically in global affairs, they are not doing something that is additional to or that is not really part of their ordinary activities. Religious engagement means acting as a church and being visible as such in the world. Of course, such global engagement places the Christian community in a dynamic of reciprocity with other religious or secular cultures and the Christian ecclesiology also continues to develop further.

Admittedly, the claim that Christian involvement in development cooperation is not only an expression of love but also of worship, witness and fellowship raises many questions. It might even provoke rejection, especially considering that religious actors are often accused by their non-religious partners in global affairs that worship is in fact incitement to violence, witness serves to propagate conservative gender roles, and behind the emphasis on fellowship is merely an attempt to proselytise (Marshall 2021, 54–56).

To meet this criticism, we will turn to the field of martyria – public witness – in the next section and show to what extent it can be understood as part of the theological foundation for religious engagement.

2.2 *Public Witness to the Kingdom of God*

So far, we have followed the thesis that the motive of the Christian community for global engagement is rooted primarily in its self-understanding of being a church. This results in a certain attitude towards its environment, which is expressed in the four characteristic activities described above. Among these activities, martyria – the witness of the church to the world – deserves special

2 As this text is being written, Christian churches in the area are preparing prayer services as they wish to pray for the end of the war between Russia and Ukraine, as well as for assistance to the victims of the earthquake in Syria and Turkey.

interest. Two aspects of Christian witness are crucial as reasons for global engagement; from a systematic-theological perspective, they belong to the fields of *eschatology* and *anthropology*.

Let's start with the eschatological aspect. In bearing witness to God's grace, the Christian community also expresses a specific hope for the well-being of the whole of humanity, something that takes on relevance in the political context.

Theologically speaking, the centre of Christian hope is the message of the *Kingdom of God*. The Kingdom of God is a reality of faith. According to Christian conviction, the Kingdom of God began with the appearance and work of Jesus Christ. From the very beginning of creation, God has proclaimed that the world is good and that it is to be a home for human beings in which they can flourish (Gen 1.31). God created human beings and gave them the task of stewardship of the earth (Gen 1.28). But it is only through the action of Jesus Christ, who not only preached the coming of God's Kingdom, but brought it about through his death and resurrection, that the conditions were created so that creation could follow this destiny. In Christian understanding, the time of reconciliation and salvation has already dawned, but its full realisation is still pending. Thus, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the present world as the "penultimate", whose existence is determined by the "ultimate", the complete realisation of the Kingdom of God whose being is in becoming. The fact that the present is determined by something external does not make the Christian community inactive, but on the contrary, active. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, it is a matter of "preparing the way" for the Word of God:

> in Jesus Christ God comes down into the very depths of the human fall, of guilt, and of need (…) None of this excludes the task of preparing the way. It is, instead, a commission of immeasurable responsibility given to all who know about the coming of Jesus Christ. The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom. It would be blasphemy against God and our neighbor to leave the hungry unfed while saying that God is closest to those in deepest need. (Bonhoeffer 2008, 162–163)

As a result of the conflicts and changes of the 1960s, the mobilising effect of the preaching of the Kingdom of God has once again been rediscovered, as has the importance of the public involvement of the Christian community in shaping and forming the world socially and politically. In many places this has had a decisive effect on the theology and preaching of Christian communities.

The hope for a comprehensive realisation of peace and justice in the world has an engaging effect, as expressed in the words of Jürgen Moltmann, one of the most important international theologians from the second half of the 20th century:

> This hope and expectation also sets its stamp on life, action and suffering in the history of society. Hence mission means not merely propagation of faith and hope, but also historic transformation of life. (…) The hope of the gospel has a polemic and liberating relation not only to the religions and ideologies of people, but still more to the factual, practical life of people and to the relationships in which this life is lived. (…) In practical opposition to things as they are, and in creative reshaping of them, Christian hope calls them in question and thus serves the things that are to come. (Moltmann 1967, 330)

In contemporary theological thinking, many theologians hold this vision of political commitment and hope in God's grace for the world (Keller 2007). The US theologian Charles Mathewes has appropriately described this attitude, which is at once hope – within and not outside human history – for a better world and active participation in changing the existing conditions from which it suffers, as "critically hopeful citizenship". This kind of citizenship takes a political stand by acknowledging and naming human need without falling into fatalism or into militant activism. The witness of the Christian community is therefore to generate engagement for the global world out of well-founded hope:

> Because it is shriven of the illusion that the world is complete and closed, because it is liberated from the refusal to await the truly new thing, hope can see. (…) Hope not only seeks to participate in the new world, it seeks partners in such engagement; and before all else, the hopeful soul wants to help them see as it does. (Mathewes 2008, 247)

The vision of the Kingdom of God is not only an eschatological question but also implies a special approach to anthropology: the world as the lifetime of each human being, who are not merely material entities to be described physically or sociologically. They are the creation of God and thus called to follow God's will, of which Christian theology says that its essence is love. One of the fundamental convictions of Christian anthropology is that as part of God's creation, every human being possesses a dignity that is granted to them by God and is thus inalienable. This conviction about human dignity is often based

on the idea that the human being is created as the *imago dei* – the image of God (Gen 1.26).

Christian theology, however, is informed not only by the biblical scriptures or by its own theological tradition. It is also informed by life. As we have seen in the quotation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer above, a close look at the realities of this world reveals that large parts of human existence are shaped not by the experience of the Kingdom of God and the inviolable dignity of every human being, but by inhumane conditions that produce material hardship and political inequality.

The term often used to describe such inhuman conditions is *poverty*, but this term is to be understood theologically in a differentiated fashion, not only as an economic condition (Thacker 2017). Poverty is here understood as a complex, existential phenomenon that refers not only to material hardship, but also to exclusion from education, democratic structures, technical resources, land and being able to shape one's own future. The critical question is thus how to address this discrepancy between the theological vision and the earthly reality.

The idea of men and women as being created in the image of God should correctly be understood as a description of what men and women are called to be. The metaphor of the image of God thus refers to the promise under which human life stands (Bengard 2021, 43). But where there is poverty, people are prevented from following this promise. The former Archbishop of Canterbury and Anglican theologian Rowan Williams in his "Theology of Development" sums up the importance of the *imago dei* vision for religious engagement as follows:

> To recover the image of God must mean recovering an intelligent and creative way of relating to and working with the environment (…) "Development" is an aspect of this self-recovery and self-awareness as an agent within the world, capable of making a difference that will serve human dignity. (Williams 2009, 5)

On a theological level, therefore, overcoming poverty is not primarily about material differences that have to be overcome through a practice of selective giving, or charity. It is about building structures of participation that achieve sustainable results since they empower people to exercise their rights and become active. For Rowan Williams, this is linked to an expanded interpretation of the *imago dei*. Not only the individual human being is the image of God, but humanity as a whole is called to be a community in the image of God, who is present in the indissoluble and loving trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. From a Christian point of view, religious engagement in global affairs

is therefore never focused exclusively on economic aspects but has as its goal the restoration of the fundamental human relationality. This is the case both at the level of local communities where social differences create isolation and injustice and at the global level when it comes to the relationship between different parts of the world. Jürgen Moltmann summarises this fundamental theological assumption as follows:

> Likeness to God cannot be lived in isolation. It can be lived only in human community. This means that from the very outset human beings are social beings (…) Consequently, they can only relate to themselves if, and to the extent in which, other people relate to them. (Moltmann 1985, 222)

There is a close connection between the desire of the Christian community to overcome poverty by restoring broken relationships of solidarity and the idea of "hopeful citizenship", mentioned above as an expression of Christian identity. The term "citizenship" has of course a political dimension. Thus, to empower marginalised and poor populations, the Christian church must first become aware of its own identity as a *citizen* at the global level. By doing so, churches are nowadays more eager than before to do professional advocacy work in the field of religious engagement and development cooperation in order to raise consciousness of the problem of poverty on a global, systemic scale (Mtata 2013, 34). If they do this and develop their theological reflections publicly or in dialogue with secular partners, they are doing *public theology* – a concept that is gaining more and more importance in current systematic-theological discussion. Martin Junge, the former secretary of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), gives this comprehensive definition of public theology: "A theology in the public space that addresses the questions and dilemmas of the human family, offering insights based on what it knows and holds to be true because of faith" (Junge 2015, 2).

The religious engagement of the Christian churches thus consists of both theological reflection and professional engagement in development work side by side with religious and non-religious partners. As part of the martyria of Christian communities it is an embodiment of identity and belief. It is an actualisation of the ecclesiology of the communities, a contemporary way of bearing witness to the Christian faith in a plural, multi-religious world.

2.3 *Gender Justice, SDG Advocacy and Interfaith Dialogue – 3 Examples of Protestant Engagement in Global Affairs*

In the context of French-speaking Switzerland, where this article was written, one does not have to look far to find concrete examples of the religious

commitment of Protestant communities to peace, justice and the empowerment of the poor.

Geneva, the largest city in the region, is not only home to the World Council of Churches, but the LWF also has its headquarters here, where decisions are made on theological and humanitarian strategies.

The Department for World Service, the LWF section that focuses on supporting vulnerable and marginalised people through development cooperation projects (LWF n.d.), is the largest RNGO working with the United Nations High Council for Refugees and is also a member of the United Nations Multi-Faith Advisory Council. Through the work undertaken by the World Service, the LWF engages in public theology and contributes to the implementation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Here I will offer only three examples to give an overall impression of the potential of religious engagement in development cooperation.

Gender equality is explicitly stated in the SDGs in accordance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations 2015). Gender equality needs to be achieved everywhere at the local level, but advocacy at the national and international level is needed to make this happen. Despite the criticism that gender equality is not sufficiently part of the development projects of religious actors, the LWF is very active in this field, especially when it comes to supporting local actors in gaining influence in political decision-making. In accordance with SDG 5, the LWF World Service has a programme for women's human rights advocacy training with the aim of empowering the female representatives of local NGOs to represent their concerns politically and participate in the annual meetings of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (Ojulu 2019, 23–24).

Another initiative, "Waking the Giant", launched by the LWF in 2016, is dedicated to publicising the SDGs so that they reach a grassroots level and can help support concrete local efforts. Here the "Giant" refers to the whole Christian church with its large variety of local groups and communities. To this end, the LWF has created an online self-assessment tool where local actors can share their experiences (Waking the Giant n.d.). The Waking the Giant initiative provides feedback to UN policymakers on the implementation, relevance and effectiveness of the SDGs in practice. This example shows that an RNGO like the LWF not only participates in the achievement of the political development goals of the UN, but also serves as a multiplier of these activities through its communication strategy.

The two examples above show how the intention to fight poverty through empowerment and breaking out of isolation is implemented in practical diakonia. But RNGOs cooperate with the UN not only as individual actors. They

can also form pragmatic alliances with other RNGOs, including at an interreligious level, as the following example demonstrates.

In 2014, the LWF and the Muslim RNGO Islamic Relief Worldwide signed a Memorandum of Understanding to cooperate in humanitarian work in coordinating projects for refugees and displaced people (LWF 2014). This is the first official cooperation between a global Christian and a global Islamic humanitarian organisation and also serves as a public witness to interreligious cooperation between Islam and Christianity. Martin Junge puts it as follows:

> Not only because it allows us to respond much better to the dramatic situation of refugees and displaced people. It also offers a powerful message – almost a counterproposal – to what the public perception seems to be gathering from news as they relate to faith and religion. (…) It is about compassionate service to life, particularly where it is threatened. It is about life, never about dead; it is about serving, never about killing. (Junge 2015, 5)

3 Religious Engagement as an Opportunity for Change

3.1 *The Discovery of a Larger Community*

When the ecumenical community rediscovered the idea of koinonia as one of its core values in the 1960s, it was not the result of something that was conceived at a desk. The awareness of the need to live communion not only in the local church but with all Christians worldwide was due to the social development at that time. Increased mobility, a growing awareness of social injustices and the churches' own entanglement in injustice, and more generally an awareness of plurality and diversity decisively changed the theological identity of the Christian churches. However, this development has also been challenging and sometimes painful because it has forced the churches to renounce privileges, as well as to accept their role as a minority within a global dynamic of religious pluralisation and/or political secularisation. Religious actors are confronted with their own limits, in terms of their religious claims and their contextual value systems. Thus, religious engagement in political and social development at the global level is also an important opportunity for change.

In the past, the vision of church development cooperation was inextricably linked to the idea of transferring social and technical know-how from North to South, from the centre to the periphery. For some years now, however, this idea has been in the process of changing. This is part of a larger change of

perspective and would probably not have happened without the religious engagement of the Christian community at the global level.

The text *Together towards Life*, published by the Commission on Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, expresses this development very clearly:

> Mission has been understood as a movement taking place from the centre to the periphery, and from the privileged to the marginalized of society. Now people at the margins are claiming their key role as agents of mission and affirming mission as transformation. This reversal of roles in the envisioning of mission has strong biblical foundations because God chose the poor, the foolish, and the powerless (1 Cor. 1:18–31) to further God's mission of justice and peace so that life may flourish. If there is a shift of the mission concept from "mission to the margins" to "mission from the margins," what then is the distinctive contribution of the people from the margins? (World Council of Churches 2012, 5)

3.2 *How Can We Speak of Hope in a Theologically Credible Way?*

A further question needs to be explored by the Christian community as it becomes increasingly politically and socially engaged. To say as I did that religious engagement is also part of the leiturgia and martyria – of the spiritual life of the Christian community, its proclamation and prayer – raises the question of how theology can express itself responsibly and in a timely way about hope for this world. Like all human beings, Christians see that this world is ravaged by environmental degradation, conflict and poverty, something that can also lead to doubts about the viability of development projects. Inhumane social and political conditions, the blame for which is sometimes shared by the institutional churches, are in blatant contradiction to what God's creation was meant to be. To continue to hope and be inspired to act in this situation creates a tension with other discourses. The vocation of Christians is to confront the world and name its shortcomings in their prayers and sermons: "Your Kingdom come!" The preaching of hope will never lead to pure optimism, and it will never be congruent with positive economic forecasts, not even in the field of development cooperation. This is a significant part of the theological and political engagement of the Christian community, also at the global level.

But its special way of talking about the Kingdom of God does not release the Christian church from the fact that its discourse also must remain understandable in secular or political debates. This is why the Christian community needs to remain aware that the Christian discourse of hope is not something that is extra-worldly. In this context, the term "citizenship" is particularly interesting,

since it can be connected to both theological and political thinking, and recently has at various points described religious existence in the political sphere, whereby different aspects are emphasised. The above-mentioned Charles Mathewes uses the term "critically hopeful citizenship" to describe the Christian attitude to the world. In Mathewes' writings this term is used in the Augustinian tradition and refers to the fact that Christians are basically foreign citizens because their true home is the Kingdom of God (Mathewes 2008, 143). But in his opinion, Christians are also actively participating in this new homeland and are looking for partners with whom they can join forces (Mathewes 2008, 247).

The term "citizenship" appears in a completely different context in the Marrakech Declaration of 2016, made by Muslim religious leaders, heads of state and scholars (Zentrum der Ökumene 2017, 6). Here, the term means that non-Muslim people who are minorities in Muslim countries should not be subjected to political disadvantages. The document calls for "inclusive citizenship" as a fundamental right for all:

> Inclusive citizenship, in this perspective, reaffirms basic commitments to citizen rights and liberties and their equality under the rule of law, but it also includes a particular attention to cultural and religious diversity and seeks the more active inclusion of the various "others" in public life, whether these others represent socially marginalized or culturally different groups. (Petito, Daou, and Driessen 2021, chap. 1)

Finally, the term "citizenship" is also used in the Document on Human Fraternity, signed by Pope Francis and the Rector of Al-Azhar in 2019:

> The concept of citizenship is based on the equality of rights and duties, under which all enjoy justice. It is therefore crucial to establish in our societies the concept of full citizenship and reject the discriminatory use of the term minorities which engenders feelings of isolation and inferiority. (The Holy See 2019)

Despite the diversity of the contexts from which these quotes come, there is one common point of reference. "Citizenship" is first and foremost a political concept, but it explicitly includes a religious orientation, as well as the claim that the religious attitude of each citizen is not only recognised but even heard as a constructive contribution in the political sphere. For the Christian community, this political concept is an additional encouragement to express its anthropological and eschatological orientation in the public sphere. On the

political level "citizenship" must be recognised and taken responsibility for. But "citizenship" is not only a political right that must be granted by those in power. It also has to be lived out on a spiritual and existential level as "critically hopeful citizenship". This second form of citizenship implies an attitude of hope and social responsibility. If the Christian discourse of hope for the world wants to be credible, it is therefore necessary that Christians identify with the duty of global citizenship, and do not withdraw from contemporary discussions but participate actively in overcoming poverty (Junge 2021). For the Christian community, religious engagement in global affairs offers considerable scope for this.

4 A Lack of Recognition for the Theological Foundations?

From what has gone before, one could imagine that the theological foundations of religious engagement in global affairs might be considered quite positively, as they seem to be in line with the humanitarian goals of secular actors.

However, a publication from 2021 has questioned such a positive assessment of RNGOs and their motives. In his contribution to the volume *Does Religion Make a Difference? Religious NGOs in International Development Cooperation* (Heuser and Köhrsen 2021), the political scientist Jeffrey Haynes comes to a different conclusion (Haynes 2021).

He argues that RNGOs behave extremely pragmatically and goal-oriented within the framework of religious engagement, to demonstrate "their willingness to work closely with secular actors in pursuit of shared development perspectives". But "whether they can make a difference at all will depend on their acceptance in non-religious development circles" and according to Haynes (2021, 64), such acceptance is by no means universal. Quite the contrary, he argues.

On the one hand, it is true that in the eyes of development policymakers, RNGOs have many characteristics that make them interesting as partners, especially their credibility at the local level and their reach in areas that are difficult to access. On the other hand, according to Haynes, most governments and international organisations are not to be easily convinced about cooperating with religious actors (ibid., 75), primarily because religious actors are still perceived ambivalently at the political level. Such ambivalence is usually justified by the fact that while religion can promote peace and economic development, it can also provoke violent conflict and social decline (ibid., 76).

According to Haynes, it is the negative aspects of religion that are perceived politically: the influence of religion is not only ambivalent, but even associated

by the majority of political actors with gender conservatism or the oppression of women, violence, terrorism and other phenomena that inhibit development. Writing in the same volume, Heuser and Köhrsen also express a rather pessimistic view on the chances of religious actors being recognised by secular partners: "At closer look, there is one characteristic suspicion against RNGOs: they would follow a proselytism agenda (… violating) the consensus of impartiality, non-discrimination and equality" (Heuser and Köhrsen 2021, 22–23). There are also different ideas about the goals of development. According to Haynes, the primary goal of political actors is economic growth and the achievement of higher incomes. The representatives of RNGOs, on the other hand, work to overcome poverty based on justice and participation, and argue on the basis of values. Religious actors are aware of this difference, but they can only really influence global development if secular actors show themselves capable of learning, being willing to compromise and interested in theological convictions, which is not usually the case, according to Haynes. As the former general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Olav Fykse Tveit, stated in 2016:

> Hitherto, development actors have generally engaged mostly with the two top levels (practices and policies) and avoided engaging with the foundational level of "beliefs, values and ideas", even if this is probably the most important level of sustainable change. (Haynes 2021, 75)

If Hayne's assessment is correct, we need to question the status of the theological foundations presented in the first part of this paper. Although they are a crucial motivation for religious actors in their humanitarian work, they may generate alienation or even mistrust among secular partners. In this case, there seems to be no widely shared consensus between religious and secular actors about the legitimacy of religious engagement; on the contrary, there is either a discrepancy or even heavy wrangling, explicitly or implicitly, about the basis of cooperation.

The studies by Heuser and Köhrsen as well as Haynes suggest that it is not possible to take an undifferentiated positive view about religious engagement in development cooperation. The fact that politicians, especially the UN, are increasingly integrating religious actors in the context of their development aid programmes is not synonymous with a general endorsement in political development cooperation of a values-based approach to development or even the theological foundations described in the first part of this article.

However, our study here on the motives of Christian actors and the examples of concrete cooperation between religious and non-religious organisations in development cooperation leads us to question or at least to nuance

Haynes' position. Haynes' discourse analysis covers the period from the end of the 1990s to 2016. Given that profound changes are rapidly taking place on the political stage when it comes to the integration of religious actors in civil society processes, we would rather assume that a broader change of perception concerning religious engagement is currently taking place. As far as the LWF is concerned, it is not possible to prove a lack of recognition by secular partners. There are on the contrary strong indications of an increasing recognition of its work. A very recent statement made in 2022 by the current General Secretary of the LWF, Anne Burghardt, clearly points in this direction:

> In early April, I visited Uganda and the largest World Service country programme. (…) It was good to see how strongly the work of World Service is affirmed by the local UNHCR staff and the representatives of local municipalities. (…) International agencies have an increased understanding of the crucial role faith leaders play in development linked to humanitarian response. The LWF structures offer a good opportunity to explore this potential more deeply. Here, we can build upon our good cooperation with Caritas Internationalis, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and HIAS. (Burghardt 2022, 16)

The mutual recognition between Christian actors and their non-religious partners seems indispensable for successful development cooperation, and mutual recognition can only be achieved in a process of trust-building. For the LWF, which has been undertaking development work for decades, long before the SDGs existed and before the topic of "religious engagement in global affairs" gained momentum, this development is encouraging and most welcome. The fact that some of their secular partners view the work of RNGOs with suspicion is also linked to a general distrust of religion in the modern Western world. It therefore is a permanent challenge for religious actors in development cooperation to invent communication strategies that convey a correct impression of their motivations. Haynes' problem report must therefore be taken seriously. However, the fruitful cooperation between the LWF and its secular partners cannot confirm Haynes' analysis and rather indicates growing mutual recognition.

For Christian actors, however, the purpose of religious engagement is not about convincing others of their importance to satisfy institutional ambitions and compensate for decreasing social and political influence. For the Christian and, more specifically, the Protestant community, what is important is the extent to which religious commitment challenges and transforms the Christian identity to better respond to its calling in a globalised age.

5 Conclusion

In this paper we presented the theological foundations for religious engagement from the perspective of the Christian, especially the Protestant community. We pointed to the fact that religious engagement is based on the theological identity of the church. When the Christian community becomes visible as a political or social actor, the church is fulfilling its fourfold mission of worship, witness, love and fellowship.

By being an actor on a global political level the Christian community experiences new ways of being a church today. This includes the effort of reflecting about global dynamics and a revised understanding of mission, where the traditional categories of those who are "the developers and those who have to be developed" no longer apply (Biehl 2013, 114). Today, public theology goes with the strong conviction that each person can promote justice in his or her respective context.

In the field of development cooperation, "engagement" does not only imply material or financial support on a global scale. Religious actors also convey a vision of the world and a lens through which economic injustice and social exclusion can be interpreted. One of the most important motives of Christian actors is the hope that the Kingdom of God is on its way and that humanity is meant to live in justice as the image of God. But this vision must be reinterpreted in the present and enter dialogue with discourses at a political level. The term "citizenship" with its political and religious dimension could prove to be a fruitful concept here.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 200–217

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Rethinking Religious Engagement in a Globalized World: an Islamic Perspective

Research Article

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This essay analyzes the major questions that challenge Islam and politics in our modern world to better understand what Islam offers to peace, development, and living together. Religious institutions and communities have important resources to engage in global affairs, and their role must be determined within their own theological and spiritual framework. This essay presents five pillars that form the resources and the theological conditions for an Islamic engagement in global affairs: value-based religious mission; religious freedom; theological understanding of democracy; the need for dialogical theology; and disarming theology and dismantling modern violence. Notably, the Islamic way of religious engagement necessitates a theological reform and a contextual interpretation of religion.

Keywords

modernity – Islam – theology of nonviolence – dialogical theology – democracy – religious freedom – religious pluralism

1 Introduction

What kind of religious engagement in social and global affairs do we look for? Can religion be a positive and constructive factor in political and public life?

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302005
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

These questions concerning Islam can be extended to other religions because we share the same challenges and problems. However, before understanding what religion offers to peace, development, and living together, we must first understand what religion does not offer. It would be misleading to shift the expectations for justice and peace in the world from the political powers to religious institutions and communities. The latter have important resources to engage with global affairs; however, their role has to be determined within its own theological and spiritual framework.

This essay does not aim to engage with scholarship in the field. It focusses rather on presenting five pillars that form both the resources and the theological conditions for an Islamic engagement in global affairs, especially in the context of the current global challenges: 1) value-based religious mission, 2) religious freedom, 3) theological understanding of democracy, 4) the need for dialogical theology, 5) disarming theology and dismantling modern violence. What is identified as the Islamic way for religious engagement is also the way for a theological reform / contextual interpretation of religion. Here may lay the specificity of Islam in the framework of religious engagement.

2 The Value-Based Contextual Mission of Religion

From a certain theological standpoint, the nature and mission of religion are primarily educational: To help the human being realize and actualize the potential of his or her humanity and sainthood. Religion cannot offer a political or economic system. In fact, religion cannot be identified with a political system. Religion is neither royal nor republican, neither capitalist nor socialist,[1] neither right nor left. Religions in history have adapted to different and even contradictory political systems.

The Qurʾān mentions, for example, the consultation, *šūā*, (Q 3, 159), (Q 42, 38),[2] as a social value, but does not explain how this principle can be applied. The Qurʾān also mentions obligatory almsgiving, *zakāt*, (Q 9, 60, for instance), as a form of social solidarity. It remains insufficient, however, for the construction of an entire economic system.[3] The absence of a political or

1 For the different Islamic views on capitalism see for instance Hendrich (2018).

2 The Qurʾānic quotations are a mixture of different translations, mainly Abdel Haleem (2004) and Itani (2012), with some modifications. The letter Q indicates the Qurʾān; the first number indicates the sūra number; the second one shows the verse number (Ḥafṣ numeration).

3 In Islamic juridical tradition, there are other economic and financial principles, like the prohibition of interest, usury, and commodity monopoly, but still not enough to construct an entire economic system. Some contemporary Muslims attempted to develop an economic theory based on these principles to face the ideological competition with capitalism and

economic theory in the Qur'ān is not a sign of weakness and incompleteness, but rather a manifestation of divine mercy and human freedom. It is a sign of flexibility that enables believers to survive historical changes.

Believers evaluate and criticize all these systems in many ways. In other words, indeed, religions do not produce political and economic systems. Still, not all systems are perceived in the same way by all religions or by different groups within the same faith.

The democratic systems are not perfect but seem to be the best available system for our contemporary societies. Democracy is not a mere procedure. It is a culture and a collective consciousness that enhance and protect the rules. Democracy cannot be transported or imposed. It is an absurd contradiction that only serves to justify and embellish imperialist and expansionist temptations. Democracy is not the result of forced globalization imposed by a single dominant culture, that of the West, but rather a negotiated and shared process that can be applied and improved in different cultural contexts.

In a democratic context, religion cannot offer a legal system, but it can offer a system of values. In doing so, religion leaves a space of freedom, which is necessary for a plural society. The value system is more flexible, though it does not end the conflict of interpretation. We in fact live in a world where religions no longer monopolize ethical values, but coexist with nonreligious or secular ethics.

At the same time, values change their content and meaning between one epoch and another. Justice, for example, is a universal value, but some forms of justice in history have now become forms of injustice. The attachment to ancient forms today may betray, in some cases, the spirit and the founding principle of the value. Slavery is a clear example that concerns the gap between past and present.

Anyone who takes modernity seriously is aware of the challenges caused by the time gap. As for the conservative believer, whoever contents himself with the pre-modern interpretations considers the historical forms to be the true guarantee of the scripture's value, without which it would hold no sense. Or he might prefer to be selective, avoiding the prickly topics, given that they are "exceptional," in this way refuting slavery and accepting polygamy (Q 4, 3) and a non-egalitarian inheritance (Q 4, 11, 176).

The distinction between the value itself and the historical form in which the value was revealed for the first time is inevitable, in order to avoid an arbitrary selection or a literalist reading. In other words, the distinction between the essential and the accidental is the first condition for modern faithfulness. This

socialism. See for instance Sadr (2022). The more concrete expression is modern Islamic banking.

distinction itself is an act of interpretation that should not be merely a compromise of adaptation to the pressure of modernity (see: Mokrani 2022a).

Despite all these challenges, embracing and fulfilling the will of God remains a central doctrine in religious consciousness. It is in fact the etymological definition of the word *islām*. But what is God's will for me in the present moment? How can I know that? Does consciousness need an internal source? Are the sacred texts sufficient as a moral reference?

Values and ideas are not enough. We need a profound transformation, an initiation. We can know ideally many things, remaining at the same time enabled to transform the theory into life and practice. Behind the laws and values, there is an existential foundation, the transformative alchemy that manifests itself in human beings' ability to transcend his or her ego and personal and tribal interests, toward a more humane and inclusive horizon. Without transcendence, immanence has no meaning. Or rather, transcendence is a condition for the implementation of values. This interior work is religious par excellence. No parliament or government in the world can do it.

For this reason, the educational mission of religion is not simply a discourse of normative values; otherwise, we would return to the problem of legalism. The core of the matter is the soul's transformation, which purifies the intention. It makes the consciousness more awake and attentive to all forms of violence and injustice. Without this inner work, values and laws lose their credibility and effectiveness. They become dead letters, or means of power, manipulated by the powerful man of the moment.

The question of coherence or righteousness of conscience is fundamental for ethical discourse. The educational mission of religion is not limited to cleaning and awakening consciences; it aims also to form a free and critical consciousness. Can religions, which in many cases have been instruments of control and domination as ideologies of *sacred* power, reveal the "hidden treasure," the critical prophetic awareness that resists all forms of injustice?

The Qur'ān mentions explicitly religious freedom: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q 2, 256). Authentic religiosity should be free; otherwise, it is nothing but hypocrisy or terror. However, this obvious principle has been suffocated and marginalized for centuries. What can we do today to unleash the salvific potential of this principle to form the basis of a new conscience that is both religious and democratic?

3 Religious Freedom as Mandatory Framework for Authentic Belief

Non-compulsion is more radical than non-violence. It rejects even psychological violence, a hidden one that does not shed blood or leave bruises. Yet it

still leads to physical violence by preparing the conditions for it. The verse "No Compulsion in Religion" is not only a fundamental moral principle but is also a definition of religion. Religion cannot be combined with coercion, which ranges from violence by hand and weapons to violence by words and gestures, extending to silence and neglect. Non-compulsion is a categorical rejection of all forms of violence, the purification of religion from all impurities that would question or diminish human free choice. Embracing or leaving a religion (see: Alalwani 2011), practicing or abandoning it, are all possible options for a person as long as he or she is free and responsible. Anyone who thinks that an external authority (a state or law) can make from people good believers is wrong. Coercion only creates hypocrites or those fearfully oppressed. Religious coercion is a psychological terror that enslaves and does not liberate, is anti-religious and contrary to the essence of belief.

The same verse states the reasons for non-compulsion: "*rušd* (truth, rectitude, wisdom) stands out clearly from *ġayy* (error, ignorance)." This clear distinction can be understood on two levels: The verse affirms the dynamism and autonomy of truth on the intellectual level. Its beauty and authority are enough to move and persuade. It does not need violence, even when it is subtle and hidden. The truth shines like a light in the dark. It does not require a protector or guardian. It runs through peoples and cultures, strong in itself and not because of others, dispensing goodness, beauty, and freedom. It uses people, and people do not use it. As far as the practical level is concerned, coercion is oppression and injustice, which are incompatible with reason and wisdom.

Standing before its ancestral traditions, the prophetic rebellion[4] refused to follow the footsteps of the ancestors and called into question their inheritance from the parents:

> When it is said to them, "Come to what God has revealed, and to the Messenger," they say, "Sufficient for us is what we found our ancestors upon." Even if their ancestors knew nothing, and were not guided? (Q 5, 104)

It is the same consciousness that asks:

> Say: Produce your proof, if you are truthful. (Q 2, 111), (Q 27, 64)

4 Prophecy in the Qur'ān is a universal phenomenon. There is no nation or culture without prophets: "Every community has been sent a warner" (Q 35, 24).

A conscience that accepts no idea without verifying its authenticity:

> O you who believe! If an evil-doer brings you any news, investigate, lest you harm people out of ignorance, and you become regretful for what you have done. (Q 49, 6)

We can explore and activate all the theological and political implications of some verses that speak of religious freedom, like this one:

> So remind [O Muhammad]! You are only a reminder. You have no control over them. (Q 88, 21–22)

Several verses confirm religious pluralism as a legitimate fact wanted by God; I quote for instance:

> For each of you We have assigned a law and a way. Had God willed, He could have made you a single nation, but He tests you through what He has given you. So, compete in good deeds. To God is your return, all of you; then He will inform you of what you had disputed. (Q 5, 48, see also Q 2, 148, Q 42, 8)

This is legitimate diversity and plurality, as it is willed by God. The Qur'ān states here that if God had willed, He would have made only one community, but He did not. Instead, it was precisely His will that established such plurality of ways, which have, however, the same God as their ultimate goal (Khalil 2013; Shah-Kazemi 2006; Lamptey 2014).

These are valid principles and values against fundamentalism or religious populism. In this perspective, the secular state became in our time the political system that guarantees coexistence and collaboration between different religions.

4 Theological Understanding of Democracy

As already mentioned, the role of religion is not to offer a political system, but rather to educate and prepare the human being to be more human and a good citizen, a person free from selfishness, ready to serve, full of love and altruism, constructive and nonviolent, with a critical spirit. This is not the task of politics or parliament; it is a religious task par excellence. It is the religious mission of religion, its true mission. The focus of religion is God, or, more appropriately,

God in the human being. It is a question of free conscience and a pure heart. The focus of politics, instead, is the administration of public interests. The first depends neither on numbers nor on votes, while the second requires votes and consensus.

Many historical reasons favor the dominance of the legal vision of religion and marginalize other conceptions. It is necessary to restore the balance between the different approaches of religion, by reconsidering the moral and spiritual approaches and by re-examining the legal system as it has been historically known.

It is essential to prioritize the spiritual and moral approach of religion over the legalist approach. In Islamic theology, we have a fundamental pillar that comes right after the doctrine of the Oneness of God, by which I mean justice. The duty and mission of the believer is to realize the closest model of justice and, therefore, any form or practice that experience proves to be unjust or disrespectful of this sacred principle must be eliminated or changed. This is the meaning of the priority of theology, especially moral theology, over law. This means that the law can be inspired by the fundamental principles of Islam and should not be dogmatized in any way or considered a creed in itself.

Other important concepts of the Islamic legal theory are *maṣlaḥa*, public interest, and *ʿurf*, customs which could be open to new concepts and systems, such as democracy as part of the "heritage of humanity" and the "common good." There is no idea, including religion, that does not have an original context; but when it shows its concrete validity in lived experience, it can go beyond cultural boundaries and reach universality. Human history is full of these fruitful exchanges. This is the case of democracy.

We must therefore look for positive definitions of democracy and secularism which are echoed in Islamic thought. Obviously, this only makes sense for those who do not see an insurmountable contradiction between secularism and Islam. The secular state can be seen as a guarantee of justice and equality, two fundamental principles of Islamic ethics. This goes beyond the pragmatic and utilitarian approach toward secularism: Religious minorities are generally pro-secular to escape the domination of the majority.

It is essential to demonstrate the critical link between the secular state and democracy, especially after the failure of nationalist and Islamist ideologies and models of government, and after the growing awareness of the importance of democracy. Historical experience has confirmed the validity and usefulness of democracy, despite the fact that it still needs to be improved. Slogans and empty rhetoric are no longer sufficient for the new generations if the political system does not offer the possibility of peaceful change through free and transparent elections allowing the alternation of power. True democracy does

not exist without true citizenship based on equality before the law, which only the secular state can ensure against any form of discrimination. This is what authoritarian or mafia regimes, be it nationalistic or religious, even with their democratic facade, cannot offer.

The democratic secular state is not, in principle, an anti-religious state that adopts an ideology that seeks to replace religion, but rather a neutral state that treats all citizens equally. It is necessary to recognize the neutrality of the state as a religious and Islamic imperative; neutrality that allows the full expression and actualization of religious values with conviction and freedom, insofar as forced faith is nothing but hypocrisy, a phenomenon severely condemned in the Qurʾān.

Furthermore, it is essential to underline that any state system adopted by Muslims in history has been a human product, and all interpretations of the Sharīʿa are human efforts that can be criticized and reformed, knowing that certain historical forms can be considered outdated and replaced with new forms more faithful to fundamental values.

In the Islamic context, to build a secular state, which is a necessary condition for modern democracy, we need to cut the relationship between laws, made in people's image and will, and Sharīʿa, as a religious ideal and source of values, believed and lived according to a plurality of interpretations. At the same time, secular laws can coincide with religious values and views but not in a religious or theocratic manner. To say: "People are Muslims; thus, laws should be Islamic" is no more acceptable in this simplistic way, nor is it the best way to implement justice and peace in society, because the so-called "majoritarian Muslim societies" are equally complex on the intra-religious and inter-religious levels. The secular and democratic state is a fundamental requirement for freedom, justice, and peace in our modern world (An-Naʿim 2008; Asad 2018; Asad 2003; Messiri 2002).

5 The Need for a Dialogical Theology

Living in a globalized world, we can no longer ignore the question of pluralism, or produce a theological discourse in the presupposition of the absence of the other. The Muslim theologian today is not a neo-*mutakallim*, a renewed classical theologian. He or she belongs to a broader tradition, able to transcend the confessional boundaries between Sunnis and Shias, or between Muʿtazilites and Ashʿarites. A dialogical Muslim theologian should first be ecumenical and open to the inner diversity among his or her large community before being seriously engaged in interreligious dialogue. We cannot separate micro-ecumenism

from macro-ecumenism. Both represent levels of unity, which is the reflection of the divine unity on Earth.

The question of belonging is crucial. All of us are born and grow up within a particular tradition, which represents our worldview, mental categories, and the language of our souls. However, the more important question is: Can we belong to our tradition and the other's tradition at the same time? In which sense, if it is possible, and what justifies this belonging? Can we learn a culture or a religion like we learn a language?

The answers to these questions are contextual. The Asian response seems more open to a complex identity than the European or Mediterranean responses. In interreligious dialogue, relativism and syncretism are often criticized. Obviously, the superficial mixture of ideas and practices does not achieve a coherent result. At the same time, this does not negate the fact that cultural mix is a historical fact; throughout history cultures have mingled and influenced each other.

A certain "relative relativism" is necessary to remove the accumulation of cultural absolutization and sacralization of certain ideas and practices. Theological discernment consists precisely in distinguishing, as much as possible, between the contingent and the necessary, form and essence, history and revelation.

The dangerous relativism is the absolutist one, which is in itself a mere contradiction. "Absolute relativism" denies the existence of a transcendental truth that surpasses our personal or group ideas. This denial not only makes dialogue impossible but theology itself becomes a futile effort. The reason for being of theology and dialogue is precisely the search for this truth that surpasses us and which we can reach partially and relatively together, together as religious or interreligious communities. When the objective disappears, the path vanishes.

We live in multicultural and multireligious societies, which is not a new phenomenon, but today it has taken larger dimensions. Theological research well integrated into this context must consider diversity and pluralism at the local level and at the world level. Our global societies force us to answer the same questions and challenges, which require collaboration and common reflection. Dialogical theology cannot be reduced to theology of religions. Still, it is a way of doing theology *tout court*.

Another important challenge that unites these different theologies is the radical and rapid change that transformed human knowledge in modern times, for both natural sciences and humanities. Our religions and classical theologies used to dialogue with premodern knowledge, but they are no longer able to dialogue in the same way with modern knowledge. Modernity is a

common challenge. Religions try to adapt themselves in different ways and levels. This imposes new hermeneutical questions never thought of before, and requires new methodologies and ways of thinking. Learning from the experiences of others is possible, in what could be called the "methodological dialogue," like the dialogue between biblical studies and Qur'ānic studies. For this reason, interreligious dialogue becomes a requirement for internal reform and the renewal of religious thought.

The greatest challenge, in my opinion, is to recover the link between theology and spirituality, to rediscover the connection with the religious experience itself, as an encounter with the divine and dialogue with God, as an act of self-purification from individual and collective egoism, from personal and social sins, and from individual and ancestral prejudices. Without spiritual humility, theology is nothing but a form of arrogance and power, with which dialogue is a waste of time. For that reason, dialogue is the salvation of religion and theology.

Thinking on a truly global level, so that Islam is not just a local belief claiming universality, requires openness to human heritage. It is a matter of restoring biblical heritage to its place and activating its role in a new style, in a profound dialogue with the human, historical, and linguistic sciences and methods. It is crucial to focus on the unity and complementarity of human knowledge, based on the concept of "heritage of humanity," considering knowledge as a "common good." This interdisciplinary and interfaith approach permits one to see Islam's position in the historical landscape of world religions and to develop a more inclusive theology of religions.

The key challenge for new Islamic theologies is mainly hermeneutical, that is to say, by creating new Islamic theologies that try to resolve the problems that have emerged from modernity, such as the theology of religious pluralism, nonviolence theology, feminist theology, and liberation theology. They can be considered a single theology with different facets. Religious exclusivism can be transformed into violence, as violence against women is at the heart of feminist theology, which offers new tools for the theology of religious pluralism. The integral theology of religious diversity is nonviolent, ecological, feminist, and interreligious at the same time. Those who accept diversity are reconciled with themselves and the social and natural environment in which they live.

Nonviolence cannot be reduced to political activism in resisting colonialism or dictatorship. Instead, it is an all-inclusive way of thinking and living that requires disarming theology. Theology can be an expression or an instrument of power. Nonviolent theology aims to liberate theology from power ambitions and to orient it to the service of all humanity, in particular the poor and the oppressed. In this case, religion's mission is seen as an act of humanization

and liberation from all forms of violence. Nonviolent liberation is not a mere social movement of external change: It departs first of all from an inner transformation and conversion. This means that all these theologies require a mystical dimension. Mystical theology and hermeneutics are essential parts of this project for reform.

Theologians are interested in the theological meaning of the Qurʾān, which goes beyond the historical forms. The text speaks not only to its original audience but to the present, and it opens horizons for the future. It is meaningful for me in my new historical context. The theologian is interested precisely in the historical passage of meaningfulness between the past generations and the current ones, as cultural mediation and translation. This constructive mediation is the theologian's challenging function and mission. This mission is not possible without a constructive theological dialogue, globally engaged, and seeking the good of humanity.

Partly, but significantly, the history of Islam is forged and modeled by empires, conquests, and expansions. Classical theology and Islamic knowledge still bear traces of past imperialism, even after the last empire's fall. The Islamic theology of nonviolence, just like theologies of women and pluralism, are an opportunity to purify theology from ideologies and justifications of power.

Criticizing the past is not complete without criticizing the present. The critique of modernity and its ideologies prevents reform from being a mere adaptation of, or even worse, surrendering to the dictates of some modern ideologies. An old dogmatism cannot be replaced by a new one, even if it is masked by a secular appearance. This critical character of the new theologies makes them a prophetic voice in a time of crisis (Mokrani 2022a).

6 Disarming Theology and Dismantling Modern Violence

Most religions are a premodern phenomenon born in a cultural context different from that of today. Western modernity has inaugurated a new world with the slogan of science and progress. The human being seemed to overcome the religious explanation of reality progressively, moving toward a phase dominated by reason with its modern knowledge, ideologies, and ideals. Modernity poses a severe challenge to religions around the world: because of globalized capitalism and colonial rule, on the one hand, and because of the epistemological revolutions at the level of the natural and physical sciences, as well as at the level of the humanities, on the other hand. It is a historical moment in which it seems that the human being would have taken his destiny in hand, to the point of no longer needing religious doctrines.

Reform movements attempt to respond to modernity's challenges to ensure their respective religions' survival in a rapidly changing world. Paradoxically, what empowered religions, in this decisive historical moment, is modernity itself, or better, its current crisis, called postmodernity. Despite its triumphs, modernity suffers from a profound crisis of meaning, which has made it possible to speak of the "return of religion."

Modernity, which supports the primacy of reason and human freedom, has found itself naked in the face of the scandal of violence. Modern violence has taken unprecedented dimensions in an increasingly systematic and rationalized way, with extraordinary brutality and an unprecedented capacity to kill and exterminate.

The modern world is partially a product of extreme and systematic violence: from the invasion of the Americas to the extermination of its peoples and the plundering of their riches. The transferred gold to the treasures of European kingdoms and republics has formed the material basis of emerging capitalism, besides the kidnapping and enslaving of millions of Africans to serve the white man's interests. Slavery is a perfect example of these transformations. It was a phenomenon that preceded the rise of capitalism but took on "industrial" dimensions as a result of the "rationalization" of slave trafficking methods, making them more "efficient" and "productive" than ever.

The turning point that opened the eyes of many people in the West and worldwide to the violent nature of modern ideologies and hegemonial systems was the First and Second World Wars. They awakened them from the idealistic dream of continuous progress. The Nazi Holocaust is not distinguished only by the colossal numbers of victims (Jews, Gypsies, disabled people, gay men) but also by the rational methods and techniques in organizing the camps and murdering people. There was a precise protocol; everything was done with perfect planning, in a "scientific" way, in cold blood and clean hands. Science was used to kill and exterminate. It was by no means the first massacre in human history, but it was horribly "industrial" and "rational." World War II led to the death of around seventy million people. The previous one had resulted in millions of killed and physically, psychologically, and mentally disabled people.

Then there are the massacres committed by colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Africa and Asia: in the massacres committed by Belgium in Congo, about ten million people were exterminated in twenty-three years in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) killed 1.5 million Algerians, not counting previous casualties in a total of 132 years of French occupation. As for the Vietnam War, it saw – according to Vietnamese estimates – the killing of one

million Vietnamese soldiers and four million civilians by US forces in the 1960s and 1970s.

World War II ended in 1945, with the United States dropping two nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. More than two hundred thousand people were lost, the vast majority of them civilians, including children, women, and the elderly. The two bombs wiped out all aspects of life in the two cities, including animals and plants. It would take decades for the cities to be rebuilt and for the full extent of the nuclear radiation on the survivors to become clear. Thus, a race began to acquire the nuclear bomb and other weapons of mass destruction, capable of destroying the planet and humanity several times over. Modern warfare technology has evolved to make the meaning of war utterly different from what humanity has known throughout history. Modern warfare confronts us with the dilemma of avoiding civilian casualties, given the enormous extent of the potential destruction. Violence has characterized Western modernity and the ideologies of domination and racism that accompany it. It is one of the most significant challenges that humanity must face today, with all its religions.

The current wars are a clear alarm of a global threat, where no one is spared. Unfortunately, we are still attached to the old hegemonic thinking and imperial ambitions, with a limited diplomatic and peace-building creative imagination.

Listing the modern horrors does not mean generalizing or belittling the important cultural and scientific achievements that have benefited people in modern times. The focus is on the escalation and evolution of the violence phenomenon, which ultimately led to the emergence of a radical nonviolent religious awareness as one of the aspects of the great battle for reform.

The relationship between religions and nonviolence experienced a crucial historical shift, the "Gandhian moment" (Jahanbegloo 2013), which proposed nonviolence in a new and radical way. We had to wait for the twentieth century to reach this level of consciousness. Previously, humanity had known nonviolent precursors, exemplified by the behavior of individuals and groups who favored nonviolence as a way of life. However, modernity has given the issue a systematic and political character. The "peaceful resistance," *satyagraha*, of Mahatma Gandhi (d. 1948) was inspired by ancient roots, such as the principle of *ahimsa* in Hinduism and Jainism. Nevertheless, the new dimension that this idea took on in the twentieth century was not possible without a series of circumstances which prompted human awareness of a radical and inclusive nonviolent vision.

Perhaps the most important of these conditions – as already mentioned – is technical development, which has made war more destructive than any

previous war in the premodern era. Weapons of mass destruction, nuclear, hydrogen, chemical, and biological bombs, and even "conventional" weapons have become more deadly, in a way that so-called "collateral damage" cannot be avoided. In large numbers, they are often unarmed civilians. The ferocious and criminal face of war is more evident than ever. Once, chivalry values were used to justify and embellish the armed struggle, such as courage, sacrifice, generosity, solidarity with the oppressed, and justice restoration. The warrior cavalier was the one who bore these noble qualities, depicted seated on a horse, holding the sword, crossing the ranks of enemies. This heroic image of courage has become impossible today because war has become cowardly by definition. The soldier sits in front of the computer screen, enough for him to press a few buttons to cause a level of destruction that the cavalier of the past could never reach. Modern empires or "tiger democracies," in order not to lose soldiers in battle and provoke the anger of voters and public opinion, prefer to shed the blood of civilians in other countries, where the victims are politically "irrelevant."

The Gandhian vision aims at a double liberation of the human being: Freeing him or her from the external violence, colonialism, or tyranny, and simultaneously freeing him or her from the inner violence, so the victim will not be in the aggressor's image and likeness, reproducing the same abuses. This new vision had a significant impact on global religious thinking. On a Christian level, one cannot imagine Martin Luther King Jr. (d. 1968), Nelson Mandela (d. 2013), or Desmond Tutu without the Gandhian precedent. On the Islamic level, Gandhi's influence appears first in a group of Muslims around him, who collaborated with him to liberate India, and adopted radical nonviolence, expressed and justified in an Islamic way. Among these are Abdul Ghaffar Khan (d. 1988) (Khan 1969; Banerjee 2000),[5] Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad (d. 1958) (Azad 1988), and after them, Asghar Ali Engineer (d. 2013) (Engineer 2011). Outside the Indian context, we find thinkers and activists like the Sudanese Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (d. 1985) (Taha 1987), the Syrian Jawdat Said (Lohlker 2022),[6] and the American Palestinian Mohammed Abu-Nimer (Abu-Nimer 2003).[7]

5 The young Pakistani Malala Yousafzai, Nobel Peace Prize winner, could be considered as the spiritual daughter of Bacha Khan. She is from the same ethnicity and tribal zone.

6 Among the Syrian disciples of Jawdat Said: Khalis Jalabi and Afra Jalabi. The Iraqi thinker Abdul Hussain Shaban is Vice President of the Academic University for Non-Violence (AUNOHR) in Beirut.

7 For a summary of the Islamic debate on nonviolence, see Hermansen (2017, 147–162), Mokrani (2022b).

The Arab Spring in 2011, and before it the green wave in Iran in 2009, then the current protests with the slogan "woman, life, freedom," are concrete proof that nonviolence is no longer a marginal thought in the Islamic world. Nonviolence has become a public opinion and a popular movement, despite the tremendous obstacles and difficulties caused by the old regimes and terrorism. This is why dictatorial regimes fear nonviolent movements more since they are aware of their moral superiority, which unmasks official propaganda. When they are not overthrown by surprise as in Tunisia, oppressive regimes prefer to react with the utmost violence to provoke a violent reaction, thus attracting opposition to the field that the governments know best, namely that of battle. Everyone must be dirty and bloodstained, finally equal in evil and terror. The antithesis of war and terrorist madness, governmental or anarchist, is precisely nonviolence.

Terror in the name of Islam is competing with the new nonviolent awareness. What makes the situation more complicated is that terrorism is twisted with nationalism and populism. White supremacists use Christianity as a super-clan identity, as Jewish, Hindu, and Buddhist supremacists do with their respective religions. The tango dance between terrorism and populism creates a dangerous escalation on the international level, especially when combined with technologies of mass destruction and imperial mimetic rivalry. This explosive situation, combined with the weakness of the United Nations and the failure of international law, makes relations and conflicts dominated by power and brutality. The Palestinian question is an eloquent example of this dramatic condition.

Olivier Roy argues that our world is not so much witnessing a "radicalization of Islam" but an "Islamization of radicalism" (Roy 2017, 6). Islamist terrorism, in René Girard's view, is "something new that exploits Islamic codes, but does not at all belong to classical Islamic theology. Today's terrorism is new, even from an Islamic point of view" (Girard 2010, 214). The big challenge is not only Islamic but global. The destiny of humanity is one, and the way of salvation is one: Religions can be ways of salvation if they succeed in liberating themselves from the heavy burden of imperial nightmares.

On the intellectual and spiritual levels, radical nonviolence demands the redefinition of religion's mission in order to see it as a humanization mission, which exorcizes and disarms the human being from all forms of violence. It requires the complete abandonment of violence as the supreme goal toward which humanity moves gradually. The ethical conscience rises in history to reach peace in all its internal and external levels, spiritual and social dimensions. The quite spontaneous and leaderless Arab revolutions were not enough

to establish a peaceful society. The Indian Muslim scholar Wahiduddin Khan (d. 2021) describes the all-inclusive nonviolence in this way:

> Non-violence should never be confused with inaction or passivity. Non-violence is action in the full sense of the word. Rather it is more forceful an action than that of violence. It is a fact that non-violent activism is more powerful and effective than violent activism. Non-violent activism is not limited in its sphere. It is a course of action which may be followed in all matters. (Khan 2013, 3)

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan emphasizes nonviolence's efficiency and its taking on various forms to become a lifestyle and a method of living and doing in all fields. All this requires creative thinking, capable of creating new forms of work and cooperation. Nonviolence requires speaking the truth to the oppressor, denouncing injustice publicly, and working hard to end oppression. It is a very courageous and dangerous task that puts lives at risk and possibly leads to martyrdom.

7 Conclusion

Inclusive and universal peace, the project of radical nonviolence, is present in many religions, as a messianic dream postponed to the end of history and then to Paradise, as a meta-historical and eschatological hope. Today, in present history, the prevailing opinion is the theory of just or defensive war, which many religions find very difficult to overcome. Sometimes, we also find a regression to the theory of preventive and offensive warfare. The theory of permanent warfare is not dead yet. It is in the form of big or small powers that do not even recognize the minimum moral conditions of war. The debate is still open, but the awareness of nonviolence as a fundamental solution to the tragedies of war, killings, and displacements has begun to crystallize and present itself as an alternative and a new horizon.

Religion in the modern world can be part of the problem as a crisis of identity or as a fuel for conflict, war, and terrorism. It can also be a part of the solution, as a prophetic critical conscience, and as a producer of meaning for life and peace. To realize this ambitious project of global religious reform, we need interreligious solidarity and collaboration. No religion can live isolated or pretend the monopoly of truth and salvation. Our survival and earthly and heavenly salvation are based on our daily relationships as human beings. Managing

diversity as a divine gift, disarming theologies and politics, and transforming our faiths into schools of humanization and divinization are necessary conditions for the survival of humanity and the planet Earth.

In this global context, the religious engagement of Muslims for peace and development is a theological and hermeneutical process of understanding Islam in the current times and vice versa, in double faithfulness: to the traditional founding principles and to the real needs and challenges of our time.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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Policy and Practice Notes

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 221–235

R/D Religion & Development

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"Faith for Rights": a Framework for Rights-Based Sustainable Engagement with Faith Actors

Policy and Practice Note

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This article outlines the rationale and use of the "Faith for Rights" framework, through which the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights provides space for cross-disciplinary reflection and interfaith action on the connections between religions and human rights. The article analyses the preambular Beirut Declaration and its corresponding 18 operational commitments on "Faith for Rights", whose implementation is supported by the peer-to-peer learning methodology of the #Faith4Rights toolkit. The article concludes that the framework and toolkit have been deemed useful by various stakeholders at the national, regional and global levels, notably in the context of the UN Forum on Minority Issues and the Council of Europe's recommendation to member states on combating hate speech. Finally, the article suggests developing a "Faith for Rights commUNity of practices", including regular exchanges to showcase related initiatives, projects and partnerships as well as to explore areas of future cooperation.

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302006
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

Keywords

human rights – responsibilities of religious leaders – faith-based actors – Beirut Declaration – #Faith4Rights toolkit – peer-to-peer learning

1 The Rationale of "Faith for Rights"

Despite being often conveniently ignored in multilateral diplomacy, the link between beliefs and human rights has incessantly imposed itself in international relations. Already in 1954, the second UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld stated that "[t]he United Nations stands outside – necessarily outside – all confessions, but it is, nevertheless, an instrument of faith. As such it is inspired by what unites and not by what divides the great religions of the world. [… The United Nations] Organization must be animated by and defend Faith in the dignity and worth of men, born equal" (Hammarskjöld 1954). The current UN Secretary-General António Guterres has also stressed "the role of religious actors in supporting peace and building bridges between people" in today's multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious societies (Guterres 2018). Similarly, former UN High Commissioner Michelle Bachelet noted that faith-based actors may either defend or undermine human rights; therefore it is crucial to support their positive contributions, while "preventing the exploitation of religious faith as a tool in conflicts, or as interpreted to deny people's rights" (Bachelet 2019a).

Further to these clear statements and developments across the world that proved their relevance, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and several independent UN experts have been engaging with faith-based actors in the context of the "Faith for Rights" framework. It aims at articulating the missing links between rights and beliefs, mitigating their tensions and optimising their mutual enhancement wherever convergences are established. Its foundational document, the 2017 Beirut Declaration, emphasises that "Faith and rights should be mutually reinforcing spheres. Individual and communal expression of religions or beliefs thrive and flourish in environments where human rights, based on the equal worth of all individuals, are protected. Similarly, human rights can benefit from deeply rooted ethical and spiritual foundations provided by religion or beliefs" (Beirut Declaration 2017, 1).

This acknowledges the important contributions of faith teachings to protecting human dignity across the globe over millennia. Human rights were

neither born in 1948, nor are they only a product of "Western" values. Rather, human rights are an inherent part of every society's history and realities, since "[t]hey constitute a common heritage of all nations, cultures and religions" (Bachelet 2019b). This means that faith-based actors have an important role – and responsibilities to assume – in promoting and defending *all* human rights, not only their own freedom of religion or belief.

An optimal positive role of faith-based actors in the human rights arena transcends religious freedom and impacts on all other human rights. Empowering faith-based actors to assume their human rights role and responsibilities has several requirements. These are knowledge, independence and adapted structures for internal debates that are conducive to producing a rights-based vision for engagement at national, regional and global levels. While some of these elements may still be missing in practice, the human rights roles and responsibilities of faith-based actors – in tandem with human rights mechanisms – have gained added relevance and urgency considering the current challenges facing human rights. There are increasing examples of ideologically juxtaposing international human rights norms against traditional values, religious teachings, national identity or cultural particularities. Furthermore, pushback against human rights is targeting both their universality and effectiveness. These and other challenges require serious discussions and collaborative engagement by all civil society components, including faith-based actors, given their moral standing and huge influence on the hearts and minds of billions of theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or other believers.

2 The "Faith for Rights" Framework

These are also the reasons behind the "Faith for Rights" framework, which since 2017 has been providing space for cross-disciplinary reflection and interfaith action on the deep and mutually enriching connections between religions and human rights. The objective is to foster peaceful societies which uphold human dignity and equality and where diversity is not just tolerated but fully respected and celebrated. The "Faith for Rights" framework consists in the preambular Beirut Declaration (see section 2.1) and the 18 operational commitments on "Faith for Rights" (see section 2.2), whose implementation is supported by the peer-to-peer learning methodology of the #Faith4Rights toolkit (see section 2.3), including good practices and lessons learned (see section 2.4).

2.1 *Beirut Declaration on "Faith for Rights"*

Following more than a dozen meetings organised by OHCHR across the globe, the Beirut Declaration was adopted in March 2017 by faith-based and civil society actors working in the field of human rights. With this Declaration, they reach out "to persons belonging to religions and beliefs in all regions of the world" in order to enhance "cohesive, peaceful and respectful societies on the basis of a common action-oriented platform agreed by all concerned and open to all actors that share its objectives" (Beirut Declaration 2017, 7). They also valued that the Beirut Declaration and its preceding Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence (Rabat Plan of Action 2012) were "both conceived and conducted under the auspices and with the support of the United Nations […], and enriched by UN human rights mechanisms such as Special Rapporteurs and Treaty Body members" (Beirut Declaration 2017, 7). Indeed, this was the very first global institutional approach to religion by UN human rights mechanisms in full partnership with faith-based actors. This initiative corresponded to a social need for enabling religious actors "to assume their responsibilities in defending our shared humanity against incitement to hatred, those who benefit from destabilising societies and the manipulators of fear to the detriment of equal and inalienable human dignity" (ibid., 8).

To achieve this goal, faith-based and human rights actors articulating the "Faith for Rights" framework pledged as theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or other believers to adhere to the following fundamental principles: (a) Transcending traditional inter-faith dialogues into concrete action-oriented "Faith for Rights" projects at the local level; (b) Avoiding theological and doctrinal divides in order to act on areas of shared inter-faith and intra-faith vision; (c) Cherishing the virtue of introspectiveness by acting first and foremost on the challenges within their own respective communities; (d) Speaking with one voice; and (e) Acting in a fully independent manner and abiding only by their conscience (ibid., 10).

2.2 *The 18 Commitments on "Faith for Rights"*

During the same meeting in Beirut in March 2017, the faith-based and civil society actors also adopted the 18 operational commitments on "Faith for Rights". For example they pledged to counter the use of the notion of "state religion" to discriminate against any individual or group (commitment IV); to revisit religious interpretations that appear to perpetuate gender inequality and harmful stereotypes or even condone gender-based violence (commitment V); to stand up for the rights of all persons belonging to minorities (commitment VI); to publicly denounce all instances of advocacy of hatred that incites to violence,

discrimination or hostility (commitment VII); to monitor interpretations, determinations or other religious views that manifestly conflict with universal human rights norms and standards (commitment VIII); to refrain from oppressing critical voices and to urge states to repeal any anti-blasphemy or anti-apostasy laws (commitment XI); to refine the curriculums, teaching materials and textbooks (commitment XII); to engage with children and youth who are either victims of or vulnerable to incitement to violence in the name of religion (commitment XIII); and to leverage the spiritual and moral weight of religions and beliefs with the aim of strengthening the protection of universal human rights and developing preventative strategies adapted to the local contexts (commitment XVI).

To give practical effect to these human rights pledges, within their respective spheres of competence and influence (including at the very individual level), the participants of the Beirut workshop also included quotations from religious or belief texts. For example, in the context of commitment XVI, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith noted already in the 19th century that "[t]he progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquility of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God" (Bahá'u'lláh, 44). Additional religious quotes in the Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments refer to the Ancient Egyptian Middle Kingdom, Rigveda, Buddha, Confucius, Mahābhārata, Torah, Talmud, New Testament, Qur'an, Hadith, Imam ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Shantideva, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, Guru Granth Sahib and Abdu'l-Bahá. Furthermore, they also contain belief or spiritual quotes emanating from the Golden Rule, the Native American leader Sitting Bull, the humanist philosopher A.J. Ayer and a general recommendation on harmful practices jointly adopted in 2014 by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. This broad range of sources – indicated in the Beirut Declaration as merely "illustrative and non-exhaustive" – shows how religions, beliefs and human rights mechanisms have been addressing similar questions over several millennia.

2.3 *Peer-to-Peer Learning Facilitated through the #Faith4Rights Toolkit*

Since 2020, the #Faith4Rights toolkit has been translating the "Faith for Rights" framework into practical peer-to-peer learning and capacity-building programmes. Its 18 modules, mirroring the 18 commitments on "Faith for Rights", offer concrete ideas for collective and participatory learning exercises, for example how to share personal stories, assess competing interpretations of texts, search for additional faith quotes or provide for inspiring examples of artistic expressions that reflect "Faith for Rights" commitments. The

#Faith4Rights toolkit builds on, and connects the dots with, a wealth of comparable tools by several United Nations entities that have been integrated into the toolkit, with a view to enhancing the skills of faith-based actors to manage religious diversity in real-life situations towards the aims of "Faith for Rights".

The methodology of peer-to-peer learning, as advanced through the #Faith4 Rights toolkit, is characterised by a democratic and egalitarian approach; every participant of such an event has something to contribute as well as something to learn. This interactive approach is not only a pedagogical premise but it also allows for constructive engagement between faith and rights actors. Instead of carrying out top-down "training" or "teaching" of *the right answers* to theological questions, the peer-to-peer learning methodology provides space for an open discussion among equal peers of possible *rights-based answers* to practical problems in multireligious and multicultural societies. This is also the reason why the #Faith4Rights toolkit avoids the terms "trainer" or "teacher", but rather provides tips to a "facilitator" on how to steer the debate when addressing a difficult topic, how to manage diversity and how to optimise peer-to-peer learning based on concrete situations and experiences. Yet these facilitators are essentially also participants, who may learn as much as – and often even more than – the other participants. Similarly, the topics and agenda of a peer-to-peer learning event can be decided on the spot by all participants, which requires considerable flexibility and sound preparation. However, the facilitator(s) should not cling to any pre-prepared notes but instead pick up pertinent points directly from the discussion and tailor any questions or exercises to the participants' needs and interests. A degree of "calculated spontaneousness" has proven extremely rewarding in terms of the liveliness and richness of peer-to-peer learning.

The tasks of a facilitator may seem daunting, given the potential of heated discussions on complex issues that may include deeply held personal convictions and contemporary conflicts which are based on – or at least attributed to – religious divides. This underlines the importance of the facilitator being familiar with human rights education methodologies and also having substantive knowledge in the realms of both faith and human rights (#Faith4Rights toolkit 2023, 5). It may also be advisable to have a team of two – or more – facilitators, ideally gender-balanced, who could complement one another in facilitating the peer-to-peer learning debates in plenary or in smaller working groups. Discussing case studies and real-life experiences aims at shifting from "abstract inter-religious dialogues, with little concrete outcomes, into individual and joint positive actions by faith actors in defence of human dignity for all" (ibid., 7).

It is vital for the success of each peer-to-peer learning exercise to be tailored to the specific context and needs of the participants. In order to learn more

about their background and interests, the facilitator(s) could for example start the peer-to-peer learning event with an introductory round, asking the participants to briefly state (1) their first name, (2) one or more identity factors, (3) what they are hoping to take away from the event and (4) how their expertise could be useful for the other participants. If every participant indicates his or her first name at the outset, this already creates a personal approach compared to using one's family name, academic titles or institutional affiliations. The second question about one or more identity factors has proven to reveal the hidden fact that we all have multiple identities. These features of the exercise immediately go into the substance of peer-to-peer learning; participants should be encouraged to state not only the "usual suspects" identity factors such as their national, ethnic or religious background, but also some other factors that they self-define as important for their identity, for example specific educational interests, work experience, health issues or family history. In addition, this exercise also shows how diverse human beings are, beyond the traditional "boxes" that we tend to put people in, either subconsciously or overtly. The third question then allows each participant to outline what he or she expects to gain from the peer-to-peer learning event – or to admit that this concept is new to them, which is perfectly normal and can only enhance the added value of the exercise as the facilitator explains the methodology further. The fourth question may trigger self-reflection about what each participant could contribute to the discussion. It is fine if some participants do not wish or know how to answer this question; what ultimately counts is that they become aware of the two-way street involved in peer-to-peer learning and to own the exercise as genuinely interactive participants, not merely as recipients. Ideally, each participant answers these icebreaking (and deep-diving) questions in less than three minutes. Of course, these four questions may not be an appropriate opening round for all peer-to-peer learning events everywhere. For example, during an armed conflict or in a post-conflict situation, the facilitator might consider that the second question about the self-defined identity factor would be too sensitive for (some of) the participants. Furthermore, the last two questions might be too complex to answer for children, depending on their age. However, the opening round could be adapted according to their evolving capacities and the local context.

2.4 *Good Practices and Lessons Learned*

Faith-based actors, academics, human rights experts and United Nations entities have collected good practices and lessons learned in the "Faith for Rights" framework. Since 2020, many peer-to-peer learning engagements have been piloted in different forms and regions, both online and offline. OHCHR launched the #Faith4Rights toolkit, both as a website and printable PDF, in

its first edition in January 2020. Over two years, the toolkit received some 24 smaller updates and additions, leading to the launch of the second edition in 2022. Furthermore, Religions for Peace and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women organised webinars on confronting Covid-19 from the prism of faith, gender and human rights as well as on keeping the faith in times of hate; each of these webinars attracted more than 2,000 views (ibid., 35). In addition, the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University created in 2022 a website focussing on five modules of the toolkit (introduction; religious and belief pluralism; women, girls and gender equality; minority rights; and incitement to hatred) as well as a Facilitator Training Guide for conducting "Faith for Rights" sessions.

Moreover, the Gandhi-King Global Academy launched in 2022 a self-paced online course on "Religions, Beliefs, and Human Rights: A 'Faith for Rights' Approach", addressing the role of religious and faith-based actors in promoting human rights and how the intersection of religion and human rights can facilitate sustainable peace. A series of monthly peer learning events have been led in turn by the United States Institute of Peace, Religions for Peace, University for Peace and OHCHR facilitators with a view to promoting the universality and indivisibility of human rights for all. For example, during the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2023, a related side event focussed on working multireligiously for gender equality, thus reassessing the role of education and knowledge in the digital age (Religions for Peace 2023). The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights also offered a Masters course based on the "Faith for Rights" framework, exploring the tensions and complementarities among freedoms of thought, conscience, religion, belief, opinion and expression as well as minority rights and women's rights.

In addition, related peer-to-peer learning events have been conducted across the globe together with academic institutions in Amsterdam, Beirut, Collonges, Coimbra, Erlangen, Essex, Geneva, Jakarta, Misau, Montréal, Oslo, Oxford, Paris, Portimão, Pretoria, Provo, Surabaya, Surrey and Uberlândia (OHCHR 2021, 68; OHCHR 2022, 36). In 2021, OHCHR and the European Commission also held peer-to-peer learning events on using the #Faith4Rights toolkit in the context of the European Union Gender Action Plan III, which calls upon the European Union to support the mobilisation of religious actors for gender equality in line with the "Faith for Rights" framework. Furthermore, OHCHR is developing an informal network of #Faith4Rights facilitators and a peer-to-peer learning programme for professional faith leaders, specifically those who are in-training, recently qualified or young faith leaders.

Another example of peer-to-peer learning events is the Leave No One Behind dialogue series in 2021/2022, which was co-organised by the Freedom of

Religion or Belief Leadership Network, International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Religions for Peace, African Parliamentarians for Human Rights, the "Faith for Rights" initiative and the Danish Institute for Human Rights. This dialogue series explored the interrelated topics of freedom of religion or belief and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), gender, education, civic space and freedom of expression, health and climate change. The thematic briefing papers for each of the six dialogues and their full video recordings may be useful resources for the facilitator and participants. Current or former parliamentarians, religious leaders and faith-based actors shared their experiences, exploring any gaps and opportunities towards action. As a follow-up, more than 100 signatories called in their public statement for religious or belief communities' experiences of inequality and needs to be integrated into SDG planning, policy and action at a country level so that no one is left behind (IPPFORB 2022).

In this context, the #Faith4Rights toolkit suggests a peer-to-peer learning role play about collective apprehensions by a religious minority against perceived police brutalities in the hypothetical State of Polis and a draft law prohibiting arms, even if licensed, in places of worship (#Faith4Rights toolkit 2023, 94). The participants could simulate a parliamentary hearing of the different views in order to inform the legislative process on the draft law, playing various roles for example as a member of parliament, a religious leader or an atheist civil society activist. The facilitator may ask participants to use the procedural options available in their own country or to invent such a consultative process. Another peer-to-peer learning exercise could be to ask the participants to draft constitutional provisions on freedom of religion or belief as well as come up with an "ideal" legal relationship between the state and religions (ibid., 29). The facilitator can help them by asking pertinent questions, based on real-life examples from constitutions around the globe which illustrate good practices but also the potential pitfalls of certain formulations (Salama and Wiener 2022a, 118–122).

3 Concluding Remarks and Outlook

The "Faith for Rights" framework and the toolkit's peer-to-peer learning methodology has been used and deemed useful by various stakeholders at national, regional and global levels. For example, the High Commissioner's 2018 update on the situation of human rights of Rohingya people called upon the Government of Myanmar to "increase efforts further to promote tolerance and peaceful coexistence in all sectors of society in accordance with Human

Rights Council resolution 16/18 and the Rabat Plan of Action. In addition, the Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on 'Faith for Rights' can be useful to address advocacy of hatred that incites to violence, discrimination or hostility, particularly when it is conducted in the name of religion or belief" (OHCHR 2018, 49). The Human Rights Council followed up on this recommendation in its annual resolutions 43/26, 46/21, 49/23 and 52/31 on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, each of which explicitly refer to the Rabat Plan of Action.

In a similar vein, the 2021 Forum on Minority Issues enumerated the Rabat Plan of Action and Beirut Declaration as reference instruments for preventing conflicts involving minorities (Special Rapporteur on minority issues 2021, 3). The Forum also encouraged "States, the United Nations, international and regional organizations and civil society [...] to work closely in supporting the positive contributions of faith-based actors, including through the promotion of the Beirut Declaration and the faith for rights toolkit" (Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues 2021, 58). Part of this formulation was picked up by the Human Rights Council in its resolution 49/9 on prevention of genocide and by Special Rapporteur Nazila Ghanea in her first thematic report to the Council (Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2023a, 7 and 81).

Special Rapporteur Ahmed Shaheed also highlighted the role of religious leaders, influencers and other civil society actors in promoting reconciliation, peacebuilding and conflict prevention through constructive discourse and other interfaith initiatives. These include the "Faith for Rights" framework, which aims at exchanging practices, engaging in interfaith projects and collectively promoting human rights (Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2022, 66). Furthermore, he called on states to prohibit incitement – online and offline – to discrimination, hostility or violence based on religion or belief, consistent with international human rights law and standards, including Human Rights Council resolution 16/18, the Rabat Plan of Action as well as the Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on "Faith for Rights" (ibid., 78). These international standards clarify the fine line between unlawful incitement and morally reprehensible speech, a "distinction that is more necessary than ever with amplification of 'hate speech' on social media and the visible consequences of populism in hate speech targeting religious and other minorities" (Ghanea et al. 2023). It is a welcome development that Meta's Oversight Board has used in more than a dozen of its content moderation decisions the Rabat threshold test, which provides – together with the "Faith for Rights" framework – clear guidance on how to strike the right balance between responding effectively to the amplification of hatred in the digital space while avoiding measures which could undermine freedom of expression (OHCHR 2022: 70; Secretary-General 2022, 61). In addition, the Council of Europe's

recommendation to member states on combating hate speech also builds on the six criteria of the Rabat Plan of Action, and concerning human rights education the UN "Faith for Rights" framework and toolkit with its peer-to-peer learning methodology is labelled a "useful tool" (Council of Europe 2022).

The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments have been considered "as – potentially – behavior-affecting soft law or at least as 'softish law' in the making" (Bielefeldt and Wiener 2020, 179) and Ahmed Shaheed stressed "the complementarity and practical usefulness of these soft law standards" (Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2018, 63). Several Special Procedures mandate-holders quoted them as international norms and standards in joint allegation letters that they sent to states and *de facto* authorities as well as in the revised framework for communications and the Rapporteur's Digest (Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2023b). In addition, the UN Human Rights Committee explicitly refers to them in its general comment on the right of peaceful assembly (UN Human Rights Committee 2020, 50). The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has also raised the "Faith for Rights" framework in dialogues with states parties such as Botswana, Costa Rica, Fiji, Niger, Nigeria and the Gambia as well as in its concluding observations, which "illustrates the pressing demand for guidance and action in the context of faith and human rights" (Al Hussein 2017). In follow-up, several peer-to-peer learning events in 2021 piloted the interactive methodology and case studies of the #Faith4Rights toolkit with civil servants in Brazil and Nigeria as well as with judges in Indonesia. During the 2023 Munich Security Conference, a panel on religion, diplomacy and conflicts discussed how the "Faith for Rights" framework has been applied by the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, whereas the Taliban in Afghanistan did not respond to related urgent appeals by Special Procedures (Sovereign Order of Malta 2023; Salama and Wiener 2023). These examples illustrate the positive or negative impact that religious leaders have at a practical level. In view of their crucial role in speaking out clearly, firmly and immediately against disrespect and intolerance, "[e]xchanges of lessons learned and promising practices should continue to be promoted, including through the Faith for Rights framework" (Secretary-General 2023, 59; Türk 2023).

In terms of possible next steps, the need for organising regular meetings of "Faith for Rights" facilitators is apparent in light of the enriching diversity of practices. Several formats could fulfil the need for showcasing initiatives, projects and partnerships as well as exploring areas of future cooperation (Salama and Wiener 2022a). A structured approach to create and develop a "Faith for Rights commUNity of practices" should build on, rather than duplicate, other

gatherings that already exist within or outside the UN system, thus joining the dots in a creative manner. The double objective should "be the expansion of civic space at the United Nations and specific outcomes to foster mutual enhancement between faith and human rights" in a sustainable and coherent manner, for example through peer-to-peer learning points and thematically clustered promising practices (ibid., 256). The Rabat+10 and Beirut+5 workshops organised in Collonges-sous-Salève and at Geneva Academy in October 2022 and November 2023 (OHCHR 2023) could be seen as a nucleus for such an avenue of rights-based sustainable engagement with faith actors.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

Part of this article is based on the co-authors' book chapter in Michael Wiener and David Fernández Puyana (eds.), *A Missing Piece for Peace: Bringing Together the Right to Peace and Freedom of Conscientious Objection to Military Service* (San José: University for Peace, 2022), 270–305. The views expressed in this article are those of the co-authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 236–247

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"Faith for Earth": an Ethical Approach to Global Environmental Challenges

Policy and Practice Note

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

For far too long, the engagement of communities in global environmental governance and policy has been limited to civil society organizations that are accredited to the Economic and Social Council of the UN. This has left faith-based organizations on the margins of policy dialogue, unable to make important contributions by bringing moral and spiritual responsibilities and perspectives. Yet faith-based organizations have been providing the needed socioeconomic and charity support to communities for centuries.

This paper discusses how environmental issues can be addressed more effectively by building on the intrinsic relationship between religions and faiths and the environment, by relying on their strong attributes and powers. The paper also argues that to bring the different backgrounds and ideologies of religions together on the environment, a non-biased and neutral UN body, such as UNEP's Faith for Earth Coalition should act as a convening platform linking faith actors and policy makers.

Engagement with faith actors can come with perceived challenges that require concerted and collective efforts to overcome as discussed in this paper.

Keywords

environment – religion – faith – ethics – ecology – SDGs – behavior

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302007
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

1 Introduction

Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) worldwide are increasingly gaining a seat at the table of environmental policy and are becoming major players in advocating environmental stewardship. Considering that an estimated 84% of the world's population associate themselves with a faith, an environmental message from their faith leaders is more likely to motivate engagement. This is a values-based trend that environmental groups need to capitalize on to be most effective.

The United Nations (UN) is seeking maximum impact by integrating economic, social, and environmental issues, coupled with ethics, beliefs, and individual responsibility. In 2017, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) expanded its stakeholders base to include FBOs as important players. Consequently, a strategy for engaging with faith actors has been adopted and the *Faith for Earth Coalition*, as its implementing mechanism, was founded. The basic principle of the Coalition is to create a neutral platform to harness the diversity of religions and unite their common approaches to living in harmony with nature, bringing it to the forefront of decision making on environmental sustainability.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted in 2015, represent a comprehensive and inclusive plan of action to overcome socioeconomic and environmental challenges facing the world. These interconnected and cross-border global issues require more than a single or group of countries to resolve them. A key goal for the implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda is Goal 17, which requires the adoption of a partnership modality and approach in addressing the issues. This partnership approach makes it essential to include not only stakeholders representing governments but also stakeholders from all sectors of society, including faith-based organizations and actors.

2 Why Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations Is Important

Over the past few decades, global patterns of excessive consumption and production, according to scientific evidence, have led to the unprecedented exploitation of Earth's natural resources (Kent State Online 2018). Polluting our lands and waters along with the destruction of entire ecosystems puts us at risk of a new mass extinction event of species (UNEP 2019). These unsustainable patterns of behavior are putting the globe in a battle with the three planetary crises of: climate change, nature degradation, and

pollution. The complexity of the interconnection of these crises, and with other socioeconomic and health challenges, represents the most significant threat to world peace, security, and prosperity, and potentially even the very existence of humanity as we know it. Transitioning to more sustainable consumption and production practices is of utmost importance with truly global efforts toward sustainable development.

Addressing the multitude of contributing factors to these environmental challenges, as well as dealing with their negative manifestations, requires revolutionary changes toward the Planet. The means of implementation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda would require the integration of globally agreed upon ethical codes and behaviors. This interconnected and ambitious agenda cannot be fully realized if the underlying causes of the socioeconomic challenges are not addressed for a better future for the people and the planet.

A people- and planet-centered agenda cannot be achieved without ensuring prosperity and peace and working in partnership. But even with the best intentions and most measurable targets, the sustainability agenda will not be achieved without a global compact for behavioral change towards the resources of the planet.

We can use drones to blast seeds for reforestation, build the biggest solar farm, replace plastic straws or bags to protect oceans. But these measures are not sufficient to save the planet if we do not change our attitude toward abusing its resources. Eliminating the use of plastic bags will certainly reduce ocean pollution, but will increase the use of other materials such as paper bags or even biodegradable plastic. This will increase the demand and overconsumption of these new resources, and then we will end up fighting another source of pollution. Similarly, replacing gasoline-operated cars with electric cars will reduce carbon emissions resulting from burning of the gasoline, but will require generating of more electricity to operate the new cars and will create a new problem of manufacturing and disposing of electric batteries.

The environmental crisis facing our planet does not rely only on finding alternative solutions, but rather on finding resolutions to our current production and consumption patterns. We must find ways to eliminate the sources of the problems rather than finding alternatives that will produce different problems. Sustainable mobility does not only mean replacing gasoline-operated cars with electric ones, but it also means seeking solutions by enforcing comprehensive sustainable mobility practices. The future will not be charted by artificial intelligence and the internet of things alone, but by human intelligence and innovation to adopt sustainable patterns of production and consumption. These sustainable patterns would require global ethical codes and behaviors for Earth's sustainability to move beyond technocratic language and

abstract ambitions, and embed the sustainable development practices in everyday life by tapping into the spiritual wealth of the people.

The UN system has recognized the role FBOs play in protecting the environment, improving people's health, and eradicating poverty. As highly networked, trustworthy, and dynamic organizations, FBOs have been achieving tangible results on the ground. For more than 80% of the people living on Earth spiritual values have been driving individual behaviours. Spiritual beliefs and religions around the world are at the core of cultural values, social inclusion, political engagement, and economic prosperity (UNEP 2018a). It is, therefore, important for those working on sustainability to harness the agility of these beliefs and FBO organizations. Over the past decade or so, FBOs have begun to realize the importance of addressing the relationship between humans and the environment in addition to their humanitarian work. Several environmental FBOs and initiatives have been launched, addressing climate change based on specific religious values, and some have been adopting an interfaith approach.

The United Nations Environment Programme is the leading international authority responsible for integrating the environmental sustainability pillar as part of its sustainable development agenda. It is key to mobilizing all stakeholders in the implementation process of the SDGs at the global level. Through its Faith for Earth Coalition, the organization has been able to bring religious and cultural values to the forefront with a view that adopting value-based and faith-inspired lifestyles can and will promote sustainable consumption and production. The Coalition focuses on the role of FBOs in promoting religious and cultural values that support stewardship and duty of care of the Earth. The nexus of religiously/spiritually inspired environmental sustainability and duty of care can be the cornerstone for a common ethical code and behavioral vision.

The enormous assets owned by faith institutions are also potential sources of environmental challenges. Put together, the land assets of such institutions are 36 times the size of the United Kingdom. With this either comes massive pollution or enormous opportunities for sustainability.

The Faith for Earth Coalition has emphasized the immense outreach power that religious institutions hold in all corners of the world. This is demonstrated by the tens of millions of houses of worship, giving faith-based organizations the ability to educate and inspire adherents all around the world to become more environmentally conscious, through fundamental changes in behavior and attitudes. Furthermore, houses of worship can also be models for sustainability. For example, replacing the vast amount of electricity currently generated by fossil fuels with solar energy would be a colossal demonstration of walking the talk.

Similarly, faith-based and faith-inspired institutions hold enormous assets and wealth, with faith-based investment corporations and bodies considered to be the fourth-largest investment group (Cordaid 2021). Despite religion-based screenings and divestment campaigns, this wealth has not always been optimally aligned with socio-environmentally responsible investments. Sustainable investments seek to go beyond no-harm principles and intentionally foster measurable social and/or environmental positive impact in conjunction with financial return. FBOs have the potential to significantly accelerate responsible investment (UNEP 2018a).

2.1 *Living in Harmony with Nature Is a Common Ethical Behavior for All World Religions*

Most religions preach messages of environmental care and stewardship. Living in harmony with nature is a common ethical behavior recommended by religions. In the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, creation is considered an act of God, and that humanity may not destroy God's creations. Rather, humans are the stewards of God on Earth. Eastern religions such as Shinto of Japan considers that the relationship between people and nature should be rooted in rural agricultural practices. Humans are responsible for the safekeeping of the Earth and all life on it. Jainism, through ahimsa (non-violence), considers that all aspects of nature are mutually dependent. Buddhists care for wildlife and believe that living in harmony with nature is essential. Hinduism believes in the interconnectedness between life and nature. Sikhism considers that life should not be associated with conspicuous consumption. The Baha'i faith considers the diversity and protection of the natural world as reflections of God. Other spiritual practices or modern religious beliefs such as deism, polytheism, animism, or pantheism consider nature worthy of worship.

Such common religious-spiritual practices and ethical values underpin environmental concerns. Over the past twenty or so years, research on religion and ecology, capacity building and training efforts as well as advocacy on religion and the environment have contributed to the evolution of religious traditions to function as sources of spiritual inspiration, moral transformation, and sustainable life amid environmental crises (Hitzhusen and Tucker 2013).

2.2 *The Wealth of Religious Institutions*

For many religions, change starts with oneself. Several faith-based institutions and organizations have already started integrating green practices into their own institutions. Initiatives spanning from the blue mosques, integrating water

conservation practices, to solar temples, using renewable energy in places of worship, have been spreading around all religions (UNEP 2020a).

FBOs' own investment corporations, holdings, pension funds, private sector businesses, and land and real estate investment could have a proactive social stance, considering environmental or other social issues. Faith-based investing remains a niche within the overall socially responsible investing theme but involves the idea of using ethics to guide monetary decisions.

Faith-based organizations have been instrumental in moving the responsible investment agenda forward and spearheaded the movement decades ago. Some FBOs have launched programs and initiatives encourage those benefiting from their investments to adopt corporate social responsibility practices, including incorporating human-rights-based program and environmental and social services as in the case of Christian investors. This is referred to as socially responsible investment or faith-consistent investment aiming at making a positive impact on the social welfare of their followers.

2.3 *The Power of Reach*

The focus and main mission of FBOs, providing humanitarian support, is to reach local communities. It is not only an obligation for religious leaders to reach out to local communities, but a spiritual fulfilment. No other organization can have such access, making them the best communications and outreach channels to convey messages based on relevant spiritual values.

It is argued that in every corner of the world there is a house of worship, either a church, a mosque, a synagogue, a temple, or even a tent for the spiritual leader. These houses are connected to and gain legitimacy from a wider network of their own religious institutions or leaders providing funding, inspiration, teachings, instructions, or simply a point of reference. Recently, environmental faith-based organizations have been proliferating around the globe. Some have specific focus on climate change or water issues, others on wider care for the creation principles. Some projects of these organizations have already been providing the much-needed connection between religion and the environment and are contributing to strengthening and supporting global efforts.

2.4 *Global Recognition*

In 2008, by its resolution on the "promotion of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace," the UN General Assembly encouraged the promotion of dialogue among all cultures, and asked that states consider, where appropriate, initiatives that identify practical actions in all

levels of society for promoting interreligious and intercultural dialogue, tolerance and understanding (United Nations General Assembly 2008). In 2015, the General Assembly emphasized that mutual understanding and interreligious and intercultural dialogue constituted important dimensions of the discussion among civilizations and of the culture of peace (UN 2015). Consequently, a UN task force was formalized in 2009 by the United Nations Development Group, titled the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-based Organizations for Development and is currently comprised of 17 UN agencies. The Task Force meets regularly and hosts many consultations with faith-based organizations on development issues. The Task Force has also created a Multi-Faith Advisory Council from 40-something FBOs.

FBOs have been working for centuries on facing poverty challenges, improving people's health, providing education, and calling for a balance in utilizing natural resources. In doing so, religions target humanity in its entirety (leaving no one behind). However, the span of the agenda for religions is eternity, until God's promised day. For the global 2030 Agenda to be achieved, engaging with stakeholders, including those organizations based on faith, values, and culture, is not only essential, but it cannot be achieved or be sustainable without this partnership in support to the efforts of governments and other players. The work of FBOs is essential in supporting traditional stakeholders who need new creative, inspiring, and innovative actions bringing like-minded networks to support the implementation of the global 2030 Agenda at all levels.

2.5 *Religions and Science*

Environmental issues are debated within the scientific community. For example, the proponents of the theory of anthropogenic climate change versus those who say it is part of a natural cycle. Religions, therefore, need to benefit from and support scientific findings that demonstrate the need for ethical living in harmony with nature. Religious institutions are making the best use of the scientific evidence, as demonstrated by the individual and collective commitments and declarations being made at the global level on climate change. Faith leaders do not need a convincing argument, but a connection to a holy script, or a prophet's practice. What religious leaders say often goes to the heart before it goes to the mind.

FBOs, especially at the local level, do not have easy access to global knowledge and scientific evidence that is in a language comprehendible to the faith follower, not only the politician or scientist. Knowledge should be backed not only by scientific evidence, but also by ethical behavior and sustainable citizenship. This will strengthen the relationship between environmental

stewardship and duty of care in support of indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

3 Multilateralism and Interfaith Collaboration

Multilateralism is key and critical in facing our shared challenges and in achieving our aspirational goals of people living in harmony with nature. Humankind is not only united by common aspirations to live in peace, and enjoy peaceful societies and uphold human rights, etc. It is also facing common serious global challenges, such as human health, living conditions, and survival on this planet. At the launch of Our Common Home, the UN Secretary General said: "Humanity's very future … depend[s] on solidarity and working together as a global family … For people, for the planet, for prosperity and for peace" (UN 2022).

Effective multilateralism includes effective interfaith collaboration. The faith and religious communities can come together in a global coalition with a unified approach and a coherent message on living in harmony with nature. All religions uphold the same principles, regardless of the ideologies, so there is a common denominator that brings them together directed by their divine beliefs. There has been increased multi-faith engagement, not only by interfaith organizations but by faith-specific organizations recognizing that our only hope is to be unified. We need to live in peace with nature, not at war with it. Peace with nature means that we need to understand that we are not the only beings on this planet. In alignment with the beliefs of both Eastern and Abrahamic religions on creation, diverse communities have been brought into existence by divine forces, and it is essential to reassess human relationships with these other beings.

The challenge is to find a neutral platform that can provide a common space for dialogue on environmental issues and the required approaches. This is one of the major goals of the work of the Faith for Earth Coalition and its strategy on interfaith collaboration and engagement.

4 The UN Environment Programme Strategy on Engaging with Faith-Based Organizations

In 2018 the United Nations Environment Programme launched a global strategy to engage with FBOs (UNEP 2018b). The adoption of the strategy has resulted in

the creation of the Faith for Earth Coalition as an implementing mechanism for the goals of the strategy.

Three main goals have been identified for shaping engagement with faith groups. The first is inspiring and empowering organizations and faith leaders in acting on the relationship between environment and faith. However, the essential aim of this goal is to increase the role of faith actors in policymaking, especially through and at the United Nations Environment Assembly. Currently, more than 60 FBOs have been accredited as observer stakeholders.

The second goal is working with faith organizations on their investments such as bonds, banking, and assets to finance sustainable development. Many, such as the Church of England and the World Council of Churches, have divested from oil and gas investments or industries that generate carbon dioxide emissions. The Islamic Development Bank is investing $6 billion in renewable energy. The main aim is to establish norms for faith-based investments – or "faith-consistent" investments that integrate the environment into the investment criteria. These norms historically concerned the "negative" aspects of investments, such as alcohol or arms dealing. Introducing faith-consistent financing and investment principles is much in line with value-based investments (Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance 2022).

The third goal is providing knowledge, networking opportunities, and scientific evidence for change by faith leaders connecting issues of faith and the environment. Relying on sacred scripts in addition to current scientific research and evidence on the impacts of climate change, pollution, or modern lifestyles would be more impactful. UNEP and other science-based institutions are providing scientific evidence that current human behavior and the current economic development paradigm are not sustainable (UNEP 2022b). Pope Francis has been very vocal on climate change issues. The Pope has criticized the current financial system and called for a paradigm shift in how economic development is addressed (The World Economic Forum 2018).

The Faith for Earth Coalition is facilitating policy dialogue on environmental issues that would encourage innovative approaches to finding long-lasting solutions to environmental challenges. The Coalition consists of five councils: 1) Eminent Faith Leaders, 2) Youth Council, 3) Religion and Science Consortium, 4) CEOs of Faith-Based Organizations, and 5) Women Faith Leaders Council (UNEP 2020b).

The Faith for Earth Coalition has made considerable progress to date. Some of the major achievements of the Coalition thus far are outlined on its website. One of the major achievements is integrating the engagement with faith-based organizations and faith leaders in policies and practices of intergovernmental organizations. The Coalition has been working with the European Union, the African Union, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. With the

latter, and through the Islamic World Educational Scientific, and Cultural Organization, ICESCO, a strategy was adopted by 57 ministers of environment of Islamic countries to spearhead faith and environment linkages and networking (ICESCO 2019).

5 Challenges Facing the Role of Faith Actors in Global Affairs

While it is essential to integrate faith actors in global affairs, especially environmental stewardship, there might be some challenges associated with such efforts that would need some attention and consideration. Building trust between different religions among themselves, with the secular world and with national governments is incredibly important. This would help overcome the wrong perceptions held by each against one another. One of those perceptions is that the UN is pushing its secular agenda over traditional beliefs. Another perception is of some non-governmental organizations attributing the lack of development of some societies to the clinging to old spiritual beliefs that promote one religion over others. Finally, there are perceptions by governments that religious leaders are politicizing religions for political gains.

Another challenge is related to gender issues and women's involvement that might be sensitive to some FBOs. Gender mainstreaming principles should be carefully used and integrated into the partnership with such faith-based organizations to minimize potential friction around the issue. Adopting a human-rights-based approach is essential to be the centerpiece bringing the secular and religious sectors together.

A major challenge is the institutionalization of the role of faith-based organizations at intergovernmental forums. Currently, stakeholders do not include faith-inspired organizations as one of the nine major groups approved by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), but they work and contribute as members of those groups. While the lack of FBOs as major group might have been an error, it is however an opportunity to integrate faith and religious values in the work of secular groups.

While the Catholic Church can be seen as an institutionalized entity with the Pope residing at the helm and providing guidance, leadership, and reference, other religions do not have such an institutional setup. Who speaks on behalf of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other religions and spiritual beliefs is a challenge since these religions are composed of different sects, distributed across the globe, and have no single figure to speak on their behalf. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation could be a good model in bringing issues of governance among Muslims, but it does not represent a religious authority. Some innovative approaches would need to be found to bring the views of such diversity into a

collective understanding. *Laudato si'* of Pope Francis and *Al-Mizan* being facilitated by UNEP are two good examples (UNEP 2022a).

The wealth of faith-inspired organizations might pose a challenge toward mobilizing action on the ground for philanthropists and the donor community. While FBOs' charity work amounts to billions of dollars, this has not yet translated into largely supporting environmental sustainability and has deterred donors from funding projects led by FBOs. Both should be working together in mobilizing the needed financial resources to work on value-based projects that address environmental challenges.

Finally, environmental literacy is an issue that needs more attention in educating not only the faith followers of the connections between their beliefs and environmental stewardship, but also faith leaders, who need to connect contemporary environmental terms to religious values and teachings.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 248–265

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Thinking Faith Engagement beyond Faith: the Spiritual Dimension in the World Health Organization

Policy and Practice Note

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

The preamble to the constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO) contains an often-cited definition of health as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Already at the inaugural meeting of the World Health Assembly in 1948, which formally founded the organization, it was noted that this definition did not mention a 'spiritual dimension' of health. Throughout the past 70 years of the organization's existence, debates over the WHO's holistic mandate and the relevance of 'spirituality' to its work have periodically surfaced. This article outlines six key moments in its history in which the lack of 'spirituality' in the WHO's understanding of health was raised and attempts were made to introduce it in some manner. In the early 2000s, amid a broader shift in the UN milieu toward cooperation with religious actors, interest in the 'spiritual dimension' began to give way to the notion of 'faith engagement'. This article raises the terminological ambiguity of the 'spiritual dimension' and critically discusses the potentially problematic aspects of the term 'faith of health' in WHO's reckoning with its holistic mandate.

Keywords

faith – spirituality – health – spiritual dimension of health – World Health Organization – WHO

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302008
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

1 Introduction

Attention to religion in the many agencies and programs of the United Nations is a relatively novel phenomenon. Until the turn of the millennium, important norm-setting agencies at the center of the global development discourse had been either indifferent to or generally suspect of the role of religion in achieving development goals. Over the past twenty years, however, the rise of religious extremism in public discourse and the ambitious vision outlined by the Sustainable Development Goals have given rise to the recognition that excluding religious actors from the development agenda is practically untenable, and a contravention of international humanitarian law. Under the banner of 'faith engagement', UN institutions and multisectoral development agencies began to bring 'faith leaders' to the table of stakeholder consultations, and 'faith-based organizations' were made implementation partners. The inclusion of 'faith communities' in planning and evaluation, as evidenced by the latest Sphere handbook on minimum standards in humanitarian response, has become established as a matter of best practice.[1] Such goes a common narrative about the rise of the "new global faith agenda" (Tomalin 2012, 692).

This article draws on a recent historical study on the 'spiritual dimension' of health in the World Health Organization (WHO) to show that the prevalence of the term 'faith' – at the WHO, and in other agencies – is a relatively recent development. Broadening the focus from UN 'faith engagement and organisations' to the 'spiritual dimension', it is argued, reveals an alternative religious discourse which has periodically surfaced at the WHO since the moment of its founding. Six brief historical vignettes are presented in chronological order to illustrate this point. This is concluded with a discussion on the ambiguity of the term 'spirituality', the potentially problematic aspects of the term 'faith' and the significance of 'faith engagement' in WHO's reckoning with the holistic mandate set out in the preamble to its constitution.

2 The 'Spiritual Dimension' of Health: Six Historical Episodes

2.1 *1948*

Hardly an hour had passed at the first plenary session of the first meeting of the World Health Assembly before one of the honored guests, Phillip

1 Cf. The Sphere Project (2018). For an overview of recent 'faith engagement' activities, see the annual reports produced by the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Religion and Development, e.g. IATF (2020).

Etter (1891–1977), the head of the Department of the Interior of the Swiss Confederation – which hosted the meeting in Geneva – made an unusual remark. Addressing the audience, he expressed his hope that the new health organization would not only fight the "dangers which threaten the health of the peoples," but develop "well-being and health in general," embracing "the whole nature of man, physical and spiritual" (World Health Organization 1948, 24). Etter, a staunch Catholic, was referring to the now well-known definition of health as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Presaging subsequent debates which would recur in the coming decades, Etter called on the assembly to extend the WHO's mandate to include a holistic approach inclusive of a "spiritual" aspect – implied perhaps, but not made explicit, in the understanding of health as a state of "complete well-being."

Indeed, the language in the preamble had been penned in the early 1940s by Raymond Gautier (1885–1957), the Medical Director of the WHO's predecessor, the League of Nations Health Office (LNHO). Gautier already in turn had taken inspiration from the writings of Henry E. Sigerist (1891–1957), a well-known Swiss medical historian and life-long admirer of Buddhism, whose historical work traced the evolution of the notion of health from the holism of Greek medicine through to the Christian commitment to social justice and the social medicine of the early 20th century (Peng-Keller, Winiger, and Rauch 2022, 21–25). It is a scarcely known curiosity in the history of the WHO that the first moments of its existence were marked by concern with how the newly founded organization could serve humanity in the fullness of its existence.

2.2 *1978*

This incident was arcane, but prescient. Three decades later, the WHO was in crisis. Lack of adequate funding and an infatuation with post-War medical innovations had made the eradication of infectious diseases such as malaria an overriding priority. But the technocratic, top-down war on single diseases which dominated the first three decades of the WHO's work had failed to address basic health needs in poor countries. As newly decolonized nations began to shift the balance of power in the UN General Assembly, the WHO began to search for a more inclusive, bottom-up paradigm of healthcare (Chorev 2012). Under its Secretary-General Halfdan Mahler (1923–2016), the organization approached the Christian Medical Commission (CMC) of the World Council of Churches, which was successfully operating community health offices across Africa. An exchange began between the CMC and the WHO's senior leadership, which markedly influenced the formulation of the primary healthcare

paradigm and the Health for All-initiative, launched to much fanfare at the 1978 Alma-Ata conference.

To Mahler, the son of a Baptist preacher, this was a "sacred moment"; the WHO a "temple" of health, and Health for All "gospel." (World Health Organization 2008, 748; Litsios 2022. 717). Though as Secretary-General he cultivated a disinterested appearance, Mahler felt that a 'spiritual dimension', a unifying ethos, was needed to animate the Member States of his organization into making Health for All a reality. Practically, the primary healthcare paradigm also demanded financial and personnel resources well beyond the means of the WHO. A 'spiritual dimension', Mahler hoped, would rally the best of intentions, religious and secular, to bring the Health for All vision to fruition. Mahler was diplomatically astute and knew to build consensus across the widely diverse constituents represented at the World Health Assembly, where the Israel–Palestine conflict and Cold War ideology regularly spilled over into heated exchanges. He also received support from actors whose participation might have been unexpected given the dynamics of the Cold War in which he was operating. In 1978, at the 61st session of the WHO's Executive Board, a Libyan physician named A.M. Abdulhadi criticized a report on adolescents' health needs because it "made no reference to spiritual values and their impact on adolescent development" (World Health Organization 1978, 15). Abdulhadi was supported by Desh Bandhu Bisht (1927–), a health official, former deputy minister of health in India, and a follower of Sri Aurobindo, who argued that humans are differentiated from animals through the 'spiritual dimension', which he – cleverly – dubbed "Factor X" (Hanrieder 2017; Bisht, Nagpal, and Das 1985). Although the 'spiritual dimension' had rather different meanings in the religious tradition of each of these actors – Christian, Muslim, and Hindu – it offered a sufficiently ambiguous, yet positively connoted, term through which key figures in the organization's senior leadership hoped to advance their personal and political agendas.

2.3 *1983–1984*

At the 36th World Health Assembly held in 1983, the issue was brought to the discussion of the WHO's Member States. Samuel Hynd (1924–2016), the health minister of Swaziland and a committed member of the Church of the Nazarene, made Mahler's strategy explicit: He implored the assembly that if the Health for All initiative was to succeed, it had to return to the original, holistic aspiration of the WHO, implied in its definition of health as "complete physical, mental and social well-being." In order to meet the enormous challenge of rolling out universal primary healthcare, however, the organization's understanding

of health had to be complemented with a 'spiritual dimension' (World Health Organization 1983, 109). Several delegates from African and Arab countries supported Hynd's call to formally extend the definition of health, in particular the Kuwaiti minister of health Abdul Rahman Al-Awadi (1936–2019), who later claimed this initiative a success of the Islamic Organization of Medical Sciences (Al-Awadi 2000). In the ensuing debate, the 'spiritual dimension' did not encounter strong resistance other than from the USSR, but rather questions over how to define this concept, with some delegates cautiously endorsing its use. The assembly tasked Mahler with writing a report on the matter and to set a vote at the next assembly.

Mahler's report was a masterclass in religious diplomacy. The 'spiritual dimension', he argued, was in fact the expression of an "ennobling idea" which may be articulated differently according to one's value system: in religious beliefs and practices, or in political ideologies such as "All people are born free," or – in a thinly veiled appeal to the Soviet Bloc – in "Workers of the world, unite!" Rather than appealing to the religious identity or theological commitments of delegates, Mahler thus broadened the 'spiritual dimension' sufficiently to provide a common denominator for a shared ethical framework likely to secure a majority in the World Health Assembly. In 1984, the resolution passed, inviting Member States to "consider including in their strategies for health for all a spiritual dimension as defined in this resolution in accordance with their social and cultural patterns" (World Health Organization 1984b, 82–83).

2.4 *1986*

In the years that followed, the hope that the notion of a 'spiritual dimension' of the Health for All-initiative would provide the necessary moral impetus to animate Member States to implement universal primary healthcare soon faded. "Selective primary healthcare" became more attractive to scholars, donors, and other agencies, as it appeared to be a more realistic goal. It entailed a radical – in the words of one critic, "counter-revolutionary" – limitation of primary healthcare to growth monitoring, oral rehydration techniques, breastfeeding, and immunization ('GOBI'; Cueto 2004, 1871).

But the 'spiritual dimension' of health continued to appear in disparate and unexpected contexts unrelated to the Health for All-initiative. Within the purview of the WHO, consideration of the 'spiritual needs' of the dying became widely accepted as part of palliative care. Again, it happened due to a rather odd confluence of factors. In 1982, the Swedish oncologist Jan Stjernswärd took over the WHO's Cancer Unit in Geneva. During a two-year stay in India,

he had developed a holistic understanding of health, and the conviction that cancer care had a strong social as well as 'spiritual dimension'. Under Stjernswärd, the WHO's Cancer Unit developed a global Programme for Cancer Pain Relief, and in 1986, the WHO Collaborating Centre for Cancer Pain Relief published a report in which "spiritual unrest" was seen as a form of anxiety within the concept of "total pain" – a concept borrowed from Cicely Saunders (1918–2005), the pioneer of the Christian-inspired hospice movement (World Health Organization 1986, 9; Saunders, 1996, 1600). By 1990, under the influence of the European Association for Palliative Care, Saunders' notion of 'total pain', and precedents set regarding the 'spiritual dimension' in the preceding years, the WHO's first definition of palliative care was extended to the care for spiritual needs and pain. This was institutionalized in subsequent normative documents, such as the *WHO Guide for Effective Programmes – Palliative Care*, which named "spiritual counsellors" – notably, not the confessionally connoted 'chaplains' – as part of the palliative care team (World Health Organization 2007, 28). In 2014, a World Health Assembly resolution confirmed that the early identification, assessment, and treatment of pain, including "spiritual pain", is the task of palliative care; the "ethical duty" of healthcare professionals is to identify, assess, and treat such pain, and care for "spiritual needs" should be a routine part of undergraduate medical and nursing training (World Health Organization 2014, 1–4).

2.5 *1998*

In the late 1990s, two unrelated events once more made the 'spiritual dimension' a matter of debate. Firstly, a short-lived attempt was made at the 101st session of the Executive Board in 1998 to amend the preamble of the WHO's constitution to include a 'spiritual dimension' of health. This time, it was wrapped up in a broader attempt to reform the constitution and was supported by some of the same – now senior – health diplomats which who had lobbied the World Health Assembly in the early 1980s. After a brief but contentious debate at the Executive Board the matter was rejected, together with the wider overhaul of the constitution (World Health Organization 1998).

A second, limited but more consequential, foray occurred at the WHO's Division of Mental Health and was initially spearheaded by Rex Billington, its former Acting Director. While working in the WHO's regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean, and subsequently during his work for the Global Programme on AIDS, Billington had become convinced that spirituality was closely connected to health-related quality of life. In 1996, he was made the WHO's Chief of Mental Health Promotion and Planning and, later, Acting

Director of the division. His successor, Shekhar Saxena, had developed a similar sensibility for spirituality while working on the WHO's Quality of Life (WHOQOL) instrument in India. When the Fetzer Institute – the foundation of the late John E. Fetzer (1901–1999), an American media philanthropic executive with a cultivated interest in esotericism – approached the Division with funding to expand the WHOQOL with a module on "spirituality, religiousness, and personal beliefs" (SRPB), the ground had already been tilled.

Subsequent events stand out as another peculiar episode in the history of the 'spiritual dimension' of health at the WHO. Rather than developing a questionnaire based on familiar confessional and theological categories, the working group tasked with the development of the WHOQOL-SRPB, as it would be termed, looked for a cross-culturally valid construct shown to be highly related to quality of life. Building on the WHOQOL, it employed a "participatory and non-patronizing" methodology based on a diverse group of international experts, focus group consultation, and field testing (Winiger 2022a, 136). Eight clusters of questions ("facets") were identified.[2] A recurring complaint in the focus groups however was that some facets, such as "connectedness to a spiritual force or being," "faith," and – in earlier versions – "divine love," were "too 'religious'" and mainly spoke to Christians, undermining the aspiration to create a cross-culturally valid instrument (Winiger 2022a, 150). The final questionnaire thus included an extended explanation that questions should be answered according to one's own religion, and, if one had no religion, according to personal beliefs such as "a scientific theory, a personal way of life, a particular philosophy or a moral and ethical code" (World Health Organization, Department of Mental Health and Substance Dependence 2012, 20).

2.6 *2003–Present*

In the mid-to late 2000s, the term 'faith' entered WHO discourse. In 2003, the WHO's HIV/AIDS department employed Ted Karpf, an Episcopal priest, as a "partnerships officer" to build a closer relationship with "faith communities" (Karpf 2014, 17; Grills 2009). In 2005, the WHO commissioned a major study to be conducted by the African Religious Health Assets Programme (ARHAP) to map the "religious health assets" available in six African countries in the battle against HIV/AIDS. The following year, Karpf was instrumental in the publication of a booklet entitled "Building from Common Foundations: The World

2 The clusters were: connectedness to a spiritual being or force; inner peace/serenity/harmony; meaning of life; hope and optimism; awe; wholeness and integration; spiritual strength; and faith.

Health Organization and Faith-Based Organizations in Primary Healthcare." The cover photograph of an Ethiopian mother and child, presumably affected by HIV/AIDS and wearing a cross, was intended to signify a positive relationship between African primary healthcare and faith-based actors, and the WHO's endorsement thereof (World Health Organization 2008).

In 2009, ARHAP became the subject of a major conference organized by the WHO Programme on Partnerships and UN Reform in collaboration with the Center for Interfaith Action on Global Poverty, which intended to highlight the work done by faith-based organizations in the provision of health-related services. Although they shoulder a significant proportion of the global burden of disease, it was argued, faith-based organizations are often invisible and "taken for granted." If they were "put on the map" they would gain a "seat at the table" of donor agencies and governments and could participate in planning and funding negotiations (Winiger and Peng-Keller 2021, 6). The same year, another conference on health and lifestyle was held on WHO premises by a group of Seventh-Day Adventists and attended by over 600 members of the church. But these events were poorly received by some WHO staff, who feared the compromising of the WHO's secular mandate by a religious lobby. This backlash culminated in Karpf's departure and an erstwhile pause of 'faith engagement' at the WHO (Peng-Keller, Winiger, and Rauch 2022, 182–207; Winiger and Peng-Keller 2021).

During the West African Ebola outbreak (2014–2016), reports appeared that infection control workers were met with hostility by affected communities, who feared being deprived of proper burial of the deceased. Working with 'faith representatives' on the ground, the WHO produced detailed guidelines on how to conduct "safe and dignified" burials and hoped to mend relations with local communities and improve access to infected bodies (Moran 2017; World Health Organization 2017). With the Covid-19 pandemic, and drawing on the experience with Ebola and HIV/AIDS, efforts to improve relations with 'faith communities' were revitalized and carried forward by EPI-WIN (WHO Information Network for Epidemics), which promotes a "whole-of-society" approach to health emergency preparedness and response by engaging with community leaders and decision-makers (Winiger 2020; Peng-Keller, Winiger, and Rauch 2022, 222–34; World Health Organization, Information Network for Epidemics 2023). This initiative culminated in the production of an official strategy for 'faith engagement' (World Health Organization, Information WHO Network for Epidemics 2021). In early 2022, the 'WHO Faith Network' was founded, further formalizing relationships with a wide variety of faith-based organizations and academic institutions active in the field of global health (WHO Faith Network Secretariat 2022).

3 Discussion: Thinking Faith Engagement beyond 'Faith'

As illustrated by these events, over the seven decades of its existence, the WHO has repeatedly returned to the question of the potential significance of a 'spiritual dimension' in its activities. In each historical episode, a different constellation of actors converged and, often unaware of precedent, grappled with its relationship to health and well-being. Whether religion can play a generally positive role in global health, and by extension whether the WHO's interest in a 'spiritual dimension', at least in principle, represents a positive development, is a complex matter beyond the scope of the present discussion.[3] Instead, this article outlines three potential lines of critique regarding the historical events outlined above: Firstly, the ambiguity of the term 'spirituality'; secondly, the problematic aspects of the term 'faith' which became prevalent in WHO discourse in the mid to late 2000s; and lastly, the role played by faith engagement in the WHO's reckoning with its own holistic mandate.

3.1 *Terminological Ambiguity of Spirituality*

What precisely was meant by 'spirituality' was often left underdetermined. On one hand, the term was used to denote what Eisenmann et al. (2016) have referred to as "theistic transcendence," a usage common in contemporary popular Christianity. Thus, when the inclusion of 'spirituality' in the Health for All-initiative was debated at the 36th World Health Assembly in 1983, Samuel Hynd (1924–2016), the health minister of Swaziland, argued that "there is a dimension to a man or a woman that goes beyond and above his physical, mental and social wellbeing. There is something within a person – [...] what one could call attitude, motivation, driving force, or by whatever name you wish to call it or define it, but which I prefer to call spirit" (World Health Organization 1983, 106). While key proponents of a 'spiritual dimension', including Samuel Hynd, Phillip Etter and Halfdan Mahler, were devout Christians, the theistic transcendental interpretation of the term was rarely voiced publicly. Hynd's reference stands as one of a few moments, when it was made explicit – and not without ceding that this interpretation was merely a matter of personal preference.

3 For a historical overview of the religion/global health nexus, the reader is referred to Stein (2012), Holman (2015), and Levin (2020). For a treatment of general health implications of religious beliefs and practices, see Idler (2014), Koenig, King, and Carson (2012), and Balboni et al. (2022). For the current state of the evidence in the religion/development nexus, see Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (2022).

The 'spiritual dimension' was also employed to denote what may be described as "non-theistic transcendence," referring to a "direction of transcendence and ultimate concern [that] is not necessarily vertical in the sense of a clear and primary concern with a heaven with God(s) or divine beings," but also "not simply horizontal either, since an 'other world' or realm is not denied." In this sense, 'spirituality' may refer to the "imagination of a world 'behind' as residence for the dead, ghosts, angels, supernatural helpers or impersonal symbols such as cosmic energy" (Eisenmann et al. 2016, 12). The WHO's encounter with traditional medicine (discussed elsewhere; see Winiger 2022b), in which 'spirituality' was used to refer to animistic and polytheistic worldviews, is instructive. Aware of interpreting spirituality literally as a concern with 'spirits', the architects of the WHOQOL-SRPB made a point of consulting a representative of the Aymara, an Indigenous people native to the Andes in Bolivia, Peru, Northern Argentina, and Chile, to advise on the questionnaire (Winiger 2022a).

Following Eisenmann et al. (2016), a further facet may be characterized as "mystical transcend*ing*," understood as an "anthropological category describing the human experience of crossing the boundaries of one's ego or ordinary reality on the one hand" without positing "an ontological category describing the symbolization of such experiences that may include assumptions of the existence of particular higher spheres or beings on the other." In this sense, one may speak of a person transcending their individual's boundaries when "recognizing one's higher self or inner core," "gaining insight into existential meaning or a deeper, non-rational truth," or "sensing that there must be something higher or beyond – although it is impossible to express it more precisely" (Eisenmann et al. 2016, 144). This is well illustrated by Desh Bandhu Bisht, who at the Executive Board in 1978 argued that humans are differentiated from animals through a spiritual dimension, which he dubbed "Factor X." Years later, Bisht brought this view to bear on the consultations for the WHOQOL-SRPB. He was joined by Narayana Reddy (1931–2017), a former director of the prestigious Indian National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, who contributed an extensive discussion of the Hindu conception of body and mind, the values of life, the theory of karma, asceticism, and "liberation" (World Health Organization, Social Change and Mental Health Cluster 1998, app. 5). Alternatively, transcending may occur "in terms of a universalistic orientation towards high moral standards and lead to an ethical life with respect to all other human beings," whereby "values regarded as absolute and humanity as a whole represent the concepts which transcend the individual's boundaries" (Eisenmann et al. 2016, 144). Particularly in the World Health Assembly and Executive Board discussions of the late 1970s and early 1980s, the 'spiritual dimension' was conceptualized in this vein. It underpinned Mahler's

report to the 37th World Health Assembly, when he argued that the 'spiritual dimension' of his organization encapsulated "ennobling ideas" including the political ideals espoused by his audience: "All people are born free," "Liberty, equality, fraternity," and indeed "Workers of the world, unite!" (World Health Organization 1984a, 23).

3.2 *Problematic Aspects of 'Faith'*

The complex semantic affordances of the 'spiritual dimension' contrast with 'faith', which entered WHO discourse in the mid-to late 2000s. Whereas the notion of 'spirituality' is complicated by its ambiguity, it may be argued, 'faith' has more homogenous connotations strongly colored by the Lutheran and Reformed soteriology of salvation by faith (*justificatio sola fide*), which has been widely influential in evangelical communities of the Global North (Vainio 2016; Sproul 1999). Though the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) elaborated the concept of 'faith' into a cross-culturally relevant notion acceptable even to (some) Buddhist scholars, in contemporary colloquial English, 'faith' remains strongly associated with one particular religious expression – typically Christian, protestant, and North American (Traer 1991; Aitken and Sharma 2017).

Moreover, to the extent that 'faith' is understood in terms of belief associated with a specific religious tradition or affiliation, it is difficult to translate into other languages (Needham 1972). The ramifications are potentially far-reaching. As Lartey and Moon state bluntly, "when we limit what is 'spiritual' to 'faith' traditions, it reinforces Christian hubris: a combination of white Christian superiority as normative, with racism intertwined in those standards of the norm" (Lartey and Moon 2020, 2–3). If left unquestioned, this may subtly perpetuate a colonial legacy of "curative violence" (Moon 2023, 26). Among postcolonial theologians, the privileged role assumed by 'faith' and related (protestant) Christian terminology has been noted since at least the 1980s, and given rise to a sizeable literature interrogating the unspoken assumptions, theological underpinnings, and linguistic misunderstandings entailed in offering care across cultural borders (Winiger & Goodwin 2023).

Reflecting on the historical episodes outlined above, it appears unlikely that a 'faith dimension' or even a 'religious dimension' of health would have gained much support at the first World Health Assembly in 1948, when Etter appealed to the holistic mandate laid out in the preamble to the WHO's constitution; nor in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Arab – Israel conflict and Soviet secularism made both terms highly suspect, or in the late 1990s, when focus groups consulted on the WHOQOL-SRPB complained that any mention of "faith," "divine love," or even "connectedness to a spiritual force or being" were

"too 'religious'" and "too Christian" (O'Connell 2002, 167, 168). In historical perspective, the new millennium was marked by a period of renewed interest in and rapprochement with religion (Winiger and Peng-Keller, 2021). The current shift toward the language of 'faith' in WHO discourse, it may be argued, represents a relatively recent cultural import tied to the political shifts which in the early 2000s put religion on the global development agenda.[4]

3.3 *'Faith Engagement' and the WHO's Holistic Mandate*

The shift from the language of 'spirituality' to that of 'faith' in WHO discourse was accompanied by a change in how the 'missing' aspect in the organization's activities was framed. As evident in the historical episodes outlined above, proponents of a 'spiritual dimension' of health were often established figures within the organization, concerned, at least overtly, with the conceptualization of health on the basis of which the organization conducted its activities. In this sense, the historical records typically refer to a 'spiritual dimension' of health – that is, they were primarily interested in an implied, but not actualized, aspect of the WHO's constitutional mandate, rather than external, religiously-motivated stakeholders.

In contrast, in the early 2000s, amidst a broader neoliberal restructuring and a shift toward public–private partnerships under Director-General Gro Harlem Brundtland, the emerging notion of 'faith engagement' was framed as an instrument to engage civil society actors. This was hoped to further the WHO's institutional aims in regions where resources were scarce, and influence over state institutions was brittle (Chorev 2013). Thus, Ted Karpf was brought in specifically for his religious background to improve WHO's relationship with faith-based organizations, faith leaders, and their communities. Much of the WHO's subsequent 'faith engagement' occurred in the fight against HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and Covid-19, all major infectious disease outbreaks where cooperation with public health measures and trust in and dissemination of accurate information were critical. The shift from the 'spiritual dimension' of health to 'engaging' with (external) 'communities of faith', it thus might be contended, bespeaks a process by which WHO-internal initiatives to question and revitalize the organization's holistic mandate have given way to an instrumental rationality premised on a transactional logic of exchange. 'Faith engagement' in this sense may be read to implicate a cost – benefit analysis, whereby partnerships with individuals and groups who 'have' religion ('faith actors') are

4 On the rise of evangelical soteriology in the United Nations and the broader humanitarian milieu, see Curtis (2018) and Stein (2012).

valued for their means – ideological, financial, personnel – employable toward largely unquestioned institutional ends.

4 Conclusion

By way of conclusion it is worth noting that the challenge of relating to the unifying mission of the United Nations and its agencies in an inspiring yet diplomatically effective manner was well noted by the UN's first secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld (1905–1961), and subsequent secretary-generals, who walked a fine line between their religious heritage and cosmopolitan morality (Kille 2007; Muller 1979). In his diary, Hammarskjöld articulated a highly unorthodox, even "heretical" notion of faith, certainly for a Lutheran Swede of his time. But he rarely invoked his views publicly (Aulén 1969, 139). Instead, he was greatly invested in creating a meditation room placed prominently at the UN's headquarters in New York – which he left intentionally nondescript. Alluding to the mystical theology of the *via negativa*, he wished to signify a spiritual presence amidst religious absence: "It is for those who come here," Hammarskjöld noted during its opening ceremony, "to fill the void with what they find in their center of stillness" (Hedstrom 2021, 210, 211; Hammarskjöld 1973). Like the 'spiritual dimension' of health, the meditation room at the UN headquarters may remind one that particularly in diplomatic affairs, it is often in the unsaid which creates space for meaningful change to happen.[5]

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation; grant numbers 204286 and 169222.

5 Conversely, quipped one master of the *via negativa*, "whoever is seeking God by ways, is finding ways and losing God, who in ways is hidden" (Murphy 1996, 466).

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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Reflections on the Role of Faith Actors in Refugee Responses

Policy and Practice Note

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

The growing global refugee crisis is a challenge for dignity and human solidarity. Aware of the shared religious narrative about the respect of human dignity and solidarity with the most vulnerable people, UNHCR has engaged faith-based actors, as organizations, local communities, and leaders, into the response to this crisis. This role of faith-based actors has been recognized by the Global Compact on Refugees, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2018, which has led to further religious and interreligious initiatives in assisting refugees and host communities, including conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. The paper presents, from the UNHCR perspective, the framework for faith-based engagement in refugee responses, the identified challenges for collaboration in this field, as well as UNHCR's actual priority areas for religious engagement.

Keywords

refugees – migration – religion – ethics – solidarity – interfaith – dignity

1 Introduction

All the world's religions have in common the understanding that how we treat our neighbors – especially those fleeing from persecution, conflict,

Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302009
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

and war – is an expression of the strength of a religious faith. Many religious scriptures feature stories and commandments of what could be called "sacred hospitality," and the golden rule, shared by many religious and philosophical traditions – to *do unto others as you would have them do unto you* – is inscribed in the famous Norman Rockwell mosaic at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

In 2012 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) organized a dialogue with faith-based organizations and government representatives, led by UN General Secretary António Guterres. At the end of the conference, the UN High Commissioner took on a recommendation to develop a Code of Conduct, along with faith leaders, on welcoming migrants, refugees and other forcibly displaced people and to stand against xenophobia. This commitment to welcome the stranger and to challenge others, even leaders, to do so as well, was affirmed by multiple faiths in 2013 in what became a landmark of faith-based commitment for refugees, namely the, *Welcoming the Stranger: Affirmations For Faith Leaders document* (UNHCR 2013a). The text consists of 16 affirmations written in the first person, drawing upon principles and values shared by the world's major religions. The document provides faith leaders with an opportunity to affirm the role faith communities play in welcoming the stranger, the refugee, the internally displaced, and the other.

On World Refugee Day, 20 June 2022, the Lutheran World Federation, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the Jewish humanitarian group working with refugees and asylum seekers, organized together in Geneva a two-day conference entitled *Welcoming the Stranger: Shaping the Future*. The faith actors and leaders from fifty Christian, Muslim, and Jewish faith-based organizations who attended the conference reflect the continuing religious and interreligious engagement in responding to refugee crises.

This conference evolved out of a longer-term UNHCR project to engage a broad coalition of religious leaders and organizations to support refugees, i.e., to welcome the stranger. This project offers insight on the role that faith-based organizations and leaders play in refugee responses worldwide as well as some of the challenges and opportunities that characterize cooperation between international organizations like UNHCR and faith-based organizations.

This article reflects on the challenges and opportunities facing refugee responses by faith-based and international actors and sketches a snapshot of what future cooperation between UNHCR and faith-based actors in refugee situations worldwide might look like.

2 Who Are the Faith Actors Engaged for Refugees?

UNHCR considers faith actors and engages with them in three different capacities. In 2014 the UN Refugee Agency published a "Partnership Note" targeting three groups: faith-based organizations, local faith communities, and faith leaders (UNHCR 2014). This typology allows us to highlight some of the challenges that UNHCR faces and the strategies which are developed in engaging faith actors for humanitarian ends.

All three categories of faith actors play a crucial role in demonstrating compassion and care for forcibly displaced and stateless persons in their communities. The broader work of faith actors' humanitarian action in support of sustainable development, peacebuilding, and environmental advocacy, among other examples, also impacts the circumstances and well-being of refugees in various political contexts. Through this work, faith actors can bring religious teachings to life, whether through supporting a teenage boy living in a war zone, a family who has escaped one, or a single mother without a nationality, or by fostering the engagement of their communities through faith-based teaching for universal love and compassion, meeting the humanitarian principles of helping anyone regardless of faith, gender, and ethnicity.

However, one should be aware of the fact that those categories of faith actors vary in size from a group composed of a few believers to global religions and broad inter-faith networks. They encompass a range of faith identities and motivations, with diverse degrees of knowledge of, willingness and capacity to observe humanitarian principles.

2.1 *Faith-Based Organizations*

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) is a term used here to describe a broad range of organizations influenced by faith. They include religious and religion-based organizations/groups/networks; communities belonging to a place of religious worship; specialized religious institutions and religious social service agencies; and registered or unregistered non-profit institutions that have a religious character or mission. Faith-based organizations such as the Lutheran World Federation and Islamic Relief have consistently been among UNHCR's top ten implementing partners, while Caritas is among the top ten of UNHCR's national faith-based organization partners. UNHCR partners with FBOs in emergencies to deliver humanitarian assistance and essential services, including healthcare, education, and water and sanitation. The skilled women and men working as teachers, doctors, and social workers who work for FBOs are also part of their communities, so they often best understand the context and how to ensure people get what is needed. The experience shows that FBOs can

provide an excellent entry point to augment and expand existing integrated interventions. Moreover, because the work of faith-based actors does not always depend upon external or international funding, it often stays present and active, even after international attention has faded in a crisis (Holdcroft 2014). Religious actors who coordinate humanitarian aid, through the work of the community of Sant'Egidio, World Vision or Islamic Relief, for example, often embedded in local faith communities, including mosques and parishes, stay with them for years or decades after a crisis has faded.

2.2 *Local Faith Communities*

Local faith communities consist of people who share common religious beliefs and values, and draw upon these to carry out activities in their respective communities. They are often providers of first resort in humanitarian emergencies, mobilizing and providing support through their membership and faith networks. Their members are often unpaid volunteers who act because their faith calls upon them to do so. They may or may not be aware of basic humanitarian principles. However, the dynamics of welcoming the stranger which spiritually drives many believers means that synagogues, mosques, and churches often offer assistance whether or not a person has documentation or legal status. When they offer housing, clothing, food, and spiritual care, they reach individuals who might otherwise not be able to access care from locally based international FBOs (Knapp et al. 2013).

2.3 *Faith Leaders*

Faith leaders are believers who play influential roles within their faith communities and the broader local community. They benefit from trust and exercise moral authority over members of their local faith community, and shape public opinion in the broader community at the local level and in some cases even at the national and international level. Recent examples include the impassioned defense of migrants and refugees by Pope Francis, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Grand Imam of Al Azhar. Moreover, religious leaders can and often do play an essential role in influencing global policies by calling on governments to do more, keep borders open, provide asylum, ensure humane housing and adequate food, and remind us to be compassionate (Lynch 2010; Schwarz 2018; Marshall et al. 2021). Faith leaders can also have a considerable influence in shaping popular opinion around refugee issues and integration. They can promote solidarity by reminding us that we are all part of the same human family. Faith leaders can influence their constituencies' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and care and model for refugees through their work, promoting the welcoming of refugees and encouraging values of friendship,

reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence. To foster greater collaboration with religious leaders in the build-up to the Global Refugee Forum in 2023, UNHCR and Religions for Peace formed, in 2020, the Multi-Religious Council of Leaders.[1] This had the aim of strengthening inter-faith collaboration between religious leaders across regions and faiths to address the root causes of forced displacement by supporting advocacy, conflict prevention, reconciliation, peacebuilding and social cohesion initiatives, at global, regional, and country levels. As a result of the war in Ukraine, the Council members undertook a mission to Moldova in January 2023, where they hosted a Multi-Religious Dialogue Roundtable on "Solidarity for Peace" together with national faith leaders and refugees discuss solutions.

3 Faith Actors and the Global Compact on Refugees

On December 17, 2018, the United Nations General Assembly affirmed the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), after two years of extensive consultations led by UNHCR with Member States, international organizations, refugees, civil society, faith leaders, the private sector, and experts. The Global Compact on Refugees is a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation (United Nations 2018).

The GCR recognizes faith-based actors as essential in assisting refugees and host communities, including the aspects of conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. One of the four objectives of the GCR is to expand third-country solutions, particularly resettlement programs, as a true expression of responsibility-sharing. To this end, the text of the GCR specifically recognized the importance of faith-based organizations as a relevant partner and key stakeholder in the solutions-oriented agenda. At the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF)[2] in 2019, faith-based organizations made 60 pledges (31 global pledges and 29 regional pledges) in support of GCR goals. The pledges contribute to a number of GCR objectives such as providing humanitarian assistance, promoting durable solutions, economic and social inclusion of refugees and host communities, and organizing global advocacy campaigns. The 2019 GRF gathering of FBOs and religious leaders included a joint pledge made by the Lutheran World Federation, Islamic Relief Worldwide, and the Hebrew

1 See: https://www.unhcr.org/multi-religious-council-of-leaders.html.

2 See: https://globalcompactrefugees.org/channel/pledges-contributions.

Immigrant Aid Society. Many other FBOs made specific pledges outlining how their work would concretely support the GCR and UNHCR keeps a full listing of these pledges on its website. To provide an idea about the pledges, and their concrete approaches and results, we mention here some selected examples.

The Jesuit Refugee Service, for example, made a pledge to implement its reconciliation strategy in five pilot projects in Ethiopia, Uganda, and Nigeria. The program develops the capacities of influencers who become agents of transformation in their communities. The program in Adjumani (Uganda) targets leaders of different religious denominations and works to create mutual tolerance, trust, openness, and acceptance. The result is a measurable shift in perceptions of how youth and others perceive themselves and how other community members perceive them.

Another example is the Anglican Church of Canada, which has been supporting the Canadian sponsorship agreement holders since the program began in the late 1970s, including fifteen Anglican dioceses. The Anglican Church of Canada pledged to apply to resettle 400–500 people annually through the resettlement program in Canada.

In South Africa, the Fraternity of Ministers lobbied with the government and other stakeholders to address the plight of undocumented children who were out of school in support of the Southern African Nationality Network pledge. Efforts resulted in a court case brought by the Centre for Child Law. The court ruled that the constitutional right to education extends to everyone in South Africa, regardless of nationality or immigration status.

Another pledge was received by a group of young religious leaders who created a project called "Beyond," which addresses racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and migration in Serbia, Kosovo, Hungary, and Italy through youth exchanges, local activities, and social media campaigns.

These pledges also inspired further action from faith actors following the humanitarian emergency in Ukraine. Accordingly, a pledge was made by the South Florida Ukrainian Refugee Resettlement Project, which was launched with local Ukrainian and Catholic Churches, the Jewish Family Services, and other leaders who represent religious groups and social services agencies from the local community.

Following these pledges, in 2021 UNHCR worked together with Religions for Peace to establish a multireligious council of leaders to strengthen collective efforts by faith actors and communities to support "global advocacy on conflict prevention, reconciliation, peacebuilding and social cohesion." The council includes twenty religious and spiritual leaders from a diverse number of faith traditions who are working to mobilize more commitments by faith-based organizations and leaders in the run-up to the 2023 Global Refugee Forum.

4 Overcoming Challenges Together

Impartiality, non-discrimination, respect for the beliefs of others, diversity, empowerment, equality, humanity, and protection against any form of conditionality are the fundamental principles of the *Red Cross Code of Conduct* (International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 1994), which is the common language adopted by UNHCR and which most FBOs agree to adhere to when helping people in need during armed conflict, natural disasters, and other emergencies.

Therefore, while faith may be the catalyst for humanitarian action, UNHCR encourages FBOs to be "impartial" in their action. It can be challenging for some faith communities to be unbiassed in carrying out their work, as their deeply held beliefs may lead them to want to share those beliefs and even try and convert those to whom they are providing services. A number of studies have explored the tensions present in faith-based humanitarian action and the ways in which specific religious beliefs and identities impact development assistance (Mavelli and Wilson 2016; Lynch and Schwarz 2016; Schwarz 2018; Kraft and Smith 2019; Wilkinson 2018). For example, some interpretations of religious beliefs may discriminate against women. Some faith actors condone harmful traditional practices such as early marriage or female genital mutilation (Le Roux and Bartelink 2017). Others may hold biases that cause them to exclude members of other faith backgrounds. Sometimes these religious practices have become so ingrained that they are challenging to overcome.

UNHCR, like the broader humanitarian community, is committed to upholding humanitarian principles and ensuring that protection underpins all activities. Therefore, in its collaboration with faith actors, UNHCR cannot engage in partnerships that are contrary to these principles.

Recognizing these challenges, UNHCR has developed the *Implementing Partnership Management Guidance*, which reflects the fundamental principles of the *Red Cross Code of Conduct* and can serve as a tool to mitigate some of these risks and concerns. The guiding document expects from each partner (without specifying faith actors) that "it will not discriminate against any persons of concern, regardless of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, gender or social group" (UNHCR 2013b, 17).

If the faith actors are expected to be authentically inclusive, and refrain from using the humanitarian service for other religious purposes, the humanitarian actors from their side can be challenged in navigating the religious diversity, and the socio-cultural implications of faith, especially in non-secular contexts. The humanitarian agents need to understand how different faith actors are structured, and to what extent, especially in rural contexts, religious beliefs

and practices feature in the way assistance and relief are provided. The lack of familiarity with the different processes and structures can become a source of frustration and misunderstanding. UNHCR recently developed internal FBO Engagement Guidance to help staff better navigate these challenges. It highlights the achievements, and stresses the advantages and challenges of engaging with FBOs, and provides specific recommendations and opportunities to strengthen engagement.

The learning curve of collaborating with faith actors can also be affected by staff rotation within UNHCR, and become a challenge for its institutional memory, impacting relationships, and long-standing positive cooperation with local faith communities.

In the long-term, with institutional memory, continuous critical analysis and mutual learning, and the potentially increasing and consistent collaboration between UNHCR and FBOs, the assets of FBOs and their specific strengths can be leveraged and pooled to provide better services for forcibly displaced and stateless people.

5 UNHCR Priority Areas for Religious Engagement

Recognizing the needed support provided by faith actors by offering sanctuary to refugees on their journey to safety, including reception and admission, meeting protection or service delivery needs, and by supporting communities to find solutions such as private sponsorship programs and local integration, UNHCR aims to strengthen its collaboration with FBOs, religious actors, and communities. Five concrete priority areas have been identified by UNHCR (2014) concerning where they can strengthen their cooperation with FBOs by leveraging their comparative advantages to achieve the best possible outcomes for refugees, internally displaced persons, and asylum seekers.

1. **Integrating faith-based actors into the humanitarian framework** and in regular coordination meetings will help to bridge the gap between humanitarian partners and faith communities. It will assist in addressing structural challenges associated with working with local or international faith-based organizations. FBOs can also provide knowledge and analysis of the context in which UNHCR will be working, including mapping faith-based support structures such as youth and women's groups, support services, and religious spaces.
2. **Cooperating with faith leaders in conflict prevention and resolution**, since they can assist in peacebuilding by mediating tensions between refugees/internally displaced persons and host communities in conflict or

post-conflict situations. Faith leaders can in fact deeply understand the root causes and drivers of conflict in their local contexts. Collaboration with faith leaders can also help build an understanding of the drivers of peace and the available sources of resilience, such as skills, capacities, and practices.

3. **Fostering the role of faith communities and faith-based organizations in refugee resettlement**, recognizing the historical and continued significant role they have been playing in this area. They make a unique contribution to refugees' local integration, provide friendship and meet the needs of refugees in changing social and economic contexts. FBOs can also assist in supporting refugees who would otherwise not be eligible for resettlement to access complementary pathways, such as private sponsorship and scholarships at local universities.
4. **Recognizing the role of FBOs in providing psychosocial support for refugees**, using faith-based approaches to delivering psychosocial support and counselling for trauma healing, such as for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors. For most people, psychological distress and response is a normal reaction to the abnormal situation arising from experiencing conflict. However, for some, mental health issues may arise and become an ongoing issue. FBOs can often fulfil the spiritual needs of the people they serve and use a faith-based approach to delivering psychosocial support and counseling for trauma healing, such as for SGBV survivors.
5. **Committing to mutual learning and increasing coordination**, based on the fact that UNHCR continuously seeks better understanding how faith-inspired programming can complement humanitarian or development programming. Mutual training and joint capacity-building initiatives can increase the ability to cooperate and identify potential areas for collective action and advocacy.

6 Conclusion

At the end of 2022, as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order, UNHCR counted 108.4 million people forcibly displaced worldwide (UNHCR 2023). Some of the conflicts leading to this global humanitarian tragedy are related to religiously expressed violence.

UNHCR emphasizes the potential role of faith actors in addressing root causes through supporting conflict prevention, reconciliation, peacebuilding, and social cohesion, contributing to good relations and peaceful coexistence

between refugees and host communities. In this perspective, UNHCR looks to build on the results of the 60 pledges made by FBOs in 2019 in the framework of the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), and is working closely with faith partners to generate more pledges and concrete action in support of refugees at the GRF gathering in December 2023.

During the Emerging Peacemakers Forum (2023), hosted by the World Council of Churches, in partnership with the Muslim Council of Elders and Rose Castle Foundation, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grand asserted that building peace through interreligious dialogue is possible if "we challenge biases and discrimination within our communities, among friends and families to embrace and protect those in need of help. We should create opportunities for change and fight for them."[3]

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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3 See: https://globalcompactrefugees.org/news-stories/building-peace-through-inter-religious-dialogue.

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Multi-stakeholder Partnerships in Global Affairs

Learnings from the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development in Times of Polycrisis

Policy and Practice Note

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This article argues that coordinated and multilayered cross-sectoral collaborated is required to contribute to sustainable development and respond to the global polycrisis characterized by human-made destruction of the environment, climate change and globalization. Pandemics, regional wars, and banking crises not only create local suffering but increasingly have international consequences, threatening the progress made, be it regarding poverty, education, health, or human rights. The article outlines the potential of multi-stakeholder partnerships as inclusive mechanisms of collaboration in global affairs by exemplarily outlining learnings from the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). Despite the promising potential and contributions of PaRD, the article illustrates the need to overcome the principal problem of imbalanced power allocation in global affairs, as decisions at a global level are usually made by governments, with stakeholders from civil society being involved in pre-consultations but remaining without decision-making power.

Keywords

polycrisis – globalisation – global affairs – multi-stakeholder partnerships – religion – civil society – sustainable development – 2030 Agenda

1 Introduction

Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in South Africa in 2002, there seems to be consensus that multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) are important mechanisms of collaboration in global affairs, especially in times of polycrisis (Biermann et al. 2007). The 17th Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), "Partnerships for the Goals", specifically addresses strengthening the means of implementation and revitalising global partnership, since the 2030 Agenda calls for action by all countries worldwide (United Nations n.d.). To ensure that no one is left behind, this includes partnerships between governments, multilaterals, the private sector, and civil society. The 2030 Agenda specifically identifies MSPs as a key element in achieving the SDGs. It says:

> Multi-stakeholder partnerships …
>
> 17.16 Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology, and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries
>
> 17.17 Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships. (United Nations n.d.)

Accordingly, multilateralism and MSPs have gained attention in global affairs (UNEP n.d.). In the German context of international development cooperation alone, over 45 MSPs are currently operational in all key sectors:

> The substantial number of new MSPs launched over recent years also reflects a new and less hierarchical, but more integrative, understanding of the relationship between stakeholders from the private sector and government. Private sector stakeholders – both those with a focus on generating profits and those not-for-profit – are increasingly involved in formulating and implementing policy measures. (Partnerships 2030 2017)

There are many reasons why MSPs have gained importance in international development cooperation. Postmodernism seems to have increased, at least partially, the willingness to seek new forms of intersectional collaboration and transgress formerly separated spheres, also amongst governments. Today's global challenges, such as environmental destruction, pandemics, and banking crises, are multifaceted. Polycrises demand multiplex collaboration. Multiplex

in the present context means including all key stakeholders in the process of finding solutions to multilayered problems, including governmental, multilateral, academic, and civil society actors, and developing solutions inclusively from a variety of perspectives. The multiplicities of current global challenges demand a holistic and evidenced-based understanding of issues and way forward. They transcend the capacities and expertise of individual nations, organisations, and sectors (Stibbe and Prescott 2016). The following outline of the potentials and challenges of MSPs is based on concrete experiences over nearly a decade since the inception of the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) in 2016. The paper also draws on the experiences of colleagues who have been working in other MSPs in the context of international development cooperation.

2 Added Value of Multi-stakeholder Partnerships

The following key added values can be derived from successful MSPs:

1. **Trust:** Developing and maintaining trust is fundamental for successful collaboration and creating impact. MSPs provide conducive frameworks to build trust among stakeholders by creating room for long-term engagement based on personal exchanges. Stakeholders who are otherwise sceptical of each other get recurrent opportunities to meet and overcome reservations and possible prejudices. A prerequisite for this is honest and transparent communication and decision-making, developing a common language and opportunities to commit to shared goals. Once trust has been built, it ultimately leads to greater commitment and ownership among stakeholders (Khane 2017).
2. **Access:** Stakeholders who otherwise do not collaborate systematically with each other get the opportunity to access a wide range of views, entities, and sectors. This can be especially valuable for smaller NGOs which would otherwise have neither the capacities nor the knowledge of how to approach governments. Governments on the other hand can collaborate with diverse civil society actors in a coordinated way and can draw on the knowledge and ideas embodied in these stakeholders for policymaking and when developing new initiatives and programmes.
3. **Ownership:** Including stakeholders representing different perspectives and interests and involving affected communities enhances the overall ownership as well as the legitimacy and acceptance of proposed solutions, as they reflect a broad range of voices and concerns from policy to the grassroots level. This is especially true when partnerships operate

based on principles of collaborative governance on an equal level, where decision-making involves transparency and consensus-building as well as shared responsibility, and accountability among stakeholders.

4. **Impact:** By pooling human and financial resources, networks, technical expertise, and experiences, and by providing a conducive environment for learning and innovation, MSPs offer avenues for creating synergies and leveraging collective action beyond established hierarchies and protocols. It also allows existing impact to be amplified and scaled up in a coordinated way.
5. **Efficiency:** MSPs enable stakeholders to retrieve and share information without much effort. By facilitating the exchange and dissemination of promising practices but also failures at the policy and operational level, MSPs can foster adaptive solutions and improve the effectiveness of interventions over time. They create room to identify the potential to scale up the impact by replicating successful approaches and thus accelerating progress towards sustainable development. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, online conferencing tools have created easy, quick, and cost-efficient opportunities for networking, dialogue, and consultations while keeping the CO_2 footprint low.
6. **Flexibility:** MSPs are often established as voluntary undertakings operating under their own principles and pursuing a common vision and mission. Compared to more regulated processes of governments, they can act in creative and flexible ways to achieve specific goals in a short time span.
7. **Localisation:** The need of the hour is to better understand the intertwining of the local and the global and vice versa. Local contexts and dynamics ought to be understood first before context-sensitive responses can be developed which are accepted by the people, including traditional authorities, which usually enjoy a high level of trust and authority due to their long-standing local rooting. Localisation is by no means a one-way process. MSPs facilitate spaces where the dialogue between local and global is not only created but maintained over time. Drawing on local experiences and ideas, MSPs support attention being placed on actual needs and the adaptation of successful practices from other regions to specific regional needs. When local perspectives and experiences are heard by governments and multilateral entities, more inclusive decisions can be taken, also at the global level.
8. **Visibility:** The pooling of resources and the possibility of getting the support of a secretariat that supports the coordination of an MSP enables the impact to be showcased in a coordinated way at a global level, for

instance through a common website, newsletters, and publications. This is particularly helpful for smaller NGOs contributing to the SDGs which do not have the bandwidth and expertise to demonstrate their impact at an international level. This valorises the work of local stakeholders and increases opportunities not only to be visible but also to be heard and included in consultations when new policies and programmes are developed. This also increases the opportunities for stakeholders to initiate new collaborations through joint projects that can catalyse long-term partnerships.

3 Challenges of Multi-stakeholder Partnerships

While MSPs offer much potential, they also face various challenges which are amplified by an increasingly dynamic world, where political priorities and attention keep shifting quickly:

1. **Power:** Multi-stakeholder partnerships involve actors with varying levels of influence and resources. Power imbalances can undermine equal participation and inclusive decision-making. Stronger actors, especially key funders of MSPs, may dominate discourses and shape outcomes in their favour, marginalising the perspectives and interests of less powerful stakeholders. Therefore, MSPs need to develop a governance structure which ensures a fair distribution of decision-making power among all stakeholders.
2. **Priorities:** Stakeholders have divergent interests, resources, and approaches. Balancing these differences and creating overarching goals and priorities with which all stakeholders can identify demands developing a common understanding and inclusive consultations. It is especially important that solutions and policies that impact the local level are developed in consultation with local stakeholders.
3. **Coordination:** Aligning efforts among diverse stakeholders is much more complex and resource-intensive than in the case of single and more homogeneous entities. MSPs are sometimes based on elaborate coordination systems which need time and patience. Decision-making might be unwieldy, but chances are high that decisions are not based on one single perspective or wrong assessments since MSPs include actors with different levels of information, understanding, structures, decision-making processes, timelines, and resource allocation. Achieving coordination and ensuring effective collaboration requires a professional

and well-equipped coordination mechanism, for instance through a secretariat which receives the required staffing, funding, and infrastructure to work on a long-term basis.

4. **Accountability:** Multi-stakeholder partnerships often operate in a complex governance landscape where accountability but also monitoring mechanisms and capabilities are not evenly distributed. Without a robust monitoring and accountability mechanism, an honest and self-critical reflection on the progress made is difficult. Developing an inclusive strategy process which delivers strategic planning equipped with clear priorities, responsibilities, and indicators measuring progress towards the commonly agreed goals demands stamina and sufficient human and financial resources.
5. **Commitment:** MSPs often operate over extended periods. Maintaining engagement and onboarding new stakeholders is challenging. It is a common experience among MSPs that there is a smaller number of highly engaged stakeholders at the centre of the partnership and many less active members at the periphery. Ensuring ongoing commitment requires stakeholders with high intrinsic motivation to work towards the agreed goals, since MSPs usually have no formal enforcement mechanisms for active participation. As stakeholders have varying levels of commitment and workloads, and civil society organisations often rely heavily on volunteers, creating a sense of belonging and identification with the higher purpose of the partnership and realistic chances of bringing about the envisioned change is key. This can be achieved through opportunities for virtual but also personal exchanges, especially to collaboratively develop work plans and to network, showcase progress, and learn through regular gatherings of all key stakeholders.
6. **Competition:** It is in the very nature of MSPs to be inclusive, complement the strengths of stakeholders, and avoid duplication of efforts and structures. Resistance, especially from established actors who prioritise their own vested interests over the wider success of the relevant thematic area or sector, can create friction and conflicts of loyalty and weaken partnerships. This is especially true when relatively new partnerships work towards more inclusive and globally coordinated approaches and aim to overcome established power relations, parallel structures, and inefficient working modalities.
7. **Sustainability:** The financing of partnerships which may not even be legal entities remains a challenge, especially if key funders withdraw their monetary or in-kind support. The diversification of funding sources from an early stage is key. Depending on the thematic topic, funding by

governments may be complemented by foundations or membership fees. Governments in particular experience frequent rotations of staff and fluctuations in responsibilities and priorities. When an MSP is dependent on the personal engagement of individual officers but has no thematic structural rooting in a ministry or subordinate agency, there is a risk of losing long-term political backing and financial support. Ensuring a structural rooting beyond the personal commitments of individuals among the involved main funders is therefore one key factor for continued resource allocation and sustainability.

8. **Impact:** Measuring impact is a principal challenge for all interventions and needs additional resources and expertise. The OECD/DAC core evaluation criteria include the following points: Relevance – Is the intervention doing the right things? Coherence – How well does the intervention fit? Effectiveness – Is the intervention achieving its objectives? Efficiency – How well are resources being used? Impact – What difference does the intervention make? Sustainability – Will the benefits last? (OECD 2021). Measuring the impact of an MSP has specific challenges. A successful MSP needs to demonstrate that the achieved impact would not have been possible without the partnership itself. Has more been achieved together by the MSP than individual stakeholders would have accomplished? For a holistic assessment, one also needs to keep in mind the impacts on involved individuals at a cognitive level. This is true for instance when encounters in a partnership lead to transformation in thinking and acting. When stakeholders inform their networks about their positive experiences in the MSP, they can contribute to the questioning of established perceptions, procedures, and behaviour, and help in developing a greater willingness for new and more inclusive approaches and policies (Partnerships 2030 2018).

Addressing these challenges consciously from the very beginning of an MSP is helpful as they are faced overarchingly and independently from the specific subject matter, as experience over the last decade indicates. Let us now turn to a concrete example of an MSP in the context of religious engagement in global affairs.

4 Religion Matters!

Secularisation theory has dominated political discourses in many countries in recent times. Secularisation assumes that religion is becoming less significant or even irrelevant in so-called developed societies. This assumption

is underpinned by the decline in formal membership especially to Christian churches in many parts of Western Europe in the last decades. However, surveys show that around four out of five people worldwide still affiliate themselves with a religion and that their number is growing (Pew Research Center 2018; Pew Research Center 2022; Ipsos 2023). Even in countries which have progressed substantially in terms of economic development, including India, Indonesia, or Arabic countries like the United Arab Emirates, most of the population still affiliates to a religion.

Religion does not only provide a sense of belonging. Religion offers orientation at the individual and collective level, inspires trust in a higher divine power, encourages ethical reflection and behavioural change, and helps build resilience in times of suffering. It is also one of the most powerful inspirations for people to engage in voluntary work, social welfare, and development cooperation.[1] Religious actors provide locally rooted practices of mediation and informal justice as well as educational, social, and health services, also in times of crisis and in areas where the state reaches its limits. Furthermore, religious actors amplify the voices of vulnerable and marginalised groups and make human rights violations public.

5 Bringing a Political Strategy to Life: the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD)

Recognising not only the overarching spiritual and ethical importance of religion in many countries but also the fact that many contributions to the SDGs are being made by religious actors, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) developed the strategy "Religions as Partners in Development Cooperation" (BMZ 2016). It is based on two main convictions:

1) The very fact that religion and faith are so influential in BMZ partner countries begs for a professional approach and taking the perspectives and contributions of religious actors seriously in international development cooperation.
2) Only by joining forces with civil society, and this includes religious actors since they are one of the strongest pillars of civil society, can the SDGs be achieved. As a result of this new and more inclusive approach, the BMZ commissioned the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale

1 It is beyond the scope of this article to reflect on the ambiguities of religious actors, especially the misuse of religion for political, monetary, colonial, and missionary purposes.

> Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, its implementing agency for international cooperation, to establish a Programme on Religion for Sustainable Development at the end of 2015. Based on talks with international partners, the need for global coordination in the field was soon identified. Together with other governments, a unique global alliance was created in 2016: the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD). Its Secretariat has since been attached to the Programme on Religion for Sustainable Development (GIZ 2023).

PaRD aims to provide a safe space for continued dialogue, learning, and collaboration between governments, multilateral entities, academia as well as religious, traditional, indigenous, and other civil society actors to better inform policy and practices in achieving the SDGs. Building on the diversity of religious and interfaith actors in the world, PaRD has more than 170 members from over 40 countries today, including several governments (including Canada, Denmark, Indonesia, and the USA), multilateral organisations (e.g. the African Union), academic institutions, and over 120 civil society organisations, particularly those that are faith-based. There is also a regular exchange with UN agencies, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

Through PaRD, existing contributions to the SDGs by members are bundled, amplified, and showcased at a global level through news articles, social media, videos, publications, and conferences. Members develop new networks and cooperation and organise expert workshops and consultations. Interdisciplinary workstreams led by experts from key constituencies offer a conducive framework to work intersectionally on concrete matters in the current priority areas: health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), water, environmental protection and climate action (SDGs 6, 13, 14, 15), sustaining peace (SDG 16), food security (SDG 2), localisation as well as freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), which is regarded as a fundamental principle of human rights and a precondition for sustainable development (PaRD n.d.-c). Global challenges such as pandemics and emerging issues like artificial intelligence or online safety with increasing incidents of hate speech, which need immediate attention, are addressed through taskforces (PaRD n.d.-b; PaRD n.d.-c; PaRD 2022a; PaRD 2022g; PaRD 2020; PaRD n.d.-a; PaRD 2022e; PaRD 2022d; PaRD 2022f).

6 Selected Achievements of PaRD

The following selected examples highlight concrete contributions of religious and faith actors through the framework of PaRD.

1. **Visibility:** The contributions of religious actors to the SDGs were made visible in 2022 among others at the 11th Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the Geneva Peace Week, regional forums on religion and COVID-19 in southern Africa, the World Population Conference, World Water Week, World Food Day, and the G20 Interfaith Forum.

   Another example is the collaboration with the International Development Law Organization on a multi-religious-stakeholder consultation on customary and informal justice. The aim is to build consensus on the evidence base and develop key recommendations for policymakers and practitioners which include the perspectives of faith and traditional actors. The outcomes shall be presented at a relevant UN conference.

   A current example which made the contributions of religious actors visible at the world level is the first ever Faith Pavilion at a UN Climate Change Conference, which was organised jointly by the Muslim Council of Elders, the Faith for Earth Coalition of UNEP, the PaRD Secretariat, and other stakeholders. According to the Greenhouse Agency, a London-based PR firm, the Faith Pavilion at COP28 gained widespread recognition in the media, with over 4,000 articles mentioning it. Leading media outlets such as AFP, *Politico* and *The New York Times* reported on the Faith Pavilion. Euronews, which claims to reach around 145 million people every month, published an op-ed which was co-authored by the author of this article (PaRD 2023a; PaRD 2023b).
2. **Faith-sensitive guidelines:** PaRD members developed the publication *Faith-Sensitive Mental Health and Psychosocial Support* (*MHPSS*) *to Foster Resilience in Children on the Move* (PaRD et al. 2021). Its recommendations aim to mainstream the inclusion of faith-sensitive approaches to support the psychosocial well-being of children on the move. Faith-sensitive MHPSS approaches can restore connections and relationships among children and adults and enhance a child's sense of belonging and resilience capacity. MHPSS needs to be informed and inspired by faith, as children often carry with them religious and spiritual beliefs and traditions from their families and communities of origin. These beliefs and traditions are part of children's identity and can contribute to their sense of purpose, belonging, and, ultimately, their resilience. This work exemplifies the added value of PaRD being an MSP. Experts from civil society, including religious organisations, academia, governments (e.g. Mexico, Germany), multilaterals (e.g. UNICEF, UNDP), and quasigovernmental organisations like the United States Institute of Peace, contributed their knowledge and experiences, and jointly developed recommendations. PaRD members in turn used the recommendations to improve policies in their subsequent countries and regions.

3. **Strengthen peace and inclusion:** Projects initiated through PaRD have created spaces to strengthen peace and social cohesion, and the inclusion of women and youth. In Nigeria and Pakistan, PaRD members have been working against the misuse of religion by extremists and bringing together people from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds since 2022. In Kenya, interfaith dialogue forums have brought together youth from villages and government officials to work together to prevent extremism and combat stereotypes that non-Muslims hold about Muslims.
4. **Women as agents of change:** Faith-inspired members of PaRD together with the German, Canadian, and Danish governments and UNEP showcase annually the contributions of religious women as agents of change, including in the field of environmental protection during UN Commissions on the Status of Women (PaRD 2020).
5. **Fostering freedom of religion or belief:** PaRD members, including the USA and Denmark, and leading experts from religious organisations and academia organised an exchange at Wilton Park in 2022 on understanding the linkages between FoRB and the SDGs. A common understanding of the subject could be reached by acknowledging that fostering peace and security necessitates valuing individuals' dignity and acceptance irrespective of religion and belief. Recognising the potential of FoRB to bridge gaps between religious and secular actors and foster collaboration grounded in shared human rights and social responsibility was regarded as equally important. Probably the most important common insight the participants came to was understanding that strengthening FoRB means increasing the likelihood of achieving the SDGs. This is because religious actors can only work at full capacity when they are not restricted in their way of life and in providing social services but find a conducive political and societal framework. Drawing upon these premises, the first policy recommendations were developed and brought into the high-level International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief in London (PaRD 2022b) and considered in the German *Federal Government's Third Report on the Global Status of Freedom of Religion or Belief* (BMZ 2023).

7 Learnings from PaRD

The following learnings could be derived since the inception of PaRD:

Bridging barriers: PaRD exemplifies interdisciplinary collaboration on and the development of a common understanding of specific matters between actors from different cultural, religious, linguistic, political, and

societal backgrounds. This helps in dismantling prejudices and bridging barriers between secular and religious actors (see §2.1, 2.2).

Harnessing the convening power of civil society in decision-making: Related to the point of "access" and "ownership" of MSPs, it remains challenging to ensure that the positive potential of religious actors is more systematically included by decision makers. There is a general problem concerned here, as the COPs exemplify. A Conference of the Parties (COP) refers to a committee tasked to discuss and adopt an international treaty. The term COP however has become especially popular in association with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Also here, decisions are solely made by member states (usually at ministerial level). All those from civil society who provided recommendations and were involved in pre-consultations usually have no say when it comes to decision-making. Taking MSPs seriously means not only listening to them but using their convening power and including them in decision-making (see §2.2, 2.3).

Collaboration on an equal level: Based on internal learnings since its inception, PaRD has developed a governance structure which ensures that all key constituencies are represented in the Steering Board, where key decisions are taken consensually. Initially, PaRD distinguished members from partners. Member seats were reserved for governments and partner seats for NGOs. Civil society stakeholders perceived this as a massive imbalance. After intensive debates, the difference between members and partners was dissolved. Since then, the Steering Board has consisted of three representatives from governments, three from multilateral entities, six from faith-based or other civil society organisations, one from academia, and *ex officio* the Head of PaRD Secretariat. This distribution ensures a strong representation by all key stakeholders. Since the reform, voices criticising an uneven distribution of power have rarely been heard (see §3.1).

Diversity through inclusivity: In the past three years, PaRD has welcomed more than 40 new members. The partnership has been joined by organisations from previously unrepresented religions and traditions, including Jews, Hindus, and Sikhs, but also Indigenous and interfaith organisations.

An inclusive and externally moderated process was initiated to develop a five-year strategy, which was consensually adopted in 2021 (PaRD 2021). Its emphasis on increasing diversity within the membership is mirrored in the conceptualisation of the traditional Annual Forums on Religion and Sustainable Development. PaRD's Annual Forums have established themselves as one of the key global gatherings in the field, which enables members and other relevant stakeholders to network and make their contributions to the SDGs visible. In November 2022, one of the largest and most diverse PaRD Annual

Forums was held in Indonesia with over 160 participants – 41 per cent of whom were women – from 35 countries. For the first time in PaRD, representatives of Indigenous communities were actively involved in discussions, especially on environmental protection. The joining of the largest Muslim country in the world, the Republic of Indonesia, just after the Annual Forum is regarded as a significant success since it is the first government from Asia to become a PaRD member (PaRD 2022c, PaRD 2023c). The Annual Forum 2024 in Brasilia was co-organised with the G20 Interfaith Forum and brought together more than 350 participants from all over the globe (see §2.3, 2.5, 2.7).

Complementarity and mutual learning: Rather than creating competition, PaRD has been striving to complement the strengths of key stakeholders. This resulted in attempts to reduce duplications and inefficiencies, and to foster closer collaboration with existing initiatives like the Faith for Earth Coalition from UNEP, G20 Interfaith Forum, Joint Learning Initiative on Faith & Local Communities, Religions for Peace, and the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers (see §2.5, 3.1, 3.2).

8 Outlook

With a view on the potential that the partnership discussed here as an example holds, and without neglecting the challenges faced, it can be argued that the investment of time and resources dedicated over the past years has created an added value for members and partners of the MSP. However, there are areas where PaRD could play a more active and significant role in global affairs, for instance in mediation and reconciliation (after conflicts and wars), in creating conducive spaces to nourish unifying values while respecting diversity, and in sharing inclusive methods of collaboration across sectors and age groups. PaRD could also play a role in helping to develop much needed alternative paradigms and models to measure development and prosperity. A vision that PaRD could support is the establishment of a globally binding holistic well-being index. Such an index could be based on scientific evidence complemented by spiritual wisdom which acknowledges a cyclical and interdependent understanding of life, and regards well-being as the core indicator for prosperity and development, and not merely income or linear economic growth based on the exploitation of Mother Earth, humans, and animals (Singh 2022; Singh n.d.)

It is certainly desirable to complement the outlined initial learnings with independent interdisciplinary quantitative and qualitative research and learn more systematically from the experiences of MSPs. Nonetheless, the discussed points indicate that such partnerships hold relevant potential as inclusive and

collaborative alliances for sustainable global progress in an interconnected world facing multifaceted crises. However, achieving true impact requires a shift towards balanced power-sharing, enabling all stakeholders, including civil society, to participate more actively in decision-making.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

The article reflects the opinions of the author. I am very grateful to Lasse Joost, Dr Jennifer McCarthy, Jonas Belkaid, and Theresa König for their support with this article and to all PaRD members who commented on the first draft.

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 294–305

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Religious Engagement and Global Affairs: Whither the Multireligious?

Policy and Practice Note

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Published online 16 June 2025

Abstract

This article reviews religious engagement in foreign policy as well as international development based especially, albeit not only, on the legacy of work carried out for over five decades by the world's faith leaders, together, in and through Religions for Peace. The article also provides some lessons learned from the author's own experience in intergovernmental, academic and international nongovernmental organisations of engaging with religious actors. While noting the unique heritage and capacities of religious organisations and leaders, including in challenging contexts, the author also shares concerns about the ongoing relative scarcity of multireligious collaboration and investments, which are deemed to be the tipping points for building socially cohesive and environmentally sustainable polities.

Keywords

religion – multireligious imperative – accountability – interreligious councils – human development – peace – Interfaith Rainforest Initiative

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Published with license by Brill Schöningh | DOI:10.30965/27507955-00302011
 | ISSN: 2750-7947 (print) 2750-7955 (online)

1 Introduction

Ibn Al Arabi, an Arab, Andalusian, Muslim scholar, mystic, poet and philosopher, extremely influential within Islamic thought (1165–1240) – to this day – once said 'there was a time, when I blamed my companion if his religion did not resemble mine. Now, however, my heart accepts every form … Love alone is my religion' (Ibrahim, 2020). This is one of the most poetic descriptions of the work of Religions for Peace, the largest multireligious coalition of religious institutions and faith communities, which I am privileged to serve. But Religions for Peace has existed to convene all faith leaders, and facilitate their work to serve the common good – or global public goods (United Nations 2021) as it is often referred to in the multilateral system – since 1970. In other words, this mission to have every heart accepting every form of religion, through working together to serve all, globally, regionally and nationally, in institutional form, goes back at least 50 years, and is realised through over 90 Interreligious Councils. Each Council brings together faith leaders representing their religious institutions (where they have such), or their faith community, thus also including Indigenous and Traditional communities where they exist and wish to be part of such Councils.

Individually, religions, through their respective institutions (e.g. mosques, synagogues, temples, etc.), through their diverse faith leaders, as well as through their affiliated NGOs, have been serving the 'common good' since the beginning of history. I have systematically argued that there are several very good reasons why religions matter to international development, foreign policy and constantly increasing humanitarian needs.

A Pew Research Poll in 2012 indicated that over 80 per cent of people around the world claim a certain religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2012). This means that the secular lenses through which many Western governments have understood the world – through the prism of their own sidelining of the realms of religion to 'private concerns' – do not apply, at best, or are blinding, at worst. Religious institutions, religious leaders and faith communities are social and cultural gatekeepers in all societies. Any transformation in behaviours and attitudes – in social and cultural norms – involves religious leaders and institutions speaking from their respective pulpits, and advocating for specific behaviours. Only then is it possible to disseminate broadly, widely and systematically the changes required, for instance around how to stay safe and healthy during the pandemic.

As I have argued elsewhere (Karam 2014), even within the UN development system, which, arguably, operates with a western European mindset, the 'ignorance' around religion is now reversed. Today, there is a UN Interagency Task

Force with over 25 UN system entity members, with an Advisory Council of religious NGOs composed of over 40 international faith-based NGOs (FBOs). I know because I was one of those who founded and served both. UNHCR and UNDP have an 'Islamic financing' unit, and UNICEF has launched a Multifaith Giving Circle. Because today, the United Nations even receives money from religious actors – a far cry from the times when religion was simply a private or spiritual affair.

Social development notwithstanding, if 'peace' is to be understood as not only the absence of war, but the security of everyone's access to dignity – at a minimum, access to basic needs, such that 'no one is left behind' – then some hard economic and service realities have to be acknowledged. Religious institutions are the largest, oldest and most far-reaching social service providers – the original development actors. Since time immemorial, religious institutions have served people's needs in health, education, nutrition, sanitation, environmental conservation, psycho-social and palliative care, among many other basic matters.

While data varies (Osorio, Patrinos and Wodon 2009; Olivier and Wodon 2012), Christian health organisations alone are estimated to provide at least a quarter of the world's primary health care across Africa, Latin America and Asia. This also applies to a large extent in the USA. The figure is known to rise dramatically in conflict-ridden contexts. Moreover, religious NGOs are the first responders in humanitarian crises – at least four out of the top ten global humanitarian NGOs are religiously inspired, if not religiously based. Religious sites are often the first 'go-to' spaces in natural or man-made humanitarian crises – especially, in armed conflicts.

Sustainable human development, including the nurturing of a sustainable environment, is the heart of our future as one planet, a matter which has imposed itself on the agendas of many political parties, and the discourses of most politicians. It behoves us, therefore, to be aware that religious leaders – and some movements and entire religious infrastructures – are partners in policy and actions and 'spiritual advisors' to many politicians. Religious inspiration runs deep in the fabric of the social consciousness of most political actors, in societies which are themselves still rooted in cultures defined and informed by religion. To assume a clear divide between secular politicians and religious leaders is to ignore the interlinked realities that have existed for centuries.

If security is to be realised through the participation of human beings, then we must understand that religious entities are the largest, and actually among the most creatively self-resourced, bodies in the world. Their networks of volunteers (human resources) as well as their respective fund-raising capacities

(financial resources) far outweigh any secular NGO counterpart. Indeed, some religious institutions may well be wealthier than some political parties. We need only think about charitable donations and giving in Christian, Buddhist or Hindu contexts, or consider Islamic Zakat and Islamic financing institutions, as well as the Vatican Bank, just as examples. This is not an argument that all religious institutions are wealthier than nation states, but it is important to consider that many religious institutions and large religious NGOs receive funding from governments in diverse guises, including in the supposedly secular Western hemisphere. And it is equally valuable to recognise how it is that the Covid pandemic itself has resulted in legions of volunteer labour/efforts, mobilised by religious communities, around the world. In short, as long as humans matter to peace, that which moves them, nourishes them and serves them also matters.

Furthermore, if religions are identified as the sources of some human insecurity, and/or violations of rights and dignity, indeed also of terrorism, violence or extremism, then all policymakers must ask themselves how it is even possible *not to* engage with the religious sectors. How are the symptoms treated if the spreaders of the disease are not engaged with?

And yet, gauging from the interest within the global headquarters of the United Nations, the acknowledgement of the role of religious actors, and the invitations to engage therewith, and to begin to be seen as potentially compatible or helpful international development partners, only began to manifest after 2000. It is wise to acknowledge, therefore, that the understanding of mutual strengths – secular and multireligious – in international development and foreign policy remains youthful.

2 Growing Wisdom: Some Lessons from Decades of Practicing Multireligious Collaboration

So, what are some of the lessons learned relevant to global affairs, and specifically to serving the global public good, from within the institution which has half a century of experience, and built on decades of respective religious teachings and discourses, which are relevant to secular international organisations mandated to serve the same global public good (i.e. the UN)? There are many lessons being learned even as I write this. Religious institutions predate secular ones, and will likely outlive them, albeit in forms different from their original ones. This means that the lessons are never done, much like many of us never stop learning (or should not at least) for all our lives. For the sake of brevity, only two main lessons will be shared here:

2.1 *The Multireligious Imperative*

Most religions institutions, where they exist as centralised ones (for example the Catholic Church and its affiliated entities or the Anglican Communion and their affiliates, etc.) or as satellites in dispersed orbits (for instance Hindu ashrams, Buddhist temples, ministries of Awqaf/religious endowments, Zoroastrian entities, Jewish coalitions and/or formats thereof, etc.) are in various stages of transition and transformation. And even though each of these tend to see themselves – and their sacred books/references – as eternally present and concerned with more than this life, they are each having to adapt to volatility of means, contexts, leaderships and sense of relevance. This translates into at least two concrete implications: that none of these institutional formats can be relied upon to be a permanent partner; and none of them are alike. In turn, this means that knowledge about these actors, and engagement with them, has to evolve, the methods of partnership or engagement need to be adaptive, and, at all times, a level of humility (rather than the traditional arrogance that comes with the territory sometimes) is a must. As an example, a good relationship with the Catholic Church under one Pope, or with Al-Azhar under one Grand Imam, does not guarantee a continued commitment of this entire body of institutions, to any one issue, ad infinitum. Nor does a wonderful partnership with the Vatican or the regional or national Catholic Bishops' Conference, say, or the Chief Rabbinate in one country, guarantee, in any way, a smooth relationship with all religious communities within the one national boundary. No one religious institution or body represents or speaks for all. In fact, I would argue that there are many people of faith who struggle to see their religious leaders, and/or their religious institutions, as fully representing them, on all issues, at all times. Conversely, relying on engaging with only one religious body and assuming this covers the realm of religion and/or partnerships with religion is nonsensical.

This underlines the value-added of consulting with, and being taught about, legal, representative and inclusive inter/multireligious structures. Representative here meaning those platforms which are inclusive of all faith traditions in any one country, and have formal (i.e. assigned or elected religious representation of institutions, rather than individual members) nominees. Not only do these structures point to how various religious bodies or communities work together (or do not), but they also provide multiple indicators of civic and political health.

The efficiency (or lack thereof) of these structures points to the degree of general social cohesion (whether and how religious leaders and institutions actually coexist), the participatory nature of civil society (whether these structures work with, or as part of, broader civic networks), and even to the

extent of democratic legitimacy of the government. Why? Because the legal existence of these interreligious councils, or platforms, as well as what they (are allowed to) say and do is at the mercy of political regimes. Where they are legally registered and able to get on with their programmes, they are often able to do so subject to how governments are allowing other civil society actors to exist and serve.

Conversely, where Interreligious Councils are struggling to maintain coherence of voice and diligence in serving the common good through joint work points to a tear in the fabric of social cohesion, and to political instability. Where such Councils exist and are composed of only one, or a dominant family and/or religious community, they point to an imbalance in the relationship between religious communities, and to the challenge of freedom of conscience, thought and belief in that country. Moreover, where such interreligious councils are forged through the hardships of seeking to resolve conflict or serving humanitarian contexts, together (as is the case with several of Religions for Peace's Interreligious Councils today) they are amongst the most sustainable entities serving the common good. In sum, interreligious councils or structures are the barometer of the social and political health of their nations. To ignore them is to be blind to a panorama of historical and cultural legacies and to the dominant political realities.

2.2 *Collective Accountability – Rather Than Religious Exceptionalism*

> The resilience of spirituality should underscore the value-added of engaging religious leaders in multilateral spaces … but how they are engaged requires significant caution, to avoid creating an impression that some religions matter more than others or have a greater say in influencing multilateral spaces than others.[1]

All religious institutions (as with any others) are composites of their human membership and operations, which means that human weaknesses and human error can and do shape them, and can sully their performance and/or weaken their legitimacy. To assume that religious leaders and/or religious institutions are above the common fray is to assign to human beings a characteristic that they do not have. It is incumbent on all secular entities and actors to understand that no institution stands innocent of any human wrongdoing. This does not mean that such institutions should not be held accountable. Far

1 Noted as advice by the author during a UN Security Council briefing on religious engagement in 2021.

from it. No institution should be held as exceptional in any way, i.e. above the laws of its own nation, or indeed beyond accountability to global norms and standards. Yet several religious institutions, and religious leaders, would seek to claim that exceptionalism.

The argument being made here is simple: while we should not expect miracles of these human-led institutions, we must insist on holding them, and their leaders, accountable, as they work together, to higher standards than their non-religiously inspired counterparts. But here is the 'catch' so to speak: to hold others accountable, one must also engage, and engage diligently, over a long period of time. Wagging fingers from a distance with foreboding judgement is an act of arrogance. Working together and sharing service to others allows for deeper and better knowledge of the human weaknesses but also enables an understanding of the respective strengths inherent in any entity. Rather than passing judgement from a distance and using this to dismiss the entire workings of the institution or its relevance (as is being done now about UN Peacekeepers, and the entire UN system in fact), a legacy of partnership enables a more learned understanding of where weaknesses reside, but also where some critical strengths remain.

Working with religious institutions also allows for, if not demands, mutual holding of accountability. This mutuality of accountability is also required for and by interreligious structures. In fact, the interreligious space may even be more in need of accountability, as it is also an opportunity to seek disciplined self-reflection amongst and between all religious institutions, rather than a one-by-one siloed approach. Where religious institutions can present, through their respective teachings and interpretations thereof, ties that bind, interreligious (and especially interfaith)[2] structures offer a buffer from fundamentalist tendencies, for it is impossible to be fundamentalist (let alone extremist) for any length of time when people of faith have to see and work with one another. Moreover, interreligious coexistence, and especially joint service to all communities, is an opportunity to be affirmed in the goodness of one's own and the others' faith. The tendency to hold one another and one another's institution or entity accountable is often difficult to avoid in an interreligious context, for by the very definition of being on/in a joint platform, each person, and each entity, is holding a mirror to the other.

2 'Interreligious' and 'interfaith' are used interchangeably here, and deliberately so. Outside of academic existences, the two terms, together with 'multifaith' and 'multireligious', are not dissected or differentiated when it comes to international development and foreign affairs praxis.

All to say that for religious engagement, or some input into global affairs, it is wise to work with such structures, for multiple reasons. Multi- or interreligious platforms are not the panacea to the challenges of today – no one group or groups of institutions can be. But they are part of civil society and civic conscience, both of which are required for the guardianship of global public goods.

3 Instances of Multireligious Engagement

> Strengthened multilateralism requires spiritual resilience.
>
> DANILO TURK, Former President of Slovenia

Building spiritual resilience may seem as if it is about meditation and reflections and yoga, and of course those are critical components. But building spiritual resilience also comes from working together across religious differences, to build together, or to celebrate together or to serve one another's needs so as to leave no one behind. In other words, building spiritual resilience can come through normalising an ethos and reality of collaboration inspired by faith, but not limited to those practising the same faith. This at least is the philosophy of Religions for Peace.

When the Covid global lockdowns began in February and March of 2020, a trend was clear to observe in the response of almost all faith-based humanitarian and relief organisations. Each and all went into overdrive to serve communities suffering the multiple impacts of Covid-19. Yet as much as this overdrive was visible, necessary and commendable, few religious institutions, or FBOs, endeavoured to actually work together to do this, even when each was serving the same communities in the same countries. So religious public health and other social services were ramped up, but multireligious collaboration to deliver those services was very hard to note. While understandable – for it is seriously challenging (if not downright hellish) to coordinate multiple diverse, massive institutions – it also pointed to a worrying trend for those with many years of experience in strengthening interreligious cohesion. In times of global stress and need, joining hands to serve those facing similar sufferings is an opportunity to build social cohesion, and thereby to invest in long-term resilience.

3.1 *The Multireligious Humanitarian Fund*

With this concern, and decades of having learned this lesson already in mind, during my service at Religions for Peace, and with support from the GRH Foundation and the Fetzer Institute, I set up a Multi-Religious Humanitarian

Fund in April of 2020. The Fund is a mechanism designed to enable religious actors, especially – albeit not only – Interreligious Councils, to continue to work together, to serve the shared needs of their communities. In its first two years of operations alone, the Fund supported 27 countries across five regions in the world, providing seed funding for various kinds of Covid-19 responses. Nearly 37 million people were reached through various multireligious efforts including direct services, public advocacy, skills training as well as psycho-social support (Religions for Peace 2021).

3.2 *The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative*

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative (IRI), of which Religions for Peace has been a core interfaith implementing partner, is an international, multifaith alliance that aims to bring moral urgency and faith-based leadership to global efforts to end tropical deforestation. The IRI brings the commitment, influence and moral authority of religions to efforts to protect the world's rainforests and the Indigenous Peoples that serve as their guardians. It addresses the crucial role of faith communities and Indigenous People in saving the rainforests. The programme is lodged within the UN (the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)), and brings together governments, academics, Indigenous and faith leaders, in five countries: Colombia, Peru, Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Archipelago of Indonesia. Together, these five countries contain nearly 75% of the world's rainforests.

While targeting part of our planet's lungs as part of our essential environment, the IRI has provided 'collateral social construction', promoting respect for human dignity, as it successfully appeals to all Amazonian countries to prevent ongoing threats to Indigenous Peoples, healing some of the traumas in relationships between the Catholic Church and Indigenous Peoples, as well as seeking national legislation which secures their rights (United Nations Environment Programme 2020). Bishop Gunnar Stallset – who previously served as a member of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee for 17 years, as a Special Envoy of Norway to Timor-Leste, as a Member of the Norwegian Government, as the General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation, as Executive Committee Member of the World Council of Churches and as the Bishop of Oslo – describes the IRI as 'perhaps the most successful example today of what can be achieved for common good in genuine multilateralism.'

3.3 *Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding*

The power of religious and multireligious engagements in promoting peace and harmony in different parts of the world can be witnessed in **Sierra Leone**, where in the 1990s over 50 child soldiers were freed from captivity by warring

militias through the intervention of a multireligious group of women of faith. Today, the Interreligious Council of Sierra Leone is a respected mediator in several national and local conflicts, and members of the Council serve as electoral observers as well as advisors to all political parties to maintain a balance among and between political and social concerns.

In **Bosnia-Herzegovina** (BiH), the Interreligious Council of BiH was forged through the civil conflict and came into being to realise a modicum of social cohesion within the borders of the country. While interreligious tensions are never far away from the BiH context, the existence of the Council provides a space for dialogue and intercommunity negotiations that can be lacking among the political parties.

In **Myanmar**, for many years, the Interreligious Council facilitated the creation and hosting of a unique space where military and political leaders and religious communities came to find common ground for governance of the country. When the military undertook its coup in 2021, this also spelled the end of the ability of that rare site of social cohesion to function meaningfully.

In **Haiti**, as the country faces ongoing natural disasters and political conflicts, the Interreligious Council continues to provide a space for relatively safe political dialogue as well as joint programmes aimed to relieve some of the suffering of the peoples. The work in all of these contexts is tough and uneven. But the experience of working together to serve all, remains an important one, against the ongoing onslaughts of politics and planetary pain. The Interreligious Councils are a necessary site of social resilience.

For many people of faith, seeing the material world as the creation of a Divine bequeathed to human responsibility can be a powerful counter to destructive exploitation and dehumanising materialism. Multireligious collaboration to safeguard the common good both enacts and nuances an ability to serve a higher purpose for humanity, as well as a deeper existential awareness of interconnectedness and dependency on one another and on the planet.

4 Conclusion

The question is not whether religions have a role to play in human existence, in war as in peace, in providing diverse basic needs for communities, in serving migrants, refugees and displaced people, or even in affairs of governance and government, in any corner of the world. The question ought to be how have religious institutions, religious leaders and faith-based NGOs (or FBOs) already been thus engaged. But such a question must only serve as a starting point. What must be further asked – and investigated – is why conferences bringing

together religious leaders endorsed by governmental sectors proliferate today even in countries which either claim secular existences or are registered as violators of aspects of religious instances; why religious freedom and 'religion and development' is on the agendas of certain ministries of foreign affairs; why specific FBOs have become champions of selected human rights only (at the expense of others); why the voice of one religious leader gets reported on in major global newspapers (and not the equally valid and impactful voices of others); and why new religious and interreligious organisations seem to be emerging in noticeable frequency in the past decade.

Issue and Editors

This article is part of the special issue "Religious Engagement in Global Affairs: A New Interreligious Dynamic for the Good of Humanity", edited by Fadi Daou and Michael D. Driessen.

Acknowledgements

Published with the support of the Romandy Institute for Systematics and Ethics, the Faculty of Theology, and the funds for publication of the University of Geneva.

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Book Reviews

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RELIGION & DEVELOPMENT 3 (2024) 309–315

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The Palgrave Handbook of Religion, Peacebuilding, and Development in Africa, edited by Susan M. Kilonzo, Ezra Chitando, and Joram Tarusarira. London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Pp. 832. Hardcover: $279, ISBN 978-3-031-36828-8

The Palgrave Handbook of Religion, Peacebuilding, and Development in Africa is a book bubbling with knowledge and ideas. At 45 chapters in total, it is as near comprehensive as possible for a topic with such breadth and depth. This edited volume truly demonstrates the wealth of scholarship on religious peacebuilding across the continent of Africa. Acknowledging the mammoth task that the editors undertook to bring this collection together, the book includes reflections on diverse traditions from Traditional Authorities to Rastafarianism, covers case studies from nine different African countries, and touches on themes from interfaith networks to gender, and other topical issues such as digital peacebuilding and decolonisation. In line with the dominant debates in religious peacebuilding of the last twenty years or so since Appleby's *Ambivalence of the Sacred* (2000), the handbook authors invariably see religion as "a double-edged sword. It can play both roles: contributing to violence, and providing solutions for conflicts" (p. 20), as editor Susan Kilonzo puts it in her chapter.

In the many examples provided throughout the handbook, it is noticeable how many religious peacebuilders are thrust into peacebuilding and become peacebuilders through trial and error in necessary moments of peacemaking. They grow their peacebuilding skills through their own interpretations of their religious beliefs and practices and practical needs in their context, frequently with acts of extreme bravery in the face of threatened violence, such as Bishop Korir in Kenya (p. 24). Over time, they develop and learn more about the theories and practices of peacebuilding and formalise some of their approaches and learned processes, sometimes forming faith-based organisations that can continue the original religious peacebuilder's efforts.

The inclusion of development comes with the projects that often run alongside peacebuilding efforts to support cooperative, grassroots structures that seek to improve the health and well-being of the communities experiencing conflict. These are the necessary support structures providing environments where peacebuilding can be facilitated. Several authors pay attention to the mental health effects of conflict and the subsequent need for types of psychosocial support to be provided. In their chapter on disability, migration and gender, Tarusarira and Tarusarira conclude (p. 696) that there needs to be "an

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expanded model of peacebuilding where the psychosocial and practical needs of the mothers and the children are met."

Religious actors meld with the cultural practices of their context, using both the resources of their religious beliefs and practices and the norms of their cultural environments. The section with case studies from different countries demonstrates how religious actors have been complicit in conflict (see the Rwanda case) but also how they have acted as peacebuilders, with many specific examples of organisations such as the Interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria, the Evangelical Alliance of South Sudan (EASS) and the Pan-African Christian Women's Alliance (PACWA) in South Sudan, and the Conseil Inter-Confessionnel du Burundi (CICB). Approaches include the use of religious texts in dialogue and mediation, as well as activities such as trauma healing, storytelling and even pantomime in the case of one example from Egypt (p. 461). A lot of the impacts of these efforts are happening in micro-spaces by helping solve very local-level disputes, which can have ripple effects to the greater areas. The question remains how the micro and macro (national/state actors) can meet, and some of the chapters show this divide by tackling only one side of the spectrum, while noting the need to improve linkages. Even the Interfaith Peace Committees in Tanzania, which purposefully has national, regional and local levels in its structure, faced challenges in cooperation between the levels.

Analysis of the impact of colonial history and the interwoven arrival and dominance of some religions on the continent is present throughout the text. Without needing to segment off a discrete section for decolonisation, the editors demonstrate its significance in their curation of chapters that continually touch on colonial histories and their modern effects. The focused section on gender, conversely, is highly merited as it demonstrates the unique contributions of feminist theories to religions, peacebuilding and development, while also highlighting the particular challenges of religious women in peacebuilding and warning against stereotyping women as either weak or "natural" peacebuilders (p. 712).

The chapter authors represent a large range of African higher education institutions, making this handbook an outstanding example of the current African scholarship in the field of religions, development and peacebuilding. Accounts in various chapters of increased teaching on religious peacebuilding in universities across the African continent bode well for continued flourishing. They also represent a vast range of disciplines, as well as practitioner and scholar backgrounds. Authors cite scholars from John Paul Lederach and Johan Galtung in Peace Studies to Mercy Oduyoye and African Women's Theology. As often seen in religions and development research, this book remains committedly interdisciplinary and greatly benefits from its authors' range of knowledge

and experience. The book is a significant contribution to the field and marks a welcome turn towards prioritising African scholarship in religions, development and peacebuilding handbooks. As Ezra Chitando, one of the editors, puts it in his sole-authored chapter (p. 402), "If religion is to make an effective contribution to peacebuilding and development in Africa, it is absolutely critical that African scholars who are mandated to study religion be at the forefront in the production of the relevant knowledge, its dissemination and uptake."

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Spiritual Contestations: The Violence of Peace in South Sudan, by Naomi Ruth Pendle. Woodbridge: James Currey, 2023. Pp. 322. Paperback: £26.99/$38.95, ISBN 1847013384.

Much has been written about conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan and the failings of repeated internationally brokered peace agreements. Scholarship since the 1990s has countered earlier (and still prevalent in the media) understandings of Sudanese conflicts as wars between different religious and ethnic identities, identifying instead their root causes in predatory political economies and core-periphery disparities going back to at least the nineteenth century. Peace agreements in the twenty-first century have been criticised for reinforcing and reproducing these patterns through power- and wealth-sharing arrangements that merely bring former rebels into the privileged centres of state power.

As important and accurate as these political economy analyses are, they too risk privileging the high-level political and military actors and emphasising their manipulation of their foot soldiers through kinship, clientelism and the instrumentalisation of ethnicity. Pendle's powerful book provides a vitally different approach, based on unusually deep, long-term research and relationships with rural communities in South Sudan. It offers a sensitive yet unflinching analysis of state power, military conflicts and peacemaking from the perspective of people who experienced and sought to control and mitigate their impacts. This is not simply a "bottom-up" perspective: the book continually emphasises the entanglement of different forms of authority with state power and the enmeshing of local and national politics. But by looking at the state from a locally grounded perspective, the book situates it within worlds of moral, cosmological and spiritual meaning that are invisible in most political economy analyses and to most international observers and actors. The simplest and most powerful argument of the book is that wars have meaning for those who fight in them and that this meaning is not determined by economic and material motives. The strongly secularising logics of international peacemaking ignore and exclude the "cosmic polity" in which political contestations and wars are fought, and thus inevitably fail to offer meaningful resolution or lasting peace.

A striking and central theme of the book is that governments can be understood as "divine". Pendle draws on Graeber and Sahlins' (2017) arguments that all governments in the world evoke ideas of divine kingship through their assertion of sovereignty, which is "essentially a claim to be able to carry out arbitrary violence with impunity" (p. 9). Pendle finds a direct parallel in the histories of indigenous "divine authorities" in South Sudan, such as the *baany e biith*

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(Dinka priests and masters of the fishing spear), *kuar muon* (Nuer priests) and *guan kuoth* (Nuer prophets), whose divinely sanctioned curse enabled them to kill with impunity. She suggests that the arbitrary violence of governments since the nineteenth century led people to equate the power of the *hakuma* (the state or government sphere in the broadest sense) with the divine (p. 53). Yet the book ultimately shows that this was more a comparison than a direct equation – the government is *like* the divine, as an elderly interviewee put it (p. 7) – and it was always contested. Governments may have claimed to stand outside of any moral order and used both arbitrary violence and the law to assert their impunity, but these claims have been repeatedly resisted and "creatively refused" by divine authorities, rebel movements and wider communities. In turn, however, governments have succeeded frequently and increasingly in constraining the divine authority of indigenous priests and prophets, not only through the overwhelming force of the gun, but also by changing and limiting divine authorities' judicial and peacemaking roles through law and legal institutions. Many of these authorities and their relatives have been drawn into the *hakuma* through government chiefship, education and the military. As Pendle repeatedly emphasises, there is no pristine or static realm of tradition from which to oppose government or make peace.

As evoked beautifully by artist Letaru Dralega on the cover, blurred boundaries are thus a key theme of the book: between *hakuma* and home communities, between war and peace, and between ethnic groups. The Bilnyang river system provides a geographic rather than ethno-centric focus for a study of neighbouring Nuer and Dinka communities historically tied together by shared use of these rivers and the seasonal grazing they provide. This place-based approach enables Pendle to explore both/all sides of the wars that have gradually transformed this river system from a meeting place to an epicentre of violent conflict and exclusionary boundary-making. Both divine authorities and government are seen to have originated from these rivers; more recently the region has become central to national politics as the homelands of the most powerful – and often warring – military and government leaders in South Sudan.

The depth and detail of the study makes it essential and fascinating reading for anyone seeking to understand past and present conflict in South Sudan. Its argument that peacemaking needs to take account of the cosmological, spiritual and moral logics of wars is also of much wider significance to peace and conflict studies, though this could have been further illuminated through more comparative discussion. The book's accessibility to non-specialists would also be aided by a fuller introduction to the context of society, belief and authority

in the region of focus, as well as by a glossary and more detailed index. But the book is written in clear and straightforward prose and the numerous, relatively short chapters make the detailed content very easy to access and digest.

The book is structured chronologically: Part 1 traces the early history of the *hakuma* in this region from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. Chapters 1 and 2 draw on considerable archival and other documentary research, but they privilege oral sources to tell this history from the contemporary perspective of Pendle's interviewees. As such, Part 1 does not simply form background historical context; rather, it explores the "cultural archive" which has continued to both shape and reflect moral and cosmological meaning and political possibilities in recent years. It establishes a deep historical foundation for the ongoing struggles of the *hakuma* and the priests and prophets to constrain each other's divine authority and impunity while also appropriating each other's power.

Parts 2 and 3 then explore in rich detail how these struggles have played out through successive, interconnected conflicts within and beyond the region and through multiple attempts to make peace since the 1990s. Some of these initiatives, with government, international and/or church backing, have sought to harness Nuer and Dinka peacemaking traditions by enlisting divine authorities. But they fundamentally changed the logics and practices of peace by removing the judicial and spiritual function of compensation payments, which had enabled redress for the dead through marriage and procreation in their name. Peace has thus been violent, not only in its military enforcement but also in this "silencing of the dead", which generated fear of unresolved spiritual pollution and made revenge "a moral necessity" (p. 135). Military leaders have instrumentalised the logics of revenge to recruit and motivate ever more extreme forms of violence outside all moral codes, while asserting that their wars exempted fighters from compensation demands or pollution. Yet these claims of impunity have been refused, most conspicuously by divine authorities such as the female Nuer prophet Nyachol, who remedied spiritual pollution by demanding judicial accountability for killing, even by government personnel.

Pendle is careful, however, to avoid romanticising the nature of such divine authorities, emphasising that their peacemaking has increasingly been violent and ethnically exclusionary. Asserting that the *hakuma* is subject to moral codes and divine sanction has also drawn government forces into communities of kinship and collective responsibility, which are then politicised, enlarged and defined in monoethnic terms, to the benefit of government elites seeking control of land and labour. Overall then, both conflicts and peacemaking have

eroded the possibilities for lasting peace through judicial resolution and divine sanction, instead generating "unending" wars of revenge. This is a profoundly bleak story, but one that must be understood if peacemaking is to avoid further entrenching ethnic division and government impunity.

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