

## **At the Intersection of Interreligious Engagement, Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) & Sustainable Development**

### **International Workshop<sup>1</sup>**

Religions and International Relations Programme

ISPI-Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation

in partnership with the FoRB & Foreign Policy Initiative at the University of Sussex

**Bologna, March 6-7, 2019**

**Summary Report**

#### **INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT**

The workshop on Religions and International Relations focussed on opportunities for collaborative work across policy agendas of Religious Engagement, Freedom of Religion or Belief, and Sustainable Development by evaluating the idea of Interreligious Engagement Strategies. This meeting was the 10th edition of the International Workshops on Religions and International Relations, convened by ISPI and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (also known as the ISPI-MFAIC 'Religions and International Relations' Programme). This year it was organized in the context of the European Academy of Religion's Annual Conference. The workshop's concept built upon a year-long consultation under the patronage of the 2018 Italian OSCE chairmanship led by the FoRB & Foreign Policy Initiative based at Sussex University, which began in March 2018. The meeting was a follow-up to last year's [workshop in Bologna](#), which marked the beginning of the consultation, aiming to develop a set of policy guidelines, on how interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be successfully operationalised to further the aims of peace, sustainable development and human rights protection.

The closed-door workshop took place under Chatham House rule and assumed the possibility of looking at religious actors as potential partners in building solutions to global

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<sup>1</sup> Workshop's concept note, programme and participants' list, including some video interviews can be found at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/eventi/evento/intersection-interreligious-engagement-freedom-religion-or-belief-forb-sustainable-development>. For a discussion of the larger Italian initiative and ISPI-based programme headed by Dr Fabio Petito, see F. Petito - S. Thomas, "Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge: Italy as a Special Case of Religious Engagement in Foreign Policy", *Review of Faith and International Affairs* vol. 13, no. 2, 2015, pp. 40-51; and P. Ferrara - F. Petito, "An Italian Foreign Policy of Religious Engagement: Challenges and Prospects", *The International Spectator*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2016, pp. 28-43. We thank Nasreen D'Agostino for her research assistance and help in drafting this report.

problems beyond their predominant representations as perpetrators or victims in international relations. The workshop was attended by 33 leading scholars of religions and international relations, diplomats, policy makers, religious representatives including members of the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD) a forum of diplomats from North America and Europe working at the intersection of religion, foreign policy and international affairs. The event provided an opportunity to brainstorm issues and topics that will become central to the follow-up event that will take place in the second part of 2019 to mark and celebrate the 10th anniversary of this Italian initiative on religions and international relations.

The workshop began with a public roundtable discussion, which was followed by three closed-door sessions. The first session was a discussion of the report, '[Interreligious Engagement Strategies: A Policy Tool to Advance Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)' launched at the 25<sup>th</sup> OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Milan in December 2018, the second, led by members of the TPNRD, explored concepts of 'religious literacy' and 'policy literacy', and the third examined where the policy discussion on Religion in International Relations is going.

## **PUBLIC ROUNDTABLE**

### Dialogue 4.0: The Role of Religious Communities in Fostering Inclusive Societies and Sustainable Development

The roundtable, which opened the seminar, consisted of seven speakers who considered the need for a dialogical revolution, or Dialogue 4.0 – a new era of interreligious dialogue and collaboration to help humankind foster inclusive societies and sustainable development worldwide. Keynote speaker, Hon Emanuela Del Re, Italian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, discussed the fundamental role of religious communities, especially to meet sustainable development goals, and Italy's support of them, interreligious dialogue and religious literacy.<sup>2</sup> The speakers spoke to whether, in an ever more polarized world, policymakers should see religious actors as partners in building long-term strategies to foster pluralism, social cohesion and sustainable development.

## **SESSION ONE**

### Interreligious Engagement Strategies: A Policy Tool to advance FoRB

#### *Discussion of the Report*

The first session focused on the opportunities and risks associated with the Interreligious Engagement Strategies Report. The key message of the report is that policy makers should not only see religious actors as victims or perpetrators of FoRB, but as partners in building long-term strategies to advance it. Participants highlighted that national societies in a globalised world are becoming increasingly more pluralistic and religiously diverse, but

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<sup>2</sup> Hon Emanuela Del Re's video interview, given after participating in the public round table that opened the seminar, can be found at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/eventi/evento/dialogue-40-role-religious-communities-fostering-inclusive-societies-and-sustainable-development>

where there is ignorance, there is also intolerance and violence. Therefore, interreligious dialogue and collaboration are crucial policy tools which can provide opportunities for members of different religious and non-religious groups to become acquainted with one another. This helps to foster social cohesion and sustainable peace. It was also noted how in the past, development initiatives were carried out on people's behalf rather than seeing and treating them as agents of their own change. Similarly, the approach to FoRB should not just be carried out for people or assume that religious actors are in need of being rescued. Rather, religious actors should be seen as agents of FoRB-promotion who are especially well placed to recognize and offer solutions to their own problems, as well as to create networks, connections and preventative initiatives that can avert issues.

Participants, although largely in support of interreligious engagement strategies, stressed a number of associated risks. Interreligious dialogue has tended to focus on the theological sphere and was regarded as outside of state interest and competence. This independence provided religious actors with a degree of autonomy of initiative and discussion *vis-a-vis* state authorities. However, with the state's renewed interest in the role of religion within state affairs, this prior autonomy could be encroached upon by state actors. It was also noted that religious actors might have a non-secular interpretation of FoRB. This interpretation runs the risk of weakening the protective function that FoRB as a legal right has for dissidents, minorities and members of controversial religions. Moreover, there is a risk of undertaking a 'good-will, peace and love' approach to erase all differences. Participants recognized the importance of not claiming that all religions believe the same thing and have no differences. This is untrue and counterproductive. Differences must be addressed and embraced to achieve tolerant and inclusive societies.

## **SESSION TWO**

### Enhancing Policy Discussions around Religion and Diplomacy

#### *A dialogue with the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD)*

The TPNRD, founded in 2015, enhances communication, coordination, and collaboration between diplomats and policy officials in Europe and North America who work at the intersection of religion and foreign policy. Throughout the session participants discussed the similarities and differences across the transatlantic community in the approach to religion and diplomacy, as well as risks and opportunities associated with religious literacy for policy-makers and policy literacy for religious actors.

Participants acknowledged that the attitudes and approaches towards religion and diplomacy vary between Europe and the United States due to transatlantic differences. The United States sees the separation of church and state as a way to protect religion, whereas in Europe, the separation of church and state is about protecting society and the government from religion. Additionally, participants highlighted that political actors in the United States often heavily embed religious discourse into their campaigns to acknowledge the status and importance of religion in civil society. This is not the case for Europe. The European political system has been forged on the idea that religion creates tension and conflict, and therefore, public expression of religion is regarded with suspicion.

The magnitude of 9/11 forced governmental and non-governmental agencies both in Europe and the United States to consider the role of religion in international affairs. Participants highlighted the growing recognition by governments that religion does indeed matter on a local, national and international scale. However *what* religion means and *how* it matters remains largely unanswered. It was noted that across Europe and the United States religion is commonly viewed as a source of conflict. Contrasting this, the approach of the TPNRD is to think of religion in a more substantial way – what it means for people and the different ways it is practiced and expressed – not only as a threat or as a means for instrumentalization.

The concepts of religious and policy literacy were heavily discussed by participants. It was noted that religious literacy reaches beyond the substantive aspects of religion, such as the five pillars of Islam or the essence of the Torah, to questions encompassing more nuanced aspects, such as who decides what is taught, and what happens when one encounters different teachings. This led to a general consensus that religious literacy is not just concerned with knowledge of doctrine or religious texts, but also contextual knowledge of religious demographics, behaviours and attitudes in a given region, as well as the history of religious interactions. Religious literacy would ideally involve knowing the right kinds of questions to ask in specific contexts in a similar way as having awareness of the economic, political, and cultural landscapes of a region. These critical questions are helpful within broader policy contexts, as they aid policy makers with making sense of a wide range of issues.

Participants stressed the need to focus on the functional aspects of religion. This could mean emulating practices undertaken by the TPNRD, such as engaging with religious actors on subjects of mutual interests, working towards progress through concrete action, rather than focussing on the theological road. This approach would allow governmental and non-governmental agencies to address controversial issues and sometimes work with controversial groups. Some participants did express concern for politicians and policy makers being overwhelmed with religious literacy information and the need to make decisions based on evidence, since policy makers are often under immense pressure and time constraints which can make this difficult. However, when done effectively and with select partners, religious literacy can provide policy makers with an appropriate reality check to concretely inform their decisions.

Panellists discussed how to best enhance the relationship between policy makers and researchers. As religion is still largely regarded as a source of conflict, bypassing bureaucratic hurdles and securing a space to administer discussions around religion and policy making is challenging. Therefore, panellists highlighted the need to communicate with foreign policy departments and civil services that it is in their best interest to consider religious dynamics and engage with religious actors when appropriate. This would be useful because religion is heavily embedded in the social fabric of many societies and religious actors can provide a useful gateway to understanding and working with communities. This is where the role of academics would prove beneficial. Academics should also be encouraged to engage with governments on matters of religion and not lose sight of the fact that

governments are made up of individuals who are in need of support, guidance and cooperation.

### **SESSION THREE**

#### The Future Trajectory of Policy Discussion on Religion and International Relations

In the final session, participants explored policy discussions around religion and international relations and where challenges and opportunities might arise. Some speakers pointed to recent progress such as the 2016 Marrakech Declaration. This broke new ground by bringing together a large number of ministers, religious scholars and academics from various Islamic backgrounds and schools of thought to advocate the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim lands using Islamic teachings and references.

However, worrying trends concerning religion and international relations, which are becoming increasingly more problematic, were also highlighted. The issues of growing religious persecution and growing religious nationalism were both identified as globally occurring macro trends. Participants drew attention to the religious persecution of the Ahmadis in Pakistan, the Rohingya in Myanmar, and Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in Europe and the United States as prime examples of this phenomenon. Moreover, countries such as India, Turkey and some Catholic majority countries were indicated as cases with rising religious nationalism. Participants suggested that policy makers look for ways to encourage religious voices that are not of the nationalist, populist, or exclusivist variety in order to counteract this trend.

There are several challenges facing the policy discussion on religion and international relations, such as the role of media outlets in contributing to a fear and loathing of religion in society. The consistent, biased coverage of controversial issues with a religious element, coupled with the spread of false news regarding religion, exacerbates existing misconceptions about religion. In turn, this harms the progress of policy discussion by fuelling the idea that religion is a source of conflict and religious actors cannot be partnered with. In addition, speakers expressed particular concern for mounting Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in civil society and amongst politicians in Europe and the United States, potentially jeopardising the relationship and trust between policy makers and religious actors.

The case of China was presented to spotlight the fluctuating relationship between religion, government and policy. Religion is not spoken of extensively in Chinese society, but religion is often referenced by Chinese politicians in political discourse. Unable to completely eradicate religion from society, Chinese politicians have instead adopted a carrot and stick approach. It was pointed out that high restrictions were placed upon religion under the leadership of Mao; whereas under his successor, Den Xiaoping, there was much more freedom. Current leader Xi Jinping has taken a more stringent approach towards religion. It was pointed out that the reason for this approach is to be found in the books used in the Communist Party Schools and studied by the current Chinese politicians. The books argue that religion, such as Catholicism in Poland and Islam in Afghanistan, caused the downfall of

the Soviet Union. Therefore, to preserve the regime's stability, religion must be prevented from flourishing unchecked throughout society. This example highlighted the need to avoid projecting a 'western' understanding and reading of religion and its political influence in different contexts. Attitudes toward policy discussions concerning religion fluctuate significantly throughout time and policy discussions are influenced by the understanding and interpretations of the historical role of religion, as exemplified by the different approaches of Chinese politicians. This factor must be taken into account when considering how to best develop policy discussions around religions in international relations.

Participants offered suggestions for how to advance policy discussions around religions in international relations. The principle of human dignity, shared by all the great worldwide religious and philosophical traditions, was posed as a useful concept for the progression of policy discussions on religion. It could be particularly beneficial to the different actors concerned with the foundations of human rights, serving as a tool to re-energise and depoliticise the human rights agenda. Human dignity is useful in legislation, constitution building, jurisprudence, interfaith dialogue, and education. Participants emphasised the need for more research in understanding the link between religion and international relations, stressing the role academics must play in initiating discussions. Leading from this, the importance of compulsory training for foreign ministry officials and policy makers in religious literacy was also raised.

Through the enhancement of policy discussions around religion and international relations, speakers identified a range of opportunities for achieving common goals. It was noted that religion and human rights can be complementary rather than oppositional forces and in fact religious actors help to uphold human rights when under attack. Religion can provide a means of forgiveness and reconciliation, which is beneficial to peacebuilding initiatives within and between different religious groups. Participants called for a continued effort to enhance dialogue and communication between policy makers and religious actors and, even more crucially, to increase practical collaborations. The more positive encounters that exist between different groups, the more opportunities there are to achieve common goals.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Interreligious dialogue and collaboration are crucial policy tools that help to foster social cohesion and sustainable peace.
- Religious actors should be seen as agents of FoRB-promotion, well placed to offer solutions to their own problems, as well as to create networks and preventative initiatives that can avert issues.
- Interreligious engagement strategies require more thought around how to best deal with the risks and dilemmas emerging from this new development that sees interreligious dialogue and collaboration becoming a matter of interest to the secular authorities of states and international organisations.
- Religious literacy is not just concerned with knowledge of doctrine or religious texts, but also concrete and contextual knowledge of religious landscapes, demographics, histories and attitudes.

- Religious literacy for diplomats needs to be functional and action-oriented since policy makers are often under immense pressure and time constraints which complicates their ability to integrate complex religious literacy content into their decision-making process.
- A future challenge facing the policy discussion on religion and international relations relates to the role of media in contributing to a fear and loathing of religion in society.
- Research on the influence of religion in international affairs must avoid projecting 'western' understanding and the reading of religion and its political influence in different contexts, as the case of the current Chinese leadership's understanding exemplifies.
- The religious and secular principle of human dignity has the potential to help different actors think about the foundations of human rights and serve as a tool to re-energise and depoliticise the human rights agenda.
- More research and engagement with academics is required to understand the link between religion and international relations.
- The more positive encounters between religious and non-religious groups, the more opportunities there are to achieve common goals.

### **Participants**

**Kristina ARRIAGA**, President, Oxford Society for Law and Religion & Vice-Chair of USCIRF– US/UK

**James ALEXANDER**, Policy Advisor, Office of Religion and Global Affairs, Department of State – USA

**Mustafa Cenap AYDIN**, Director, Tevere Institute – Italy

**Armando BARUCCO**, Head of Policy Planning, Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Italy

**Judd BIRDSALL**, Managing Director, Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies, Clare College, Cambridge – UK

**Francesca CAEDDU**, Researcher, John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies – Italy

**Roberto CATALANO**, Co-Director, Office for Interreligious Dialogue, Focolare Movement – Italy

**Jocelyne CESARI**, President, European Academy of Religion – Italy

**Fadi DAOU**, Chairperson & CEO, Adyan Foundation – Lebanon

**Michael D. DRIESSEN**, Associate Professor, John Cabot University – Italy

**Marta DIONISIO**, Policy Planning Unit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Italy

**Gideon ELAZAR**, Anthropologist, Bar-Ilan University – Israel

**Sonya ELMER DETTELBACHER**, Programme Manager "Religion, Politics, Conflict", DFA Federal Department Of Foreign Affairs – Switzerland

**Mohamed ELSANOUSI**, Executive Director, Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers – Finland

**Pasquale FERRARA**, Italian Ambassador to Algeria

**Silvio FERRARI**, Professor of Law and Religion, University of Milan – Italy

**Paolo FRIZZI**, Director of the Center for Global Studies, Sophia University Institute – Italy

**Nazila GHANEA**, Associate Professor in International Human Rights Law, University of Oxford – UK

**Massimo INTROVIGNE**, Director, CESNUR – Center for Studies on New Religions – Italy

**Thomas LAWO**, Senior Advisor, PaRD – Germany

**Evelyn MAIB-CHATRÉ**, Advisor on Human Rights, The German Agency for International Cooperation, German Federal Government – Germany

**Maria MANCINELLI**, Programme Coordinator, FoRB&FPI, University of Sussex – UK

**Alberto MELLONI**, Director, Foundation of Religious Sciences John XXIII – Italy

**Pekka METSO**, Ambassador for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Processes, Ministry for Foreign Affairs – Finland

**Yahya Sergio Yahe PALLAVICINI**, President, COREIS Islamic Religious Community of Italy

**Jean-Christophe PEAUCELLE**, Advisor for Religious Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs – France

**Fabio PETITO**, University of Sussex & Head of the ISPI-MFAIC Programme on ‘Religions and International Relations’ – UK/Italy

**Peter PETKOFF**, Director of Religion, Law and International Relations Programme, Regent’s Park College, Oxford; Law Lecturer, Brunel Law School – UK

**Brett SCHARFFS**, Director, International Center for Law and Religion Studies, Brigham Young University Law School – USA

**Rosita ŠORYTĚ**, President, International Observatory of Religious Liberty of Refugees) – Italy

**Scott THOMAS**, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, University of Bath – UK

**Marco VENTURA**, Director, Center for Religious Studies, Bruno Kessler Foundation – Italy

**Erin WILSON**, Associate Professor of Politics and Religion, University of Groningen – Netherlands