

jubilee dialogues

Conference report



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

How will religion
shape foreign
policy in the next
ten years?

In association with:



Wilton Park



Jubilee Dialogue

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The Jubilee Dialogue is a series of discussions in which external experts provide their views to Government on a key foreign policy subject.

This meeting was the third in the series, bringing together a small group of faith leaders, theologians and religious affairs specialists to explore the ways in which religion will shape foreign policy in the next ten years. The discussion focused broadly on the following three questions:

- Is religion a key variable in foreign policy in the post-9/11 world?
- Is there a risk of Western liberal miscalculation on the increasing importance of religion for governments elsewhere in the world?
- Do we need more 'religious literacy'?

Key points

- The relationship between foreign policy and religion is complex and is the subject of intense debate.
- Religion is often one element at work within a multifaceted on-the-ground situation.
- Current events, for instance, in Turkey, Nigeria, and Egypt, highlight the nuanced role of religion, often specific to each locality.
- UK engagement with religious actors abroad does occur, but often is conducted privately.
- The UK could employ a range of practical actions to increase its understanding of religion in foreign policy development and to strengthen its commitment to Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- Better training of UK diplomatic staff on these issues is crucial and would be reflected in improved Post reporting.
- Western focus on 'rational' motivators such as economics and security detract from understanding the complexity of communal and individual identities around the world. This is also reflected in UK media reporting.
- The UK may suffer from "cultural cringe" particularly in its response to Christian minority protection. Broad promotion of human rights including Freedom of Religion or Belief for all would help solve this dilemma.
- Institutional religion in the UK may be in decline. However, 84% of the world's population displays some sort of religious affiliation and this must be accounted

for in foreign policy analysis.

Introduction

1. There are a broad range of foreign policy issues within which religion is a variable, providing challenge and contributing to solutions. This is apparent not only within the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) but across government agencies. The Department for International Development (DfID) encounters religion within its work on economic development, women's rights, health, contraception and community building. This is applicable not only to the Middle East and North Africa, but across a range of countries including Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Burma.
2. Questions about the UK's human rights framework are an inherent part of this debate, particularly in terms of how the UK applies its human rights policies either through a western lens or is sensitive to the values and traditions specific to each country. The mainstreaming of disinterested thinking about religious issues throughout the diplomatic service will contribute to such debates. It will strengthen UK foreign policy performance in terms of analysis and response to events which have a religious element. It would also help strengthen the UK's support for freedom of religion or belief as a universal human right.

Practical action for UK consideration

3. The following are some practical actions suggested to strengthen UK engagement with religion in foreign policy development and support for the freedom of religion or belief around the world:
 - **Conditionality on foreign aid (and trade):** could increase UK emphasis on Freedom of Religion or Belief, especially in the context of protection of minority rights.
 - **Diplomats as “reflective practitioners:”** the UK's diplomats need to be “reflective practitioners”, ie they need to be able to reflect on how faith *or* secularism impacts upon policy developments and their actions in post.
 - **Pre-deployment training to include the impact of religion on foreign policy development:** training should not only focus on new/younger staff but on established personnel and the “unconverted.” It should also incorporate analysis of secularism. Here it is important to recognise that there are many ‘denominations’ within secularism and that secularism is not a neutral position. The goal is not only for FCO staff to better understand ‘the other’ but for them to understand how the other views themselves. This empathetic approach would be reflected in Post reporting.
 - **Annual audit:** an audit of religious freedom or belief around the world would serve to assure others that it is a UK priority. One suggestion was to create a commission on understanding ‘Britishness,’ including the variety of minorities and the breadth of religious affiliation within British society as a first step.
 - **Engage with diasporas:** there are clearly lessons to learn and connections to be made not only within the Muslim diasporas in the UK, but among a range of other religious communities.
 - **Partnerships with religious voices on the ground:** would significantly contribute to our foreign policy development; similarly, diverse groups should have a voice at the table (although not necessarily a veto).
 - **The role of the intelligence services:** draw on the expertise of the intelligence services in understanding individuals. Diplomats tend to have a broader focus on communities, stakeholder groups, etc.

- **A legal and constitutional approach:** focus on promoting legal protection for the freedom of religion or belief, especially for minorities.

Religion in foreign policy: practical examples and considerations

4. Recent events in Egypt and Turkey bring issues of religion and foreign policy to the fore. What does the presence of religion in the world mean for the UK? There are numerous examples of how religion is under-played, over-exaggerated, or simply misunderstood within western thinking. In Egypt, what has largely been perceived as a secular military coup, in fact required the support of the Salafist al-Nour party and the al-Azhar mosque. Alternatively, the co-existence of the Sunni Muslim group, Hamas, and the Christian minority in Gaza, emphasises how a broader Palestinian identity encompasses religious differences.
5. In 2011, Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan urged the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to embrace a pluralist state as Turkey had done. Similarly, former Tunisian Prime Minister Rashid Ghannouchi noted his desire for Tunisia to become a secular state within which all religions are free to practice, based on the UK model. This not only highlights that the UK has a lot to offer in this respect, but acts as a reminder that calls for secular government do not necessarily detract from the continued strength of religion within society.
6. In Nigeria, the influence of Shari'a declined following the emergence of democratic rule. However there has since been resurgence via political and constitutional means. A number of politicians have run on platforms espousing the values of Islamic governance in everyday life.
7. In Morocco and Iran, religion is openly discussed as an aspect of foreign policy. In the Sudan, reports suggest that peacekeeping officials often feel uncomfortable in the presence of religious figures in Cabinet meetings - the UK *must* interact with religious leaders in these countries.
8. There is a widely-held perception that the West has often failed to account for the religious aspects in key events: the 1979 Iranian revolution, the rise of al-Qaeda, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, etc. Why is this the case? Institutionally, is religion taken sufficiently seriously within the FCO and more broadly across Her Majesty's Government (HMG)?

Understanding complex identities: HMG and the media

9. The borders created at the end of the Ottoman Empire arguably no longer hold. The Sykes-Picot agreement (dividing Ottoman Empire Arab provinces into future areas of British and French spheres of influence) means very little to people in the region. Religion is a strong uniting factor for many, at times more relevant than nationality. We must therefore take seriously the complex interplay between the constituent elements of national identity for example, religious, cultural, tribe, education.
10. The Western Enlightenment Project presents the UK with an ideological problem. There is no point of reference beyond human rationality which makes our default position one that is based on economics or security. This is despite the fact that identity politics, particularly in a time of intra-state conflict is extremely important; belonging to a religious community is often a central point of consolidation, for example, in the Balkans. There are no mono-causal explanations of conflict. We must factor in those which we find difficult to understand. Our "editing out" of these perspectives can leave us ideologically blind. At the same time we must avoid any tendency to "edit in" religious factors overly-simplistically.
11. Disentangling a web of motivating factors is complex but the UK's best diplomats *do* consider faith aspects in their assessments of human behaviour and recognise the importance in getting beyond their own cognitive understanding in order to see other

points of view.

12. The press has also met with difficulties as regards identity and the language they attribute to events with religious aspects. Terms such as Islam, Muslim, etc. have resulted in backlash even when religion *has* played a motivating role within the ideology. The media certainly must take care not to demonise all Muslims. However, to analyse the role of religion it must also be properly recognised and named at its worst. In the recent Oxford sex abuse case, the media sought to avoid cultural and religious affiliations; this changed however following coordination between a number of mosques in denouncing the grooming of children by Muslim men.
13. It is often difficult to build a *positive* narrative and to find news stories that challenge stereotypes. However, the recent papal visit, and engagement between mosque members and English Defence League (EDL) protesters in York, helped to challenge negative narratives. It emphasised how religion can unite rather than divide.
14. The influence of religion can be a very difficult problem when related to political extremism and/or oppression or the denial of rights. Islam *is* often the elephant in the room, but there has been a rise in radicalisation across *all* religions. The fundamentalism of the 1980s has now shifted to a more aggressive radicalism. Sometimes though, religion provides the *means* of communal identification, whilst broader socio-economic issues may be the actual *cause* of radicalisation.
15. Religious identity does not necessarily reflect faith as it is *practised*. Assigning “fundamentalist” labels to certain groups may also undermine broader foreign policy initiatives, for example, does this polarise the debate on whether and how to engage the Taliban?
16. There are many positive examples of religion and foreign policy, such as collaboration between international governments and the Catholic Church on the Land Mine Treaty. How can we increase these types of interaction?

Government engagement on religion in foreign policy

17. The FCO does take religious variables seriously although is wary of over-simplifying the role of religion. For example, in Syria, whilst the conflict may play out along sectarian lines, the main motivators could be socio-economic. When it is a contributing factor though, the question for the UK is whether or not it is quick enough to recognise it and whether it has the necessary expertise to develop an appropriate policy response.
18. On the one hand, the UK has, in the past, failed to acknowledge the role of religion within a number of aid-related issues, eg social cohesion and women’s literacy. Experience at other international organisations has also shown this same lack of knowledge. For example, one European delegate to India claimed to not know much about Hinduism, and more importantly about how it is practiced *in* India.
19. On the other hand, FCO engagement in Burma *has* acknowledged the presence of religious factors and has precipitated a cross-Government and Ministerial-level effort. In Pakistan, the FCO conducts a lot of work on the ground related to freedom of religion, which includes minority protection; however these are not always public efforts. Furthermore, the presence of Dr Mashoud Baderin in the Foreign Secretary’s Human Rights Advisory Council also reflects a greater emphasis on these issues.
20. In the United States, former Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton set up the US Foreign Policy and Faith Working Group as well as the Office of Faith Engagement which now has 200 employees. Later this year the US will also release its National Security Strategy on Engagement of Faith, highlighting its core position within US foreign policy development. In addition, the US and Canada both have Ambassadorial posts for religious freedom. In Germany, religious freedom has been linked to trade agreement

conditions. Should the UK do the same?

21. The danger of conditionality is the perception of neo-colonialism. Working with latent forces within a country may therefore be more effective. Furthermore, established measures such as an Ambassador for Religious Freedom have not necessarily translated into results on the ground while the creation of distinct offices can detract from the mainstreaming of religion into organisation-wide processes.
22. This debate also extends to how the UK presents its values around the world. Whilst it could be argued that the UK should not shy away from presenting “British values” abroad, another suggestion is to use examples and traditions from the specific religion and culture of a given country to underpin our policy positions; a strategy the FCO has employed in its promotion of women’s education in Pakistan.

Responding to minority needs

22. UK foreign policy is perceived to have failed to recognise or respond to the persecution of minorities which seems to have increased in line with the rise of Islamist groups in government. As ‘secular’ political power has been weakened in some ‘Arab Awakening’ countries, it has led to a rise in religious intolerance demonstrated through the application of Blasphemy laws, restrictions on the ability of individuals to worship, and in the worst cases, violence. This applies to a range of faiths or beliefs including Hinduism, Judaism, Baha’ism and Christianity, as well as secularism and atheism.
23. In the case of minority Christians facing discrimination in Eastern Turkey, the UK was regarded to have failed in its response, despite pleas from the Church of England. The occurrence of Christian and Hindu persecution in Pakistan has raised a similar challenge for HMG. Should the UK grant asylum to religious minorities? Or should it work to solve problems in-country? Is this a problem for Western Muslims and Eastern Christians to resolve?
24. As one of the more secular countries in the world, the UK may suffer from “cultural cringe,” ie a fear of speaking out about religion, especially Christianity. Although they are not the only minority group facing persecution internationally; the UK seems to be uncomfortable referring directly to “Christians”. The emphasis of minority protection across the board may be the appropriate strategy. Christian minorities will benefit from broad promotion of human rights rather than specific Western support.
25. The UK needs to engage with those who have strong religious identities in order to create broad and stable international relationships; however it is also clear that this must incorporate the protection of religious minorities.

The future of religion and the development of foreign policy

26. What changes will occur over the next fifty years in religion and what will be the impact? The pattern of religious affiliation around the world – in the United States, Russia, China, etc. is increasing and changing. In China, the number of Christians now outnumbers Communist Party Members; and in Russia, over 50% of the military will soon be Muslim. In the Americas, the growth of the Pentecostal church represents a very significant shift of religious affiliation.
27. In 2007, Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah stated that British youth do not understand the Middle East largely because they do not attend church. The “millennium generation” is changing though, rejecting welfare thinking and old traditions (eg gay marriage), and assuming more choice through social media.
28. In the Middle East and North Africa, whilst the mosque has historically been the only place to freely gather under dictatorial rule, greater freedoms post-‘Arab Spring’ may alter. What will be the impact upon conservative values in those countries?
29. Overall there seems to be a decline in the hierarchical, top-down approaches, related

to social media and its impact on the allegiances of young people. What comparisons can be drawn between non-hierarchical religions eg Islam and Pentecostalism?

Conclusion

The dialogue concluded with more questions than answers and there were a number of criticisms regarding the UK's engagement with religion in the development of foreign policy. Nonetheless it was also clear that this is an issue of which the government is increasingly alert. Here it should be stated that many HMG efforts, particularly in addressing minority protection and religion related to aid efforts, are often conducted privately. Freedom of religion and worship (including the right to change or to not have a religion) remains one of the UK's human rights priorities.

Religion is clearly a factor at work in a range of foreign policy areas thus the ability of our diplomats and foreign-policy makers to identify such elements is critical. Thinking and training on these issues should therefore be made available across HMG.

Jennifer Lang

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