



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office



Wilton Park



Image: Saad Faruque

Conference report

**Religion, foreign policy and development: making
better policy to make a bigger difference**

Wednesday 5 – Friday 7 February 2014 | WP1311

In association with:

With support from:



CITY UNIVERSITY
LONDON



Conference report

Religion, foreign policy and development: making better policy to make a bigger difference

Wednesday 5 – Friday 7 February 2014 | WP1311

Executive summary

Reflecting a growing awareness on the part of governments of the need to strengthen policy making by engaging with religious actors, this Wilton Park conference brought together academics, policy makers, diplomats, development practitioners and religious actors to discuss challenges and opportunities for learning and closer collaboration in the integration of religious awareness and engagement in foreign policy and development – to make better policy and to make a bigger difference.

Major conceptual and definitional issues

The terminology of religion is fraught with complexity: even basic terms such as “religion,” “religious engagement,” “religious actors,” “faith-based,” “faith-inspired” are understood differently depending on context, culture and experience.

There are risks associated with identifying people and organisations solely in terms of religion (or lack thereof), but both policy makers and religious actors have multiple identities and complex relationships with religion and belief. For example, many people of faith work in “secular” organisations—including governments.

The organisations, particularly in the Global South, that governments define as uniquely “faith-based” are not necessarily perceived as such by communities in settings where religion is densely woven into the fabric of everyday life.

Notions of “sacred” and “sacredness” are not found exclusively in the realm of religion. Governments and international institutions may sometimes treat international documents and norms in ways that acquire qualities of sacredness and inviolability.

Key outcomes and findings

For policy makers

- There is a need for a broader understanding of the nature of religion and how it impacts the lives of global communities. We need to move beyond a conversation about ‘what people believe’ to better understand how these beliefs contribute to worldviews, how people live their lives, and how they engage politically.
- Too often in recent years, discussions about religion, foreign policy and development have been concerned primarily with a single religious tradition, Islam, and often focused on security issues. There is a need to broaden this discussion such that it considers how engagement with a wider range of communities may add value across multiple and diverse policy domains.
- There is a risk of ‘ghettoising’ engagement with religion by treating it as a function separate from broader policy making processes. The integration of religion into the

everyday practice of foreign policy and development should be a policy goal.

- Many perceive foreign policy and development institutions—particularly in the global north—to possess a secular bias and operational culture that predisposes them to be wary of religion. “Religious literacy” training may help to ameliorate this problem where it exists, but more also needs to be done to disseminate examples of good practice.

For faith-based organisations

- The instincts and inclinations of policy makers sometimes make them wary of engagement with religion. Faith groups need to develop a better appreciation of how they are perceived, and to help policy makers understand and recognize where they have distinctive and sometimes unique contributions to make to policy concerns.
- Local communities, faith groups and government actors often do not share sufficiently language and discourse on issues of mutual concern. Faith groups need to bridge this gap by enabling effective communication and better understanding of their situatedness vis-à-vis conventional policy issues and frames.
- The priorities of faith groups do not necessarily coincide with those of policy makers, especially with respect to timescales. For example, faith groups often perceive their efforts as oriented towards long term changes and improvements whereas governmental operational tempos are often dictated by short term bureaucratic or political cycles.
- Faith groups are often the ‘wrong size and shape’ for linking with government on policy issues. Faith groups need to develop a better understanding of policy organizations and processes in order to identify relevant and effective points of engagement.
- Policy makers are seeking ways to understand the changing nature of politics and faith within local faith communities. Due to their shared beliefs and values, faith groups are trusted by these communities and can be effective interlocutors between the grass roots and policy-makers in a wide range of development and transitional contexts.

The context

1. The conference was a direct response to a felt need to enhance policy-making processes by engaging with religious actors and institutions across the full range of functional and regional domains in foreign policy and development.
2. Despite a growing body of academic work arguing for the importance of faith in world affairs, government dialogue or partnership with ‘religion’ remains problematic and contentious – both domestically and internationally. The purpose of the conference was to move the discussion forward by tackling directly many of the obstacles, challenges and opportunities associated with integrating awareness of religion and religious engagement into foreign policymaking and development practice.
3. Its aims were to:
 - Draw academics, policy makers, diplomats/international practitioners and religious actors into dialogue about the best interface between religion, policy and development
 - Survey current and emerging institutional arrangements for engagement with religion at the bilateral and multilateral levels in order to identify current and emerging best practices
 - Strengthen the policy machinery within government and NGOs by improved information sharing and co-ordination about engagement with religion in support of societal transformation
4. The major insights that emerged during the conference have been grouped under three headings in this report– although it is recognised that there are inevitably important overlaps between all three. The first section identifies some of the broader, cross-cutting theoretical and definitional issues that emerged. The next section, focused on ‘challenges and opportunities for governments’ deals primarily with issues and

recommendations aimed at policy audiences. The final area, 'issues and opportunities for faith groups,' highlights actions for faith groups to consider in order to facilitate increased understanding of their role and potential for engagement with government partners.

Theoretical, definitional and conceptual challenges

5. The inevitable complexity of dealing with religion and religious actors within and across a broad range of foreign policy and development issues highlighted a number of common conceptual issues and challenges.

Actors' multiple identities

6. There is an inherent danger in identifying people and organisations solely in terms of religion (or lack thereof), which is but one facet of multi-faceted identities. It is necessary to recognise that both policy makers and religious actors have multiple identities and often multiple roles – diplomatic roles, development roles, political roles, corporate roles, etc. These multiple identities cannot be disassociated from one another in the hope of sanitizing religion, development and foreign policy. Further, it needs to be recognised that religious leaders and FBOs are not solely concerned with issues informed by faith but also issues that affect society at large. Policymakers need to move beyond the assumption that all religious actors share a particular worldview and focus on the unique added value of incorporating FBOs in the policy process.

Categorical challenges

7. The impetus to simplify social reality through classification constructs a system that requires governments to classify NGOs and also requires NGOs and FBOs to position themselves within it.
8. However, drawing such sharp lines of distinction between FBOs and policy makers, on the one hand, and NGOs and faith-based actors on the other may not be sustainable.
9. Moreover, the designation of an organization as "faith-based" may be irrelevant in the Global South where so many NGOs have a faith component or may be counter-productive where donor conditionality dominates. Distinguishing between FBOs, secular NGOs and representatives of secular states or IGOs is further complicated by the fact that many organisations that do not have an explicitly faith-based identity, including governments, frequently have staff who are people 'of faith'. We need to unpack these labels, consider how we use them and recognize that our existing frames may no longer accommodate emergent issues.

Terminology and language

10. The terminology and conceptual language that is used in conversations about the role of religion in foreign policy and development is fraught with complexity and multiple meanings: relevant actors think about and use the terms 'religion', 'religious engagement', 'religious actors', 'faith-based', 'faith-inspired' in varying ways that are not always mutually compatible.
11. Further, policy makers may over-emphasise political language in dealing with FBOs and FBOs may over-emphasise the language of faith identity in dealing with policy makers.
12. There are also considerable national differences in understandings of religion and religious issues that arise from different social and political histories. These domestic norms influence how countries think about the intersection of religion and politics and can also pervade the language, institutions and mind-sets at the supranational level.

'Sacredness' (inviolability) of secular texts and thinking

13. It is not often clear where the world of 'religion' begins and ends. However, what is clear is that the simplistic classification of civil society actors into binary and oppositional 'secular' and 'religious' categories in the abstract does not capture the complexity of social reality.

14. It is often presumed that the qualities of the ‘sacred’ and ‘sacredness’ are to be found exclusively in the realm of religion and the worldview of religious groups. Yet, governments and intergovernmental organizations often treat their foundational documents and declarations as ‘sacred texts’. While secular groups tend to shy away from engagement, fearing that FBOs may be a Trojan Horse for proselytizing, religious organisations fear ‘secular proselytizing’ and can feel compelled to secularize their operations and discourses and ‘leave their faith at the door’.

Challenges and opportunities for policy makers

15. Religious engagement comes with a number of risks related to determining the scope and nature of engagement. First, there is a danger of “going too narrow” – i.e. “sectoring out” or “ghettoizing” religious actors and only engaging with them on a narrow range of issues or through a particular policy lens (e.g. freedom of religion or human rights or services delivery) and thus under-estimating the importance of religion in a broader range of social, political and economic contexts. However, there is also a risk of over-inflating religion’s importance whether generally or in particular contexts such as those experiencing conflict, state fragility, or disaster.

The challenge of “mainstreaming”

16. While there has been growing interest in working with faith groups, governments and international institutions struggle to integrate religious engagement into everyday practice. While they might consider creating a central locus of responsibility to coordinate efforts in order to “mainstream” religious engagement as an important policy priority, they need to be mindful of the potential for ghettoizing or affirming the separateness of religion in the policy realm (e.g. “that office deals with religion”).
17. Coordination across governmental agencies and departments is necessary to ensure that religious engagement is systematic, consistent, and meaningful. Moreover, those pursuing a religious engagement agenda need to develop strategies to raise awareness across government agencies and not just “preach to the converted.”
18. The tendency to conceive of religious engagement merely as a counter-terrorism strategy is a serious obstacle to mainstreaming. It needs to be clear that counter-terrorism is not the focus of religious engagement nor are such activities aimed at a particular geographic region or religious community. In particular, the conversation on religion and foreign policy needs to move beyond being a euphemism for discussing Islam and a set of (presumably) security related issues.

The challenge of a secular bias and operational culture

19. Some foreign policy and development actors have demonstrated reservations about engaging with religious groups which indicate—or are perceived to indicate—mind sets and operational cultures wary of religion. Government officials may be sceptical about religious engagement because of dominant Western-centred assumptions about the of the secularisation-modernisation nexus. Other times their dilemmas stem from the moral complexity of the issues under consideration, or because of concerns about maintaining an appropriate delineation between church and state. Additionally, those seeking to engage with faith groups tend to attribute to the latter some “special” status without recognising their own personal biases and ideological orientations.
20. A compelling case for engagement needs to be constructed to overcome the instincts of government personnel who are sometimes wary of religious engagement. Policymakers need to move beyond the assumption that all religious actors share a particular worldview; they may need to be encouraged to explore the unique added value of each and every faith-based organisation (FBO), and recognise that they can make distinct contributions, which could be incorporated at different stages of the policy process. Governments need to take the views and values of faith groups seriously and not merely use them as vehicles to accomplish policy goals (i.e. instrumentalism).
21. Constructive engagement with religion requires putting aside prejudices about the

assumed unique propensity of faith groups to proselytise and be open to realise that even outside the realm of religion people may be operating along some “sacred” paradigms. Governments and IGOs often treat their foundational documents and declarations as “sacred texts” and may also engage in “secular proselytising.”

The institutional capacity challenge

22. Bureaucratic hierarchies and government career structures can pose significant obstacles to the religious engagement agenda. Government careers frequently involve a great deal of mobility with personnel changing roles frequently. How do institutions deal with the phenomenon of having to “start all over again” with religious engagement every time a new senior figure comes into office or as functional teams turn over through staff rotations? Likewise, how to build incentives for career advancement through religious engagement, and to incentivize risk averse bureaucrats to undertake this kind of work.
23. Creating a central governmental locus to “champion” religious engagement—such as the U.S. State Department’s new Office of Faith Based Community Initiatives—can have benefits. This might include the development of specialised offices concerned with exploring the nexus of religion and foreign affairs as well as the codification of strategies on engaging with religious leaders and faith communities. There is a need to develop intra- and inter-governmental networks that span different agencies and departments to determine the most effective means by which to engage faith communities. At the same time, there is a need to avoid allowing the existence of offices dedicated to religious engagement to serve as an excuse for other bureaus to not consider religious engagement as part of their own portfolios.

The training and professional development challenge

24. Religious engagement requires a highly developed understanding of the faith-based world. Actors need to be aware of the role that faith plays in societies so they can develop effective strategies to work with representational and congregational faith groups. However, religious awareness, religious literacy and skills relevant to religious engagement are not routinely part of the training of diplomats and development professionals and, to a certain extent, religion has been driven out of academic institutions and isolated from the mainstream. This compounds the problem of low religious literacy among policy makers who often do not understand the multi-faceted nature of religious communities, the diverse authority structures of different religions or the political significance of emergent religious movements.
25. There is a clear need to train junior diplomats and civil servants about the importance of religion and religious engagement in order to develop skill sets that can address the opportunities and issues in this field. It is important that officials understand how FBOs and people of faith think and act, not just what they believe, and appreciate the influence of the different development and transitional contexts in which they operate.

The legal challenge

26. The legal and constitutional frameworks of domestic and international institutions within which governments operate can pose constraints inhibiting engagement with religious actors. Some groups may be banned in their own countries or blacklisted by Western governments. Religious engagement can sometimes place governments and policymakers in complicated legal territory and agencies do not always receive clear and consistent guidance from their lawyers. How can we develop legal guidance that enables religious engagement while still remaining consonant with core constitutional principles? There is a need to provide an appropriate degree of legal guidance to those in government dealing with FBOs and faith communities so the work of religious engagement can be enabled while respecting legal and constitutional “red lines.”

The “who speaks for religion?” (and who doesn’t get to speak?) challenge

27. Governments and international organisations need to be discerning about whom they engage. Who speaks for whom in the field of religion? How can their representativeness be tested? How can their authenticity be tested? Women and youth

tend to be under-represented in engagements with faith-based groups. The voices of women at the grassroots level are often overlooked in culture wars that are fought at the elite level. Issues that are of concern to young people are often not on the agenda of religious leaders. There is a need to create spaces in the context of religious engagement where the voices of women and youth can be heard.

The challenge of religious engagement jeopardising other policy priorities

28. In some cases, religious engagement may interfere with or jeopardise other policy priorities. For example, how can government address situations where short-term progress in one area (e.g. security) leads a government to partner with a religious actor who holds views that conflict with other policy priorities (e.g. the rights of women, religious freedom, pluralism, etc.). Policies that present a direct conflict with faith values can negatively impact areas of existing positive engagement. FBOs may be willing to work with government on one issue but reject working with it on another where there is a conflict with the values, beliefs or agenda of the organisation.

Issues and opportunities for faith groups

29. This section identifies areas for faith groups to consider that may facilitate improved relationships and dialogue with policy makers and other government and institutional figures to help reach the overall goal of 'making better policy to make a bigger difference'.

Evidence for the 'value added' of collaborating with faith groups

30. The need to clearly articulate the benefits of working with faith groups became clear, especially as decisions within governments are increasingly being made with reference to empirical evidence. It is incumbent for faith groups to reflect on and demonstrate any distinctive contribution they bring as well as being clear about the role of faith within their work.
31. Attention was drawn to the work of the Joint Learning Initiative on gathering evidence of the value-added of local faith communities. <http://www.jliflc.com/>

Problems related to comprehension, terminology, language and discourse

32. Different historical and cultural backgrounds, and even personal experiences, can cause misunderstanding or confusion when dealing with matters of faith and religion. This is a major challenge as there needs to be a shared understanding about what religion is, what it empowers and how it helps to shape a person's worldview. 'If policy-makers don't understand religion, their tools are limited'.
33. But there is not yet a shared language or discourse for faith groups and policy-makers. When dealing with government officials and other political actors, faith groups will need to comprehend how others perceive matters of faith, especially the instincts and inclinations of risk averse senior decision-makers and adapt their approach to accommodate this. This could then provide wider opportunities to help develop 'religious literacy' among policy-makers.

Need for increased confidence in expressing faith identity

34. The predominance of modernity and secularisation in public discourse has caused many faith groups to review how they present their work when dealing with policy-makers and funders for fear of being misunderstood or marginalised: a sense that they needed to 'leave their faith at the door'.
35. This risks a lack of coherence between identity and action and conflict with stakeholders.
36. The renewed interest in the impact of religion in public life provides faith groups with both an opportunity and encouragement to reflect on any distinctiveness that faith brings and then to adapt language and discourse to present this with clarity and confidence.

Need for improved 'political literacy' on the part of faith groups

37. In the same manner that a lack of 'religious literacy' was identified among some members of government departments, there is a parallel need for improved political or policy literacy among some faith groups.
38. The impact of faith groups could be enhanced if they were to develop a greater appreciation of the structures, processes, jargons, priorities and constraints of government departments and international institutions and what roles their employees have. This would include (but is not limited to):
 - Knowing which branch of government would be most appropriate for their concerns and an appreciation of the diverse agendas of different departments
 - An appreciation that foreign policy and development objectives may be driven by a country's perceived strategic interests
 - A recognition that the time-frame for government objectives is often linked to electoral, budgeting, and other bureaucratic cycles and so may be much shorter term than those of faith groups, or the needs of development processes.
 - An appreciation that policy-makers are often constrained by a lack of capacity, personnel or senior commitment.

Building capacity and confidence

39. Faith groups are often the 'wrong size and shape' for developing solid links and influence in government and in the broader policy world.
40. Individual faith groups may not have a comprehensive range of skills, experiences and research to engage effectively with policy makers on a particular issue. Working in alliance with other groups (both secular and faith-based) was seen as a useful way to build both capacity and credibility with policy-makers.
41. The fragmentation of perspectives (both within and between faiths) can inhibit coordination among faith groups and some potential partnerships with secular NGOs may flounder due to differences with each other's position on separate issues.
42. The impact of faith groups on policy issues could be broadened if they were emboldened to reach out beyond the 'usual suspects' by identifying partners with whom they could build consensus around issues of mutual interest.

Effective Representation

43. The frequent tendency for religious leaders to be the primary representative for faith groups but the validity of this was questioned on a number of grounds:
 - It minimises the contribution of women at policy discussions.
 - They may be representing only a traditional, orthodox view of the faith, not the views of the masses or marginal voices. In many instances 'the flock goes ahead and the herders are left behind'.
 - Religious leaders may not be well informed on the topic or policy issue in question.
 - In some circumstances (e.g. conflict resolution) the time required was beyond that which was reasonable given other responsibilities
44. Religious leaders and other people of faith often have multiple roles within a community: for example as a member of a political party, a person with civic responsibilities or related to church membership. Faith groups can enhance their ability to attract the attention of the policy makers if it is made clearer from the outset in what exact capacity their spokesperson are talking.
45. There is a clear opportunity for faith groups to expand their range of representatives by including more women and people from marginalised groups which may involve a commitment to training and support.

Potential Drawbacks of engaging with Governments and the broader policy sector

46. Faith groups were seen as useful by governments and international organisations for reaching out to particular target communities. There was concern that faith groups could be co-opted to this end with risks to their reputation and credibility.
47. There is a risk that too much focus on religion could lead to faith groups being used as part of problem-solving, whereby institutions with specific mandates de facto relinquish their responsibilities to faith actors.
48. It will be incumbent on faith groups to carefully weigh the benefits and risks of engagement with government actors.

Foreign policy

49. Specific challenges emerged in the domain of Foreign Policy, where faith groups were particularly concerned with a need for improved understanding of political processes, representation and access.

How to be an effective interlocutor between poorest and policy makers?

50. The relevance of religion to policy makers tends to have a narrow focus: for example, when considering issues around freedom of religion and belief or when engaging with religiously inspired political groups (e.g. Islamist parties), or when considering security issues.
51. Many communities in the developing world are deeply religious and therefore faith groups are able to engage authentically with the grass-roots due to shared beliefs and values. Many religious actors are already engaging with the poorest who tend to know all too well from experience “how the system works”. Religious actors therefore have a responsibility to tell this story, thereby changing the current polarised narrative of faith and politics.
52. The connections of faith groups to local communities provide opportunities to bring penetrating insight into the worldview, culture, social practices and perspectives of grass roots communities to policy makers leading to more informed and engaged policy making.

How to make effective contribution in conflict resolution?

53. Faith groups and religious leaders have historically been expected to play a role in the longer-term healing processes following conflict and have also been able to provide insight into the background cultures of those involved. But at times, faith groups have also been seen as political actors or as a party to the conflict.
54. More recently there have been opportunities in a number of settings for faith groups to participate in conflict resolution itself. This was partly, but not only, due to a recognition of the theological principle of speaking with enemies, as faith groups can sometimes engage in dialogue with groups that governments cannot.
55. These opportunities need to be weighed carefully by faith groups as there are concerns that involvement in resolution itself may compromise their role in the longer term healing process as well as difficulties in identifying appropriate people to undertake this time-consuming role

Development

56. Communication and framing of multi-faceted operations are key concerns when it comes to the area of international development.

Demonstrating comparative advantage

57. Faith groups are known to be significant providers of health and education in many countries and are often embedded within society with long-term links to local faith communities leading to greater resilience. Their networks reach deep into rural communities and faith leaders are able to provide routine access to communities and

mobilise volunteers when needed. Local churches can be agents of change as their focus is not on short term programmes; rather they look at life differently, facilitating behaviour change through an holistic approach.

58. Nevertheless, the 'instincts and inclinations' of many actors are to view the influence of faith groups in developing countries as malign, especially with regard to women's reproductive issues and HIV/AIDS. This leads to a perception that religion is part of the problem.
59. Sometimes government policies, or those of funders, are in overt conflict with religious values as expressed by religious leaders and institutions. However it is important to realise that the official leaders' views do not necessarily reflect the lifestyles of the majority of the population embracing that religion.
60. Some actors resist collaborating with faith groups (and vice versa) on areas of mutual interest due to underlying disagreements which may stem from completely separate issues.
61. The ongoing dialogue between faith groups and government development actors provides an opportunity to provide clarity about their working practices 'on the ground', especially in areas of potential disagreement. This collaboration is important in order to avoid misconceptions, and to identify areas of common ground, demonstrating where and how they bring a comparative advantage.

Conclusion

62. The purpose of this conference was not to question whether religion is relevant to international affairs; instead, starting from the acceptance that religion is indeed a relevant factor affecting contemporary global politics, it endeavoured to establish how the topic of religion and the role of faith-based actors ought to be addressed by governments and international institutions in the fields of foreign policy and development in order to make better policy to make a bigger difference.
63. Looking forward at the challenges of how to make better policies at the intersection between religion, development and foreign policy, it was recognised that a double effort is required: conceptually and pragmatically and oriented simultaneously introspectively and externally. Both faith-based groups and governments and international institutions may need to reconsider their roles and languages in order to overcome mutual misconceptions and to ease communication with diverse external interlocutors and stakeholders.
64. Recognising that religion is a factor cutting across various dimensions of life, excessive compartmentalisation of governmental offices dealing with faith ought to be avoided to promote instead better coordination, collaboration, and mainstreaming effects. While institutional structures and clear processes are necessary for the existence and functioning of governments, international organisations and FBOs, efforts should be made to stay focused on their respective missions and possibilities for collaboration and avoid becoming trapped in the machinery.

Pat Finlow and Gerald Fitzgerald

Wilton Park | March 2014

Wilton Park reports are brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of a conference. The reports reflect rapporteurs' personal interpretations of the proceedings – as such they do not constitute any institutional policy of Wilton Park nor do they necessarily represent the views of the rapporteur.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park conferences, please consult our website www.wiltonpark.org.uk

To receive our e-newsletter and latest updates on conferences subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>