

Religion and Religious Freedom in International Diplomacy

Workshop Summary Brief

22 September 2016

On 22 September 2016, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in collaboration with the World Council of Churches and Finnish Ecumenical Council organised a workshop on “**Religion and Religious Freedom in International Diplomacy**”. The main objectives of the workshop were:

- (1) To understand the use of religion in foreign policies including in development and humanitarian aid;
- (2) To sensitize the need of both “literacies” on religions and religious freedom in international diplomacy and foreign policies;
- (3) To find ways to contribute to the advancement of religious literacy and freedom of religion or belief.



I. Background by Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt

In recent years we have witnessed the re-emergence of “religion” as a salient issue of international relations and international diplomacy. There seems to be broad consensus among political practitioners as well as academics that the influence of religion in politics should not be underestimated. Some Governments openly claim a religious mandate on which they largely base their political legitimacy – with or without approval of their populations. At the same time, religious communities themselves, or at least some of them, play important roles in public life, not only domestically, but also internationally. Moreover, countless people in all parts of the world feel motivated by their faith to act politically by engaging on issues, such as development projects and humanitarian aid. While religion has also become a factor of persecutions and violent escalation in different parts of the globe, projects of interreligious communication are intended to overcome the scourge

of terrorism and other manifestations of violence committed in the name of religion. These and other phenomena account for the need to promote more “religious literacy” among professionals in international relations and diplomacy.

From the perspective of freedom of religion or belief, the renewed “visibility” of religion in international political life harbours positive opportunities, but may also include some risks. On the positive side, it leads to a renewed acknowledgment of the existential significance that religion or belief apparently has for countless people. The role of religion or belief cannot be relegated into a mere private sphere. For many believers it also has a public dimension, which brings it close to “politics” in the broad understanding of public affairs. In practice, this may include running kindergartens, schools and charity organizations or the establishment of community-based social media, healthcare facilities and other public activities. Against restrictive concepts of secularism, which still prevail in some countries, the re-emergence of religion in public political life, has contributed to an increased awareness of how deep-seated, broad and far-reaching religious activities can be. This may help overcome too narrow understandings of freedom of religion or belief, which indeed covers the whole range of convictions and conviction-based practices attached to religion or belief.

At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that freedom of religion or belief follows the logic of the human rights approach in general, which has been summed up in Article 1 of the UDHR: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Instead of providing protection to religions in themselves (i.e. to religious truth claims, identities, reputations etc.), freedom of religion or belief protects *human beings* in their dignity, freedom of equality. To put it succinctly, it protects believers rather than beliefs. Moreover, freedom of religion or belief equally covers the followers of traditional and non-traditional religions, of big and small communities, of mainstream groups and special branches, and it furthermore includes agnostics and atheists as well as people with unclear religious identities. By contrast, the renewed attention attributed to religion as a factor of international politics and diplomacy may naturally focus mainly on those religions that can make a difference, i.e. politically influential, economically strong and culturally hegemonic religions. This can lead to an implicit dichotomy between politically “relevant” and “irrelevant” religions, with the danger that those belonging to less relevant groups largely remain ignored. While some communities might strongly

benefit from increased attention and public awareness, others might lose out. This can lead to serious discrimination or new forms of ignorance and stigmatization.

Another danger concerns the tendency of overemphasizing the relevance of religion, for instance as a factor of violent escalation. While certain conflicts clearly have a religious dimension that cannot be ignored, their root-causes are usually manifold and may also include mundane issues like endemic corruption, bad governance, collective historical traumas, a prevailing “macho”-culture, economic polarization, land conflicts and other variables. Describing some of the existing national, regional and international conflicts mainly or even exclusively in religious terms would not only ignore other relevant factors; it could also lead to a simplistic use of religious labels. From the perspective of freedom of religion or belief, however, this can cause profound injustice, if it ignores the self-understanding of believers or non-believers who thus may end up becoming the targets of unqualified collective labelling.

The overemphasis of religion can even lead to “religionising” politics, which is the flipside of “politicising” religion. As a result, the secular sphere of international politics and diplomacy may increasingly shrink – or even disappear in the long run. While the right to freedom of religion or belief is incompatible with narrow concepts of “secularism” that intend to push religion back into a mere private sphere, an understanding of “inclusive secularity” as a space-providing principle has proved beneficial for the enjoyment by everyone of this human rights. The inclusive secular space enhances the opportunities for people to decide for themselves whether and how they would come out religiously and how they wish to manifest their beliefs alone and together with others and in private as well as in public. Such an inclusive secular space is also needed in international politics and diplomacy. After all, human rights law itself is “secular” law in the sense of being independent of any particular religious foundations, while remaining open for positive acknowledgements and readings from the perspective of different religious, cultural and philosophical traditions. What is most important is to understand that the space provided by secular norms and institutions is an open space, not an empty space. Many misunderstandings around secularity, particularly in Europe, stem from confusing openness with emptiness.

In short, whereas the demands for more religious literacy in international politics and diplomacy are certainly justified, they should be connected with a

solid understanding of freedom of religion or belief, as an integral part of international human rights law. We obviously need both: religious literacy and religious freedom literacy.

About the mandate

The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief is an independent expert appointed by the UN Human Rights Council. The Special Rapporteur has been mandated through Human Rights Council resolution 6/37, to promote the adoption of measures that ensure the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB); to identify existing and emerging obstacles to the enjoyment of the right to freedom of religion or belief and present recommendations to overcome such obstacles; to examine incidents and governmental actions that are incompatible with the provisions of the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief and to recommend remedial measures as appropriate; and to continue to apply a gender perspective, *inter alia*, through the identification of gender-specific abuses, in the reporting process, including in information collection and in recommendations.

About partner organizations

The World Council of Churches (WCC) through its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs has been engaged during the past seven decades in issues relating to freedom of religion or belief. The main reason for creating the Commission prior to the WCC was to bring the voice of churches and the ecumenical family at large in the drafting process of major international instruments. The first Director of the Commission, Frederick O. Nolde was one of the drafters of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Finnish Ecumenical Council (FEC) works to promote the realization of freedom of religion or belief globally. During a two-year human rights campaign, FEC started collaborating with the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) on issues of freedom of religion or belief. Noting the need for information and training, FEC at the request of the MFA organised a training seminar in September 2016 on “Religion and Foreign Policy from the perspective of freedom of religion or belief”. The decision for such a focus was to equip foreign policy actors with better understanding of religions and religious freedom so that they can respond appropriately to challenges of freedom of religion or belief.

II. Religion in Foreign Policies

In this session, participants tried to explore the reasons for which religion is used in foreign policies. Presenters shared their country experiences and also other case studies to examine the outcome that religious literacy in foreign policies has yielded.



Ambassador Yvette Stevens (*Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Sierra Leone to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva*) gave a presentation which focused on the acclaimed level of religious tolerance in Sierra Leone and the actions taken to spread this experience through its foreign policy. Following an invitation extended to the Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief, his report, which highlighted the exemplary nature of religious tolerance in Sierra Leone, and the contributing factors to such tolerance, was widely disseminated. Sierra Leone has since used every opportunity to showcase its example in its interactions in international and bilateral fora. Such efforts include the analysis of country reports to the Human Rights Council, particularly the Universal Periodic Reviews (UPR) and making appropriate recommendations on promoting religious tolerance. The country's commitment to religious tolerance is reflected in its foreign policy as well as in its membership of international religious organisations such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the World Council of Churches, the World Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Sierra Leone has also made presentations on its country experience in various panels and discussions and invites all countries to visit Sierra Leone and learn from the experience.

Following the positive example illustrated by Sierra Leone, **Ahmed Shaheed** (*Deputy Director at Essex Human Rights Centre*) looked into the various reasons why states bring in religion into foreign policy. The reasons include shoring up domestic legitimacy and deploying soft power resources to achieve foreign policy goals such as access or influence in certain regions. Using Iran as an example, he explained that it

has a constitutional commitment to carry out a foreign policy based on religion, aspiring to assert its identity as a revolutionary Islamic State to influence or lead its co-religionists beyond its border. Whereas using religious values in foreign policy could be helpful to foster constructive engagements with other State, these values may be however subject to trade-offs when faced with other State interests. He also noted that the use of religion in foreign policy could also be perceived negatively especially when religious values "clash" with international human rights norms; for example, the use of religious traditions in support of the death penalty or in undermining sexual and reproductive rights, hence, violating women's rights. Therefore, effective engagement of religion in foreign policy would particularly require religious freedom literacy to ensure that such policy works in parallel to international obligations of the States.

For further reflections

Religion and human rights

Some participants questioned if religious human rights exist. It might be useful to distinguish between a religious "foundation" and a religious "appreciation" of human rights. Human rights are secular norms in the sense of not being dependent of any particular religious justification or foundation. However, this does not preclude the possibility to also make sense of human rights from genuine religious perspective, i.e. giving a religious appreciation of human rights, including in theological language.

A religious appreciation of human rights is important and should be shared from all sides. We should find the issues that bring us together instead of focusing on the dividing factors.

"Tolerance is not about ignoring other religions."

*"One religion nourishes another.
I am because you are!"*

"Without the Buddha, I may not be a Christian."

III. How can religious literacy contribute to religious freedom literacy?

In this session, speakers looked into the logic behind freedom of religion or belief in protecting human beings while identifying the misunderstandings or misinterpretations in foreign policies using religion and religious freedom. The speakers also provided their observations of potential controversies and challenges using religion in foreign policies.

Elizabeth K. Cassidy (Co-Director for Policy and Research at United States Commission on International Religious Freedom) shared her perspectives using the experience of the United States. She pointed to the fact that former Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, used to complain that she had no adviser on religion and that ambassadors posted in different countries were not required to be religiously literate. This shows the lack of religious literacy in the US foreign policy apparatus according to the definition of religious literacy (adopted by the American Academy of Religion) *“Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyse the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses...”*¹

The definition stresses the importance of understanding religions and religious influences in context and as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience. Such an understanding also highlights the inadequacy of understanding religions through common means, evidenced by the fact that the US failed to understand the sectarian implications of the invasion of Iraq for example.

She indicated that the International Religious Freedom Act 1998 had led to increases in the US Government’s literacy on both religion and religious freedom. Nonetheless, the challenge to use religion in foreign policies lies in the fact that there is no international consensus on contested issues such as the right to change one’s belief or in “defamation” of religion. She added, often, religious freedom is also misperceived as western or American value or in favour of Christianity. She concluded that in order to be consistent in the promotion of religious freedom literacy in foreign policies, it is important to ensure

¹ Definition in full: Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place.

that the States “practise at home what you will preach abroad”.



Then, the discussions looked into two types of religious literacy in the context of post conflict situations like Sri Lanka as analysed by **Bishop Duleep de Chickera** (former Anglican Bishop of Colombo). He spoke about exclusive religious literacy in which people learn at distance about people of other religions. While absorbing in their fear, suspicion and historical grievances, people also pass on these negative feelings and memories; they tend to stay in exclusive circles that are fertile ground for stereotypes. Eventually, people resort to violence in order to eliminate others who are seen as enemies, hence there is no room for religious freedom literacy such as the case of ISIS, Islamophobia and extreme Buddhists movements.

He then talked about transitional religious literacy in which people learn from face to face encounters. While they may be disturbed by harsh realities, they come together and rise together to overcome the difficulties using cyclic dynamic i.e. finding common, mutual and separate forum of interpretation and making sense of life. He indicated that religious literacy is the beginning of moving on from past conflicts and the appreciation of the worldview of the other enlightened friend. He also said that religious freedom cannot stand alone; it needs political and cultural change in order for freedom of religion or belief to be possible. In the world of diplomacy, he has seen many States and people got trapped in self-interests. In his view, the way out from transitional religious literacy is for foreign policies to take considerate approaches while weighing in self-interests and world interests.

“Go slowly, carefully and mindfully but certainly GO!”

“Substantial political changes come from the people and from below.”

Katherine Cash (*Swedish Mission Council*) emphasised from her work experience that training in both religious and religious freedom literacy are essential for actors engaged in peace-building work in order not to “religionise” conflicts. She also noted that whilst many development practitioners or diplomats recognise that they lack religious literacy, many believe that they understand freedom of religion or belief, when in fact, they do not.

Examples of typical misunderstandings of freedom of religion or belief:

“Religion is very visible in the society, it’s everywhere! Religious freedom is not threatened.”

“Minority religious communities are allowed places of worship and there isn’t any violence between religious groups. Religious freedom isn’t threatened.” (Said in a country where it is not possible to change religion)

“Religious freedom conflicts with women’s rights.”

“Religious freedom clashes with freedom of expression on the issue of blasphemy.”

“The Government talks a lot about religious harmony and often invites minorities to religious dialogues – there is more tolerance here than in Scandinavia!” (Said in a country that bans all unregistered religious activity and refuses to register some groups)

“Violence against the Muslim community is not a religious freedom violation because the motivations of the perpetrators aren’t religious; it is about access to land. In another word, land issues have nothing to do with freedom of religion or belief.”

“Religious freedom literacy does not automatically follow from having religious literacy and vice versa.”

She stressed that religious literacy is not the same as religious freedom literacy. She elaborated that religious freedom should always be included in context analysis, and that contextual religious literacy is also needed for the development of concrete strategies to improve religious freedom and build peace, and to carry out risk assessments. In short, the two literacies have complementary roles.



Heiner Bielefeldt (*Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*) further clarified that religious literacy and religious freedom literacy are distinctive because the latter originates from the human rights approach. In his opinion, secular space should be maintained in international diplomacy. He clarified that secularism however is not about pushing all religions out but being inclusive of all. In other words, religions should be visible and audible. Similarly, he said when talking about providing space in politics, it will require some sort of secularity. When State and religion are not separate, it will somehow “strangle” diversity. In addition, there should be no predefined boundaries in any dialogues. He thought no one should pretend to know it all, and the true wisdom lies in modesty. To him, modesty is exactly about one’s willingness to learn about others and respect the differences.

“Secularism is not emptiness but openness, a space filled with noises and colours.”

“The best in humanities are secularism and religions.”

For further reflections

Religion vs. Secularity

We need to urgently move away from the arguments of religion versus secularity. They are not mutually exclusive and can be mutually enhancing. Religion emphasises responsible behaviour while secular politics emphasises behaviour that conforms to society norms. Religion emphasises ethical values that do not change with time and can or should underpin secular society. Not only can basic religious literacy show that different religions are not all that different in ethical values, it also demonstrates how shared ethical values can help making secular society more humane and caring, and the world a more peaceful place.

Freedom of religion or belief is a minority issue

No, it is also an issue for the majority who also benefits from freedom of religion or belief and should appreciate that the minorities can come to their rescue sometimes. It was warned that the concept of “destructive solidarity” of the majority against the minorities is not conducive to promoting equality and non-discrimination principles. There is a need to build bridges between the majority and minorities. Furthermore, it is necessary to find ways to mobilise the majority in order for them to stand up for the minorities.

Moments of strategic thinking

In view of the lack of religious literacy and religious freedom literacy in international diplomacy, the participants at the workshop were given the challenge to brainstorm for the ways to advance both “literacies” and engage with different players at the UN.

- Develop principles for promoting religious and religious freedom literacy
- Organise exchanges on cultural/religious literacy among diplomats
- Organise open dialogues and learning space that promotes sensitivity to religions and religious freedom
- Do a mapping of available documentations on religious and religious freedom literacy
- Develop a pool of trainers on religious or religious freedom literacy
- Develop analysis tools that would cover both political and religious contexts
- Start promoting religious freedom literacy through small personal human actions



IV. Practical initiatives in advancing the two “literacies”

In this session, presenters discussed factors that would contribute adequately to both religious literacy and religious freedom literacy in international diplomacy and shared different practical experiences of their efforts in advancing the two literacies.



Baroness Elizabeth Berridge (Member of the House of Lords, United Kingdom) presented the innovative work undertaken by the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of religion or belief (IPPFoRB). It is a politically and religiously diverse transnational network of parliamentarians committed to undertake efforts, among others, to jointly promote freedom of religion or belief, share information, and mobilise effective responses according to Oslo Charter – the founding document of IPPFoRB. She added that some national and regional groups were also established recently. IPPFoRB has different advocacy initiatives such as organising International Parliamentarians Conferences, sending open letters to countries of particular concerns and conducting fact-finding/solidarity visits. In a nutshell, it promotes religious freedom literacy among parliamentarians of different countries through its inter-parliamentary diplomacy.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has almost seven decades of experience working with faith-based actors in humanitarian action. **José Riera-Cézanne** (Special Adviser to the Assistant High Commissioner for Protection) spoke about the negative assumptions and stereotypes about the roles of faith leaders, local faith communities and faith-based organisation. UNHCR embarked on a journey of building meaningful and fruitful operational partnerships with the faith-based actors through the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Faith and Protection was held in 2012. The Dialogue highlighted the importance of “faith literacy”. Given that faith, spirituality and religious practices are central needs of many refugees and displaced people, any new humanitarian worker in the field is required to understand the local context, the local political system and power structures, and local dynamics. S/he also needs “faith literacy” to understand religions in context, not just the content of religious doctrines. Moreover, UNHCR developed a Partnership

Note that aims to improve “faith literacy” of its employees. In collaboration with UNFPA and UNAIDS, UNHCR has since 2013 organised annual Strategic Learning Exchanges at the UN System Staff College, bringing together representatives of UN agencies and the faith-based community to explore the challenges and opportunities for closer partnership.

“It is important to be literate and lucid about the roles and contributions of faith actors in our societies.”

From the perspective of a journalist, **Lord Indarjit Singh** (also a Member of the House of Lords, United Kingdom) stressed that media has a role to play in advancing both literacies. Therefore, media should be literate about religions and religious freedom. He warned that such ignorance could generally threaten relationships of people from different backgrounds.

“The purpose of religious literacy is to remove dangerous ignorance. Prejudice thrives on ignorance and leads to irrational hate. We all know that in a fog or mist, even normally familiar objects like a tree or bush can assume sinister or threatening proportions. It is the same with people of different religions or cultures when we see them in a mist of ignorance and prejudice. Remove the fog or mist of ignorance and we will see them as fellow human beings.”

He also said that discussions of religious or religious freedom literacies should not be complicated by the use of academic jargons. While the discourse of freedom of religion or belief should be mainstreamed, it is important to have the right “messenger” to avoid any misunderstanding or essentialism. Moreover, freedom of religion or belief should not be used to promote rivalry.

Personal story for reflection

Sikhs are often confused with Muslims and referred to as Bin Laden.

Early one Sunday morning, two Scotland Yard police officers knocked on my front door. I invited them in and offered them a cup of tea. Somewhat embarrassed, they asked if I was “an extremist or a moderate”. I replied that I was extremely moderate. Then they asked if I was a “fundamentalist”. I replied, “Well, I believe in the fundamentals of Sikhism, like the equality of all human beings and commitment to work for greater social justice. Yes, I suppose I am a fundamentalist.” The two officers finished their tea and left thoroughly confused.

Questions for further reflections

- How to define tolerance?
- Where do we draw the line between public and private spheres?
- Who defines what religion is?
- Who are the religious or faith leaders?
- What is the definition of religious literacy?
- Question the use of ‘elite language’- for example, the phrase ‘religious literacy’.
- Who has the authority to define or to train?
- Where do we find training materials on religious literacy or religious freedom literacy? Who can claim the credit of the facts presented?
- Are there religious reasons in violent extremism? How is religious and/or religious freedom literacy helpful in the context of conflict analysis?
- Can Freedom of religion or belief be obstructed by institutionalised religions?

“I may not agree with what you said but I will defend to death your right to say it.”

“There will be no peace in the world until we are even in our attitude towards human rights.”



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