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RIGHT-SIZING RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS ENGAGEMENT IN DIPLOMACY AND DEVELOPMENT

By Peter Mandaville

The past decade has witnessed a remarkable upsurge of interest in the role of religion and religious engagement among practitioners of diplomacy, development, and foreign affairs more broadly. It feels sometimes as if the pendulum has swung quite rapidly from a posture of broad ignorance, wariness, and inertia with respect to engaging religion in foreign policy to a situation in which everyone is jumping on the bandwagon of religious engagement. While we cannot yet say that a broad and clear consensus exists with respect to the strategic importance and value of religious engagement in diplomacy—plenty of skeptics still abound—it is nevertheless possible to point to a significant and consistent track record of governmental interest and investment in learning more about the potential contributions of religious actors to advancing foreign policy objectives.

In the case of the United States, for example, three successive administrations of diverse partisan flavors have pursued significant initiatives at the intersection of religion and foreign affairs. For example, in 2002 the George W. Bush administration created a team within the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) focused on the role of faith-based actors in making U.S. foreign assistance more effective; and in 2013 the Obama administration created an Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the Department of State to play a similar role vis-à-vis American diplomacy. Signaling a distinct maturation in the policy conversation about religious

Abstract: Drawing on a combination of academic research and practical experience, this essay explores recent policy trends at the intersection of religion and diplomacy. Framing the issue in terms of a need to "right-size" approaches to religion in foreign policy, this analysis reflects on how to think about assessing the relevance of religion in particular diplomatic and developmental settings; efforts to determine the appropriate scope of religious engagement work in diplomacy; and the challenge of building broader constituencies within the policy community to support religious engagement work.

Keywords: religion, diplomacy, development, foreign policy, religious engagement

engagement, USAID during the Donald Trump administration convened in 2020 an Evidence Summit on Strategic Religious Engagement.[1] This moment was particularly significant because it represented a clear shift away from a previous discussion about whether or not governments should consider engaging religion toward a more confident stance in which that basic proposition no longer needs to be justified. Instead, the Evidence Summit, reflecting a quite significant body of cumulative expertise and experience in this area, started to ask more specific questions about how, when, and where engaging religious actors in diplomacy and development can be most effective and strategic.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this qualitative shift. Because even though the dam holding back diplomatic engagement with religion seems well and truly to have broken, much of the work associated with this new-found governmental awareness of religion often still proceeds from a position of significant knowledge deficits. It is in this context that we should understand the important service provided by the research papers that were prepared for the 2020 USAID Summit, and which constitute the primary focus of this special open-access issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*. In this essay, I will engage with and reflect on what I take to be several especially important points raised across the full set of research papers. In doing so I intend to draw in particular on my experience as part of the team that stood up the State Department's Office of Religion & Global Affairs from 2014–2016, work that entailed a high degree of experimentation, and trial and error in terms of figuring out what does and does not work when it comes to integrating religious engagement into the day-to-day practice of diplomacy. In doing so I will use the notion of "right-sizing religion" as an organizational leitmotif, exploring this concept across multiple dimensions including most prominently the question of how we assess the significance and role of religion in a given context; but also extending to the scope of issues and work properly encompassed by religious engagement in diplomacy and development; and finally some lessons learned about what kinds of strategies and approaches help other diplomats, policymakers, and foreign affairs practitioners to better see and appreciate the added value of religious engagement.

What Does It Mean to "Right-Size" Religion?

When the State Department's Office of Religion and Global Affairs started its work, we quickly identified a common challenge in trying to talk about the role of religion in the context of various foreign policy settings and issues. There was a frequent tendency on the part of many of our colleagues and interlocutors to regard religion as an "all or nothing" affair when it comes to world politics. What I mean by this is that religion was either understood to be the defining, all-encompassing, and determinative force in a given situation, or—sometimes even when discussing the very same issue—its presence and relevance were denied entirely. Just to provide a concrete example: discussions of sectarianism in the Middle East would often become reduced to "ancient hatreds" between Sunni and Shi'a unamenable to analysis or reconciliation via conventional political logic. However, others discussing the very same phenomenon might talk about minority-majority asymmetries with respect to political and economic power, dismissing religion as little more than the epiphenomenal expression of underlying structural forces in a country such as Iraq. Another version of this problem involves a disproportionate fixation on the religious identity of a particular group or community in ways that prevent us from appreciating other relevant (sometimes *more* relevant) aspects of an issue or conflict. For example, the situation of the Rohingya community in Myanmar is often described as one of anti-Muslim discrimination in ways that eclipse a far more complex cluster of marginalization involving aspects of ethnicity, race, class, and caste.

In the Religion and Global Affairs office, we, therefore, found ourselves spending considerable effort and energy in helping our colleagues elsewhere in the State Department to understand that very few of the issues and settings they

encountered around the world could be accurately characterized as either wholly *religious* or *irreligious* in nature. Rather, the challenge was always of trying to understand how and where religion fit into inevitably far more complex and multifaceted situations. The challenge of right-sizing religion, then, was one of figuring out how to avoid the twin ills of, on the one hand, over-privileging the religious dimensions of a given situation or, on the other hand, ignoring them all together.

To some extent, this problem reflects the blinders and biases specific to specific sectors in the foreign affairs domain. For example, with respect to the habit of ignoring or not even seeing religion, Katherine Marshall points out in her research paper for USAID's evidence summit that international development has traditionally been "a field where decisions were shaped by macro economists, port and power engineers, and irrigation specialists [who] rarely delved into theological matters or crossed paths with religious institutions." And one could of course speak similarly of diplomats narrowly focused on geopolitical elites, multilateral negotiations, and the state-centric dimensions of international security. With respect to the error on the flip side —the tendency to view a given situation in exclusively religious terms—the sources of the problem are more varied. In some cases, people are simply ignorant of the complex political histories of demographically diverse nations—creating situations highly amenable to sensational headlines that flatten the complexity into simplistic enemy images bearing religious labels. For others, the entry of religion into the picture seems to have a totalizing effect and serves to eclipse the role and relevance of other factors.

In my experience, this problem manifests quite frequently in the form of Islamic exceptionalism—that is, the presumption that Islam's presence in a given context exerts disproportionate influence compared to other religious traditions in similar settings. Finally, privileging religion can sometimes function as an excuse for inaction. After all, if a given conflict is "religious" in nature (i.e. transcendent, other-worldly, irrational) there is no point trying to bring effort and resources to bear on solving it; an easy bypass, in other words, for avoiding potentially messy quagmires.

What does right-sizing religion mean in practice? It often comes down to asking different kinds of questions about issues and situations where religion appears to be a relevant factor. For example, rather than asking in binary terms whether a given conflict is "religious" in nature (yes/no, on/off), or asking questions that seek to gauge the extent or level to which religion is a relevant factor (i.e. "how much religion?"), we would often do better to ask questions about the *role* and *function* of religion or religious actors in a given situation. Are religious identities serving to define and solidify particular political identities or to create solidarities across other disparate groups? Is religion providing meaning and symbols that shape and buttress specific narratives for explaining and justifying a particular conflict or political cause? The answers to these questions can suggest and shape engagement strategies that reflect a more nuanced and accurate appreciation of where religion fits into the picture.

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Take another concrete example. Looking at Northern Ireland, even though it is not uncommon to refer to the two sides in that conflict in religious terms (Catholics and Protestants), few would claim it as a religious conflict in the sense of being rooted first and foremost in theological disputes or religious difference. Rather, the sources of conflict in Northern Ireland are probably more accurately viewed as a function of political demography in the context of Britain's historical relationship with the island of Ireland—meaning that the descriptors Unionist and Republican tell us more about what is going on than labels that reflect Christian denominational differences. However, to ignore the availability of religion in Northern

Ireland as a register of political identity that facilitated mobilization and group solidarity, or that allowed specific events to become invested with symbolic meanings would represent a failure to recognize that while this particular conflict may not have been "about" religion, it also cannot be fully understand without appreciating the many ways that religion shaped its course.

The challenge, therefore, becomes one of resisting the urge to ask whether, in general terms, a given situation is religious and instead asking more specific questions about how, where, and why religion enters the picture in different ways and with different implications. This shift in how we understand the relevance of religion is crucial not only for understanding the extent to which religion is a contributing factor (a driver or "cause") but also in helping us to appreciate how and where engaging religious actors can make positive and often uniquely valuable contributions to solving problems in diplomacy and development.

Right-Sizing the Scope of Religious Engagement

Is religious engagement as a diplomatic tool relevant to all foreign policy issues or only some? While it is certainly possible to make the case that almost any diplomatic or development issue —climate change, public health, poverty reduction, refugee resettlement, weapons proliferation, corruption—has a potential religious engagement angle to it, is it actually the case that incorporating awareness of religion adds value equally across *all* issues? When I served in the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, we deliberately emphasized the comprehensive nature of our mandate and made the case that religious engagement could help to advance the full range of issues and diplomatic functions encompassed by the State Department's mission. To some degree this stance represented the hubris of a new unit with the confidence and swagger that comes from having the direct backing of a Secretary of State, but it was also part of deliberate strategy to shift the conversation about religion in the foreign policy community away from a narrow focus on Islam, security, and religious freedom in order to help our colleagues recognize and appreciate the ways religion is relevant to a much wider range of issues—including ones commonly viewed as wholly divorced or distant from the realm of religion.

We quickly found, however, that in practical terms there seemed to be a narrower set of issues where incorporating religious engagement clearly helped to advance U.S. diplomatic goals. This is not just a point about the importance of avoiding overly bold claims; rather, it potentially has very important practical implications. For example, it is worth noting that an important achievement arising from the 2020 USAID Evidence Summit was the beginning of a conversation and process of assessing—based on real-world data, metrics, and evidence—how and where (in terms of issues, sectors, and settings) engaging religious actors can have the most tangible and lasting impact. Providing sound answers to such questions will help religious engagement work to be more strategic in terms of devoting energy and resources to those issues where the impact is likely to be the greatest. As Katherine Marshall argues in her research paper for the Summit, generating such evidence may make it possible to identify where and under what circumstances engagement with religious actors can offer unique and significant "added value" to diplomatic and development work.

Aside from the responsible allocation and stewardship of public resources, this kind of evidence-based approach may also help to create buy-in on the part of those less convinced of the merits of religious engagement. Such hesitation is not limited to those who harbor generalized anxieties about religion. During my time in government, I encountered plenty of colleagues who were quite comfortable with religion but who remained skeptical of the idea that it might have any relevance to the work they were doing on, say, economic development or refugee resettlement. Solid evidence might help to change minds in this respect.

Finally, having a better sense of what kinds of issues are amenable to advancement via religious engagement is directly relevant to the question of where specialized units like USAID's Center for

Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships or the State Department's religion office should be placed on the bureaucratic org chart. Locating these teams in proximity to—and creating a more organic "wiring" with—the diplomatic and development functions most capable of leveraging their partnership makes more sense than either lodging them in an agency-wide position distant from day-to-day operations (such was the case with the Office of Religion and Global Affairs when it was directly connected to the Secretary of State) or confining them within the specific mandate and mission of a single functional office. Over time, the Office of Religion and Global Affairs came to realize that we were making considerably more progress working on issues such as conflict stabilization, good governance, and migration compared to many others we had engaged. Given that all three of these functions are housed within the State Department's Undersecretariat for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights (the "J" cone), there is a strong case to be made that the religious engagement team could have the greatest force multiplying impact by sitting within this same space. But again, more—and more *systematic*—evidence about the differential impact of religious engagement across different development and diplomatic domains would help us make such decisions in a more deliberative fashion.

Right-Sizing Intra-Governmental Engagement on Religious Engagement

The final aspect of right-sizing I want to address comes back to the challenge of how best to build the case and find support for the religious engagement agenda within diplomatic and development agencies. In my experience, overtures to other governmental colleagues encouraging them to incorporate religious engagement into their work often founder due to one or more of the following misperceptions: (1) that advocates of religious engagement are actually advocating for religion in the sense of pushing a normative agenda based on religious belief; or, if not that, then seeking to privilege or prioritize (unduly) the religious dimensions of a given issue or situation; (2) that religious engagement requires extensive effort to comprehend, appreciate, and accept very different perspectives, value systems, and basic assumptions about the world; and (3) that advocates of religious engagement are asking colleagues to add on to their already very full plates an entirely new line of work that—more than anything else—would likely detract from their ability to make progress on their actual, pre-existing priorities.

The first of these can usually be addressed through the right kind of initial framing and reassurances. The second holds some truth to it so is not entirely a "misperception"—but here again it is possible (particularly when dealing with professionals whose vocation by its nature requires some degree of intercultural competence) to stress the importance of recognizing that religious engagement often involves getting to the same table from very different starting points without needing to endorse specific religious perspectives.

So we are left with the third concern, one that is grounded in the very real and legitimate experience of diplomats and development professionals who feel they are constantly being asked to take on more and more with an ever dwindling time and resource base. In my experience, the best strategy for addressing hesitation of this sort is to start the process of advocating for religious engagement by meeting people where they already are. More specifically, religious engagement should be presented as a tool for helping someone advance an issue or agenda that they themselves have already identified as a priority. In the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, we always had the greatest success when we were able to go to a colleague at a diplomatic post or a country desk and offer to help solve, using religious engagement, a problem they had been struggling to address using other means.

Doing this successfully involves finding ways to help foreign policy practitioners understand how and where religion is connected to the various issues and questions already on their radars. Religious landscape maps for specific countries and issues can be an invaluable tool for

helping to make these connections. A number of off-the-shelf products already exist and some of them are aimed squarely at policymakers. The United States Institute of Peace, the World Faiths Development Dialogue (based out of Georgetown University), and Harvard Divinity School have all developed country profiles and case studies covering a wide range of settings and contexts. However, such resources are likely to be most relevant and effective as guides for policymaking if they are developed by government agencies in-house, with government-defined policy equities and country strategies baked into them from design and inception.

While some short-lived consideration was given to analytic frameworks for pilot countries implicated in the 2013 rollout of the U.S. interagency policy strategy for engaging religious actors in foreign policy and national security, the 2020 Evidence Summit research paper on Implementation is correct when it points out that there is no standard template for such religious landscape maps. The U.S. State Department's *Religion & Diplomacy: A Practical Handbook* contains a list of elements that would be useful to include in such assessments, but this is not the same as offering a well-developed rubric that can facilitate not just analytic insight but also the development of concrete engagement strategies for advancing specific policy goals and strategic priorities. Such a tool could help to make religious engagement more "legible" to the policy development and implementation process, all the more so if it aligns itself with pre-existing policy roadmaps such as the whole-of-government National Country Strategies developed by each U.S. diplomatic mission around the world.

In conclusion, it is worth reiterating the noteworthy progress that has been made in pushing the relevance of religion and religious engagement to a point of broadly mainstream recognition in the domains of diplomacy and development. This special issue of *RFIA* serves as a valuable snapshot of the current state of knowledge and thinking on these issues and, moreover, one that will allow us to identify and move forward with addressing the questions and challenges that have emerged over the past decade and which constitute the natural next phase of maturation for religious engagement in foreign policy. ❖

About the Author

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Note

1. https://www.usaid.gov/faith-and-opportunity-initiatives/2020-evidence-summit-strategic-religious-engagement.

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