Article

Bridging Voices to Deepen Religious Engagement

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Expanding the field of religion and international affairs

After 9/11 and the advent of the so-called “war on terror” in the early 2000s, researchers began taking a closer look at the relationship between religion and foreign policy. These historic developments prompted many to examine the growing role of religious nationalism in global affairs, exposing the devastating consequences that can arise from religious and cultural illiteracy in foreign policymaking.

In 2013 the British Council launched the three-year *Bridging Voices* program designed to build networks connecting scholars and policymakers from the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe with a shared interest in religion and international affairs. In 2017, the program was renewed for a second three-year iteration. Overall, *Bridging Voices* facilitated a wide range of dialogues and policy reports and collaborated with several think tanks and NGOs to fulfill its mission. Two major outputs of these collaborations included the program’s summary report written by Sara Silvestri and Peter Mandaville as well as the formation of the Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD).

Bridging Voices: The First Iteration (2013-2016)



A 2014 map depicting the conflicts of the Arab Spring. Source: Iam Remsen via Wikimedia Commons.

The Role of Religion in Foreign Policy and Societal Transformation

The first project of the *Bridging Voices* program was titled, "The Role of Religion in Foreign Policy and Societal Transformation: Bridging Scholarship and Policymaking." The hallmark of this project was a series of dialogues held at the Brookings Institution and Wilton Park, including the following:

- **"Religion, Foreign Policy and Development: Making Better Policy to Make a Bigger Difference":** A closed-door conference at Wilton Park in February 2014.
- **"European and US Approaches to Religion in Foreign Policy: Responses to the Arab Uprisings":** A public talk at Chatham House in February 2014.
- **Workshop at the Brookings Institution**: In May 2014, a select group of academics and policymakers met in a closed-door session.
- **Public talk at the Brookings Institution:** This talk followed a closed-door session.
- **Policymakers' networking lunch:** This informal, closed-door networking event served as a follow-up to the public talk.

Overarchingly, these networking events worked to close the gap between scholars and policymakers, allowing them to share knowledge from their respective spheres of understanding. They also sought to take advantage of the increasing interest in the interplay between religion and foreign policy.

The Report: Integrating Religious Engagement

Sara Silvestri and Peter Mandaville's brief "Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities," summarizes the findings and conclusions drawn from Bridging Voices' dialogues and collaborations. The report briefly charts the history of religion and international affairs as a field. Following this, Silvestri and Mandaville identify three important problems in the field: (1) the problem of secular bias in the Western diplomatic establishment, (2) the need to increase the capacity of agencies like the US Department of State to respond to religiously inflected situations across the globe, and (3) the need to increase religious literacy within the Western foreign policy establishment.

> ***Properly undertaken, any effort to better appreciate the role of religion in foreign affairs must involve at least some modicum of willingness to examine the assumptions we hold about the place of religion in society.***
>
> *—Sara Silvestri and Peter Mandaville, "Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities"*

In their conclusion, Silvestri and Mandaville recommend that the Western diplomatic establishment deconstruct two major assumptions about religion and global affairs. The first assumption is that religious actors and organizations should only play limited roles in diplomatic deliberations. Instead, they argue that faith-based actors occupy significantly impactful positions in the day-to-day lives of communities; their involvement in diplomatic

dialogues should mirror this reality. Their absence, the authors observe, is a consequence of the West's bias towards secularism. The church-state binary is not universal, nor is it always desirable in regions where faith is deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life. Second, Silvestri and Mandaville urge the importance of "getting beyond the all-too-common practice of using 'religion' as a shorthand or euphemism for referring to Islam."

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The Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD)

The symposia and conferences facilitated by *Bridging Voices* also gave rise to an unanticipated—yet enduring—outcome: the TPNRD. The TPNRD is a forum designed to address global religious affairs from Europe and North America. Representatives from the participating governments of the TPNRD meet twice a year to address current issues in religion and global affairs. The advisory council consists of religious scholars and experts who facilitate transatlantic dialogue and oversee the TPNRD's publication, *Religion & Diplomacy.* The TPNRD is currently based at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs at Georgetown University.

Learn more about the TPNRD

Following "The Role of Religion in Foreign Policy and Societal Transformation" another project titled "Addressing the Asylum Crisis: Post-secular Contributions to Rethinking Protection in Global Politics," was organized during *Bridging Voices*' first phase.

Learn more about Phase I

Bridging Voices: The Second Iteration (2017-2020)

While the first iteration of *Bridging Voices* reflected the dominant foreign policy focus on the relationship between the West and Muslim populations, the second iteration expanded this scope. This iteration gave rise to three main projects.

Contemporary Eastern Orthodox Identity and the Challenges of Pluralism and Sexual Diversity in a Secular Age

Through a partnership between the University of Exeter and Fordham University, participants of this consortium strategized ways to "respond to Orthodox communities (at home and abroad) and a religion which seems to reject the very idea of pluralism/diversity and, in particular, equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals." Outputs of this project included a series of ten blog posts on the subject, a research report, a webinar and a final report.

The Muslim Atlantic: Exploring Transnational Connections between American and British Muslims

This consortium was a collaboration between King's College London and George Mason University. Its purpose was to explore "the extent to which British and American Muslims have engaged in networks of transatlantic relationship that amount to a building of an 'Atlantic Islam.'" Like the project on Eastern Orthodox identity, this project gave rise to a research report, final report, webinar, and blog posts. Additional publications included a series of articles in the journal *Critical Muslim* and two special episodes of the *Maydan Podcast*.

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Religion and Social Justice for Refugees: Supporting Local Faith-Based Responses to Displacement

The third partnership of *Bridging Voices*' second phase brought together Yale University and University College London. This project sought to explore faith-based responses to displacement and compare them to responses by secular actors and institutions. This consortium produced a research report, final report, webinar, blog post series, and documentary-style video, *Religion and Social Justice for Refugees*.

Learn more about Phase II projects here