



# Religion and Coloniality in Diplomacy

■ Joram Tarusarira | 10 February 2020

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A wide range of contemporary policy issues tied to religion continue to be informed by the legacies of colonialism; among them security and terrorism, the promotion of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB), gender equality, sexuality, and reproductive rights. This paper distinguishes the historical period of *colonialism* from *coloniality*: the ongoing presence of structures and relationships of power created through the practices of colonialism. The author outlines some of these specific influences from the colonial period and he concludes with a series of recommendations that can help policymakers avoid exacerbating the effects of colonialism's legacy in global politics.

# Executive Summary

A wide range of contemporary policy issues tied to religion continue to be informed by the legacies of colonialism; among them security and terrorism, the promotion of freedom of religion and belief (FoRB), gender equality, sexuality, and reproductive rights.

This paper outlines some of these specific influences from the colonial period and how they shape contemporary diplomacy on various issues where religion is present.

To engage effectively and productively with these challenges, it is important to firstly understand the distinction between *colonialism* (as a specific historical period defined by the physical occupation and political control by Europeans of territories and peoples in other world regions) and *coloniality* (as the ongoing presence of structures and relationships of power created through the practices of colonialism). Similarly, just as *decolonization* describes the historical process through which colonized peoples gained political independence, *decoloniality* refers to ongoing efforts to challenge, subvert, and replace contemporary categories and practices which reflect the enduring relations of social and political power created and perpetuated by colonialism.

The modern understanding of religion as a distinct and autonomous sphere of life is intimately entangled with colonialism and coloniality. Religion is not a “naturally” distinctive or given domain. Rather, religion became constituted as separate from politics and public life as a central feature of modernity. Likewise, colonialism was an expression of the political logic of modernity – and, moreover, one whose coherence depended on the idea of “religion” as separate and distinct from other realms of human activity.

Secularism was a key framework through which this understanding of religion was constructed and enacted. While secularism originally referred (relatively neutrally) to the separation of distinctive domains of social and political authority (i.e. ecclesiastical vs. monarchical), it became invested over time with specific normative connotations which demarcated – particularly through colonialism and colonial practices – beliefs, practices, and spaces deemed irrational, superstitious, emotive, sensual and therefore not modern.

The designation of certain religious traditions – most notably Islam – as inherently

alien to the logic of secularism and European modernity continues to inform the way in which some policymakers understand the nature and causality of extremist violence and terrorism today. Reducing such violence to supposedly religious causes eclipses the political nature of such conflict. Similarly, validation of the religion-terrorism nexus makes it possible for many governments to use the logic of security (and the label of terrorism) to move against any religious group it perceives as a political challenge.

This last point draws our attention to the fact that coloniality is ambivalent in the sense that the categories and terms through which it operates can also be used to the political benefit of states and political actors in the Global South. For example, the ability of governments in Africa to portray sexual and reproductive human rights or LGBT rights as Western and “un-African” relies very directly on distinctions and categories enabled by coloniality.

In the domain of global development, the intersection of religion with what are often termed “harmful traditional practices” (e.g. FGM/C, child marriage, honor killings) shows how the availability of religion as a normative – and, via FoRB, a protected category – enables criticism of these practices to be portrayed as an exercise of colonial power.

## Policy Recommendations

### *On terrorism and extremism:*

- Raise the issue of internal, white nationalist extremism more frequently in policy conversations.
- Reframe extremism as a challenge for all societies and cultures, and a policy issue that requires equal and collaborative global partnerships.
- Do not facilitate the foregrounding of religion as a cause and solution for violence by diplomatic interlocutors keen to obscure relationships between such violence and their own policy and governance conduct.

### *On religious freedom and sexuality:*

- Avoid language that could create spaces for governmental and NGO actors to mobilize coloniality as an argument against action on certain human rights issues

- Instead of making pronouncements on specific human rights issues in the name of European and North American governments, elevate the voices of indigenous actors who are campaigning for action and implementation of human rights for women and LGBTQI people

*On development and 'harmful traditional practices'*

- Remove the word 'traditional' from this language. Instead refer to general harmful practices.

- In reframing the language around harmful practices, expand this to include 'conversion therapy', sexual harassment and intimate partner violence against women in 'developed' countries, which continue to be severe issues affecting women in these societies.
- Similar to terrorism, acknowledge that the eradication of harmful practices is an issue affecting all societies globally, not merely in the Global South. Utilize language and implement policy partnerships that emphasize and practice equal partnerships.

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Colonialism's influence on contemporary international relations and foreign policy, particularly regarding religious engagement, continues to be under-appreciated in policy and academia. Recent research in the sub-field of religion and international relations suggests that colonialism's legacy has profound and residual influence on issues such as security, promotion of the right to freedom of religion or belief,<sup>1</sup> gender equality, sexuality, and reproductive health and rights.

This paper outlines some of these specific influences from the colonial period and how they shape contemporary diplomacy on various issues where religion is present. After a brief explanation of key terms crucial to contemporary studies on colonialism and decolonization, the first part of this paper discusses the contentious history of the term 'religion' and its use in contexts where no such phenomenon had previously existed. In the second part I examine the role religion played in the colonial project, especially how Christianity was used to justify and buttress colonial power. I also examine the claim that religion's supposed counterpart, secularism, is a global remnant of colonial power structures shaping intra- and inter-state relations today. In the third part I consider how these concepts influence diplomacy and international affairs today. Investigating the historical development of modern ideas of religion and how they are entangled with colonialism is imperative for both policy and academia. It helps us to recognize that what we understand today as 'religion' and the resulting distinctions that are made between the religious and non-religious are not, in fact, inherent properties of 'religion' or 'the sacred'. Rather, these distinctions are an outcome of the colonial process, reflecting the power relations that this historical period created and consolidated. Practically, understanding this background enhances our understanding of how the conceptualization of 'religion' influences the type of policy responses that politicians and policy makers develop.

## Key Concepts: colonialism, decolonization, (de)coloniality

The historical period of colonialism is over, but its consequences remain a crucial part of

global politics. Colonialism and decolonization refer to specific historical episodes. They are usually depicted as past realities or historical periods that have been superseded by other kinds of social, political and economic regimes. Yet the power structures created and embedded by processes of colonization and decolonization remain long after former colonies have attained independence. These power structures are referred to in scholarship as "coloniality". Conceptual and practical efforts to challenge these power relations and promote alternatives are referred to as "decoloniality". Coloniality is thus different from colonialism, in that it refers to the specific ideological frameworks through which colonial relations were generated and justified. In that sense, while colonialism is over, coloniality is not. Coloniality is, rather, all over.<sup>2</sup> It now transcends the historical fact of colonialism and figures into the logic of a much broader range of international relations today and offers a framework for examining a variety of power relations, not merely those between former colonies and colonial powers but also the current role of China in certain parts of the African continent.

Decoloniality is different from decolonization in a similar way. Decolonization refers to the process of independence of former colonies, while decoloniality concerns challenging and dismantling the ideological frameworks that justify and maintain colonial power relations.<sup>3</sup>

Coloniality and decoloniality are tied to what is called 'Western civilization' and 'Western modernity'. Whenever we hear or speak of modernity, coloniality is part of it. Modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin, coloniality being the (often hidden) darker side of modernity.<sup>4</sup> Thinking of modernity without acknowledging coloniality suggests historical amnesia about colonial violences and foundational inequalities that are part of the modern world today.<sup>5</sup> A perception pervades contemporary global political relations that modern (Euro-American) civilization understands itself as the most developed, superior civilization. This sense of superiority 'obliges' it to 'develop' (civilize, uplift, educate) underdeveloped civilizations. Where the 'uncivilized' or 'primitive' oppose the civilizing process, violence is deployed to remove the

obstacles to modernization.<sup>6</sup> For example, 'the image of Afghan women as the helpless victims of Taliban oppression at once allowed the United States and its coalition allies to cast themselves as heroic masculine warriors and helped to reinforce the idea that Afghan women were little more than mere symbols of helplessness, placing them in a position of absolute inferiority and dependency'.<sup>7</sup> More sadly, 'when 'woman' is the mediating point between opposing claims, the story often turns out badly for actual women.'<sup>8</sup> This plays into centuries long history in which the 'saving' of women from such violence has been used to justify colonial and imperial violence.<sup>9</sup>

If coloniality refers to these unequal power structures and relations, decoloniality refers to i) efforts to challenge these inequalities that dehumanize people and communities; and ii) the production of alternative concepts and practices that open up multiple other forms of reading and responding to the world. Arguments from Global South countries challenging the structure of international institutions like the UN, IMF and the World Bank and the distribution of power and rights to members states are a form of decoloniality. Decoloniality requires not only taking seriously the knowledge, spiritualities and insights from marginalized peoples but also recognizing and problematizing the unconscious colonial assumptions that often form the bedrock of policy. This paper is concerned with the conceptual and policy implications of the entanglement of 'religion' with colonialism and coloniality. It is interested in the subsequent impact of this entanglement on issues of diplomacy concern such as security, terrorism and violent extremism, gender equality, sexuality and reproductive health and rights.

## The role of 'religion' in colonialism

Often lurking behind discussions about the right to freedom of belief or religion and related conversations is the question of who gets to decide what and who counts as 'religious' and who benefits from this process. Many scholars conclude that it is impossible to have a clear, universal definition of religion, making any engagement with religion in law or policy difficult, if not impossible.<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this paper, it is important to highlight that how religion is defined and applied in policy practice reflects the assumptions and interests of those doing the defining. Theories and definitions of religion developed during the colonial period did not dispassionately describe 'objective reality', but rather reflected and reinforced the assumptions of those with the power to make

such distinctions, namely the colonizing powers.<sup>11</sup> The meaning of 'religion' and its uses shift in relation to changes in the rhetorical use of other terms such as 'politics', the 'state', and the 'secular'.<sup>12</sup> The idea of 'religion' as something that can clearly be identified and separated from other realms of human activity is intrinsically linked to colonial era histories and cultures. Assumption by many scholars and policy makers that there are things in the world that the category of 'religion' always and everywhere refers to, things that can be observed, described, and analysed, is thus unsustainable.<sup>13</sup>

The modern understanding of religion is a historical construct that emerged in the West. It has come to be applied as a universal concept. Yet it is contingent on context, and thus cannot easily be translated to different cultural, political, economic and historical circumstances. Historians have observed that 19<sup>th</sup> century science was frequently used to support the building of colonial empires. Imperial theorists generated accounts and theories to be used to justify imperial intentions. The study of religion in the imperial era 'was simultaneously preparation, accompaniment, and result of empire, an academic enterprise that might provide justification for domination, while being shaped by relations of domination.'<sup>14</sup> Today's frameworks such as 'Freedom of Religion or Belief', thus, arguably constitute but the latest chapter in a long colonial geopolitical history of displacement of indigenous peoples and their own knowledge and value structures and their domination by (former) colonial powers. Read through this lens, the use of the seemingly positive language of the protection of religious freedoms promoted by Western diplomats across the world can sound as positive as the '*mission civilisatrice*', the authorizing slogan of French colonialism.<sup>15</sup>

## Secularism: modern global colonial state architecture?

International diplomacy today is undertaken through the framework of secularism. While there are many variations of secularism, a key component is the identification of 'religion' as something distinct and separate from other realms of human activity. Talal Asad identifies secularism as the modern state's sovereign power to reorganize religious life. The state does this by stipulating what religion is or ought to be, assigning its proper content and legitimizing particular forms of thought, morality and behaviour, while marginalizing others.<sup>16</sup> As part of the development of modernity and colonialism, secularism gained political authority for governing national and global public affairs.

Since the nineteenth century there have been changes in the ways secularism has been mobilized, using a familiar set of oppositions but attributing different meanings to them. 'Religious' and 'political' in the nineteenth century meant ecclesiastical authority versus civil government, but also the Christian nations versus the 'uncivilized' and 'primitive' tribes in Africa and the Ottoman lands. 'Public' and 'private' separated the market and politics, instrumental rationality and bureaucratic organization from home and family, spirituality, emotional relationships, and sexual intimacy.<sup>17</sup>

The governing logic of secularism has become a permanent feature of the modern nation-state. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which is said to have settled thirty years of religious wars, established the principle of state sovereignty (especially the right of each ruler to determine the religion of his territory) for all of Christendom. Secularism was hence introduced to stabilize the conflict between warring Christianities and thereby provide security. Yet, as Mavelli argues, in the process of doing that 'religion' was defined as an object of fear, chaos, irrationality, violence and danger. The result of this process was that rather than providing security, secularism created insecurity, because religion then became connected to everything that was historical, primitive, uncivilized etc.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, state sovereignty (whatever the form of governance) and Christian practice became inextricably intertwined.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, some interpretations of Christian theology, such as the doctrine of the two kingdoms, were used to justify the separation of state from religious authority.<sup>20</sup> However, this does not mean that Christianity should influence governance of public affairs. Christianity was transformed into an expression of Europe's superiority and civilization, and continues to operate as such in certain quarters, including, for example, the European Court of Human Rights.<sup>21</sup> Jürgen Habermas states 'egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love'.<sup>22</sup> Christianity is 'good' religion because it does not challenge liberal secular principles. By contrast, exemplifying the ideological structures behind colonialism, the practices and knowledge of colonized peoples were rewritten not as expressions of *another* (false) religious reasoning but as an expression of their essential (irrational) sub-humanity.

Secularism travelled beyond Western<sup>23</sup> contexts with the spread of Christianity, the

expansion of European colonialism, global expansion of capitalism and the European system of states and modern science. It was transported to the colonies – the frontier zones or zones of contact between intrusive and indigenous people - during the time of the empire. The civilized-barbaric rhetoric which emerged between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries continued into the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial era.<sup>24</sup> Indigenous peoples undergoing colonization were defined by their colonial masters as figures of *lack* in relation to Europe's normative conception of the human being.<sup>25</sup> Scholarship on religion shaped and was shaped by secular logic. The study of religion at the frontier zones was aimed at reducing complexity and gaining control over knowledge. This control then enabled colonial powers to introduce divisive governing structures along lines of difference they themselves created.<sup>26</sup> The apartheid regime in South Africa is an example of this kind of governing strategy. Understanding the dynamics of the frontier zone is not only about retrieving and reconstructing the history of former colonies but has consequences for how frontier zones are constituted and operate today.<sup>27</sup>

Social scientific theories tend to use the idea of the 'religious' to make sense of various kinds of phenomena that are perceived to be threatening to Western society. Currently Western policy makers, politicians and diplomats appear to struggle with how to address 'religious' conflicts and violence abroad. One possible answer as to why this is so may be found in tracing current perceptions of religious 'others' back to colonial frontier zones and highlighting how the scholarly vocabulary generated from there is mobilized in views on religious difference and diversity today. This is important if we are to grasp the ways in which colonial era knowledge and sources of power echo in and thus influence contemporary global political relations. Islam, for instance, like during colonial times, continues to be perceived in Western contexts as irrational. Thus Islamic suicide bombers, for example, are not dealt with as strategic but as zealous and irrational religious actors.<sup>28</sup> Today's application of the category of religion are not new, but have a historical trajectory.<sup>29</sup>

It is important to remember that the characterization of 'religion' in the colonies/frontier zone as totemism, magic and superstition vs. rationality,<sup>30</sup> was not a description of 'reality' but unfounded claims made by colonial anthropologists and administrators. Whether this was deliberate or based on ignorance and belief that only the West has access human reason is contested. Regardless, we must remember that their

description of 'religion' in these places was not necessarily 'objective truth'. Rather, it tells us more about Western culture than about what theorists claimed to be describing. It was their Christian/secular cultural background that influenced their characterization of non-Western 'religious' practices as fetishism, totemism, magic and superstition.

Further, while these characterizations are not necessarily accurate, they remain largely unchallenged because to do so would undermine the goals of the colonial powers. This negative and unfounded characterization of 'religion' continues to prevail in the Middle East and Africa. This means that knowledge production and development of policies often continues to be based on these unfounded claims about religion. As a result, policies at times respond to perceptions of 'religion' in the Middle East, Africa and Asia and not necessarily to reality as experienced by communities in these regions. Consequently, such policies may be tangential to actual sources of conflict or human rights abuses on the ground. Robert Pape argues that the fact that most suicide terrorism has been perpetrated by Muslim terrorists, like al-Qaeda, professing religious motives, has presented it as obvious that Islamic fundamentalism is the central cause. The subsequent belief is that such attacks can only be avoided by a wholesome transformation of Muslim societies. This presumed connection between Islamic fundamentalism and suicide terrorism is misleading and may result in foreign policies that are likely to worsen the situation of the foreign power, for instance the US, and harm many Muslims unnecessarily.<sup>31</sup>

## **Practical implications for diplomacy and politics**

Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis is one example of the continued influence of colonialism and coloniality in today's world. Despite being widely criticized, this thesis continues to impact international and national politics today. It was bought into by many Western policy makers, politicians and diplomats. The United Nations positively responded to it by establishing the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) in 2005, following the devastating attacks by al Qaeda on the United States on 11 September 2001 ('9/11'). UNAOC aims to bridge divides, and promote harmony among the nations, all with a view toward preventing conflict and promoting social cohesion.<sup>32</sup> The negative connotations of the Clash of Civilizations thesis makes it not an ideal place to start from in international diplomacy. It evokes resistance and closes engagement. Through the Clash of Civilizations

thesis, colonialism and coloniality continue to influence current political processes in Europe and America, and explains current Western governments' responses to Muslim migration and related security issues.<sup>33</sup> In what follows I demonstrate the enactment of global coloniality through civilizational arguments using three cases: 1) secularism and the global war on terror, 2) religious freedom and sexual rights, and 3) international development practice.

### ***Secularism and the global war on terror***

Secularism as part of colonial power<sup>34</sup> is connected to the 'resurgence' of 'religion' in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Religionists claim to be victims of secularism, which they perceive as a colonial strategy of subordination. The language they use when fighting 'back' is not one of religious doctrines, beliefs and traditions, but of humiliation, denigration, embarrassment, attack, and annihilation. When asked why he went to Afghanistan to fight, a former bodyguard of Osama bin Laden, Nasir al -Bahri, answered 'we were greatly affected by the tragedies we were witnessing and the events we were seeing: children crying, women widowed, and the high number of incidences of rape.' The study in which Nasir Al-Bahri was interviewed concluded that there was more sympathy for victims than hatred for oppressors. When Osama bin Laden issued his Declaration of War on the United States and Israel he accused them of aggression, iniquity, and injustice against Muslims. His propaganda videos were a collage of pain.<sup>35</sup> Many present-day Islamic fundamentalisms are often pre-occupied by the horrors of modern warfare and violence.

Political Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a result of colonial practices that made them feel foreign in their own country.<sup>36</sup> Although one of the Muslim Brotherhood's theologians, Sayyid Qutb, took the position in the 1950s and 1960s that militancy against apostate Islamic regimes was a sacred duty, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's mission statement today emphasizes bringing about its Salafi ideals through peaceful political change. To view such movements as 'religious' rather than 'political' categorizes them according to criteria of Euro-American colonial powers, not the frameworks through which they should be viewed and interpreted, namely the logics of the context in which they arise. Religion's violent nature is, rather, an invention of secularism which in the Middle East is associated with colonialism and coloniality.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that a default mode of looking for the 'religion' factor, sidestepping other socio-economic and political factors, in any terrorist attack or movement, is thus, too simplistic.

The global war on terror after 9/11 and the subsequent new security regime demonstrates how international institutions, such as the United Nations' Security Council<sup>38</sup>, are perceived by less powerful countries, mostly from the Global South, as new forms of global colonial power. This power is coordinated through a new form of international laws which are forged in international institutions and then put out for adoption by member states. These laws are perceived as mechanisms 'to preserve the superior status of the colonizer over the colonized and thus to reproduce the colonial relationship.'<sup>39</sup> Member states are supposed to comply because they are signatories to the UN Charter, even though this is not what many members states envisaged when they originally signed. Resolution 1373, passed three weeks after the attack on the World Trade Centre on the 28<sup>th</sup> of September 2001, without any recorded debate in a session that officially lasted five minutes is an example of what might be called global colonial power. The powerful nations make decisions and impose them on less powerful ones, thereby revealing continuities between the colonial past and current hierarchies in the contemporary global political order.<sup>40</sup> The resolution required states to criminalize terrorism as a separate offense in a national criminal code, with harsher punishments attached to terrorism-related offenses than to common crimes; disrupt terrorism financing; detect terrorists and their plots and crack down on the flow of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>41</sup>

In 2001 as the US was preparing to attack Afghanistan, it demanded that Pakistan cut its support for the Taliban government of Afghanistan, and join the American campaign by lending airspace, security support and willingness to tamp down Islamist reaction. President Musharraf complied but used antiterrorism laws to deal with his political opponents and Islamist groups. After joining the global antiterrorism campaign, money began to flow to Pakistan from the US, international financial institutions and other countries that had previously sanctioned Pakistan for its development of nuclear weapons. Huge infrastructure for fighting terrorism has been created with international approval, but Pakistan now seems unable to control its own domestic threat any longer. The radical Islamist groups that the government used in Afghanistan and Kashmir are now involved in terrorist activities inside the country.<sup>42</sup> Joining the international terrorist reaction reversed many policies that had been amenable to the Islamist groups. Some of them now have resorted to terrorist violence inside Pakistan against foreigners and the local Christian population. Their objective is not to intimidate the population of Pakistan but to

coerce the nation's rulers into accepting their demands. Hence their attacks are either on foreigners or on high-level government officials. The deaths of ordinary Pakistanis are collateral damage.<sup>43</sup> International institutions are perceived as giving all states marching orders about how they should change their domestic laws to combat terrorism,<sup>44</sup> yet the introduction of these laws can exacerbate terrorism on the ground with dire consequences for local populations.

A further element that affects these dynamics is that the war on terrorism is marked by an alleged 'religious war' of Jewish and Christian assumptions against Islamic ones, with echoes of colonial logic.<sup>45</sup> The open support Western countries gave to secular political parties during the 2008 elections in Pakistan attests to this. In the context of these elections, a senior retired US Department of State official stated: 'We should support the democratic process and not worry about the outcome as long as the winners are from Pakistan's mainstream secular political class'.<sup>46</sup> It is claimed that many US officials had stated that if the religious parties won the elections, they might stop aid to Pakistan.<sup>47</sup> In addition to seeing the war on terror as an ideological mask hiding the West's real intent of controlling and subordinating Pakistan and destroying its nuclear capability, most Pakistanis think that the West wishes to weaken Pakistan (and other Muslim countries) by eroding the Islamic basis of their identity through secularization or marginalization of Islam in their life. The developing US-India relationship, and especially the nuclear deal between the two countries, is seen as another instance of anti-Pakistan and anti-Muslim sentiments/practices. Middle Eastern countries perceive the US strategies and actions of the US as reminiscent of the civilizational projects of 19th-century colonialism and imperialism, which have now been resurrected using somewhat different terminology.<sup>48</sup>

### *Religious freedom and sexuality*

I will not go into details on the history of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Suffice to say that in many cultures, religion is an important governing factor in the delineation and implementation of sexual norms and values<sup>49</sup>. Sexuality and reproduction are intrinsic parts of (local) cultures. SRHR is hotly debated at the highest levels, including the United Nations. A variety of governments such as the Holy See, Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia to name but a few, use religious and cultural arguments to oppose a broad range of resolutions on various issues across the spectrum of SRHR, including sexual rights, LGBTQI rights and diverse forms of families, gender equality,



women's and girls' rights, reproductive rights, safe abortion and comprehensive sexuality education.<sup>50</sup> Numerous African governments like Uganda and Zimbabwe, who are opposed to LGBTQI rights, often argue that SRHR and particularly LGBTQI rights originate from the West and are 'un-African'.<sup>51</sup> The anti-homosexuality bill which became an Act of Law in 2014 in Uganda, for example, opposed homosexuality as being un-Christian, un-African, and a threat to family values and culture. Anti-gay activists in Uganda and Zimbabwe are here deploying civilizational arguments. This highlights that coloniality can be ambivalent. It can be instrumentalized, even by those who have been negatively affected by it. Coloniality is, thus, not always in the service of the West, but can be a tool for countries of the Global South to resist what they perceive as Western interference, or, more cynically, as a justification for continued human rights abuses.

### *International development and 'harmful traditional practice'*

International development practice is one of the domains connected to diplomacy where coloniality perhaps most obviously rears its head. In the effort to reduce poverty, institutions such as the World Bank and others, a priori define what development is and how it is realized. Developing countries are replete with 'white elephant' projects that are abandoned by their supposed beneficiaries because the projects fulfill the definitions of development of the funding agencies and not of the communities they are supposed to assist.

International development institutions generate their own form of discourse that construct those places identified as needing development into objects of knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni observes that 'what was popularly marketed as concerns about development' were in fact strategies of subordination and control, again using the language of civilization to take control of Africa.<sup>53</sup> Le Roux and Bartelink identify how Western-developed terminology, 'harmful traditional practices' (HTPs)—used to refer to practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), child and early marriage (CEM), honour-related violence, and son preference—is resisted by local communities in Africa and the Middle East because it is perceived as enforcing a colonial mindset. Consequently, it hinders the process of engaging people in local communities to challenge injustice and violence, particularly against women and girls. They observe that using the term immediately positions development organizations as critical of the local communities' culture and religion. This

opposition is exacerbated by the fact that the terminology almost exclusively emphasizes non-Western 'harmful traditional practices'. Equally, the available literature on HTPs focuses on practices that are found in non-Western societies.<sup>54</sup> International organizations also contribute to the narrative of HTPs being a non-Western problem. The majority of them are founded, funded and headquartered in the West, but working within non-Western countries and working on non-Western HTPs.<sup>55</sup> International development agencies, corporations and labour organizations, including the United Nations, are thus, perceived as the new institutions of global coloniality through which empires continue to exist.<sup>56</sup>

The three examples I have given are underpinned by the clash of civilizations thesis, which itself is constitutive of coloniality. The lack of empirical evidence to back the clash of civilizations thesis is, however, a confirmation that deploying the thesis is a political decision and not instinctive or natural. The enormous spectrum of human history that social theory has operated on is organized by a central idea: difference between the civilization of the metropole and an 'Other' whose main feature was its primitiveness. This is the idea of global coloniality and difference. Together with the idea of modernity/coloniality/progress from the primitive to the advanced, it is arguably both the key assumption of social sciences research and theory as well as the perceived basis of current diplomacy. Civilizational frames contribute to the implementation of policies that may only be tangentially relevant to realities on the ground. They also provoke negative perceptions of the motivations and intentions of some Western diplomatic efforts on issues such as FoRB, SRHR, security and development. These perceptions and (mis)understandings can then fuel opposition and resistance to these kinds of foreign policy initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

It is thus important for diplomats to be conscious of the implicit or explicit connection between the current discourse and practice of religion, international affairs and diplomacy, and legacies of coloniality. In relation to religion, modernity is expressed in the idea of secularism. The logic of secularism continues to influence how the study of religion is conducted and how foreign policies are formulated regarding issues with a 'religious' dimension. The challenge that not only scholars, but also policymakers and diplomats face, is that ideas of modernity and coloniality are difficult to identify because they are firmly embedded in social scientific methods of analyzing reality. This calls for a rethinking of

the foundations of our knowledge about religion in society. Policymakers should take time to understand the assumptions that sit behind their own and their ministry/government's understanding and application of 'religion' in any diplomatic engagements, and the consequences of those assumptions.

At a practical level, policymakers should consider the following approaches in an attempt to avoid exacerbating the effects of colonialism's legacy in global politics:

### *On terrorism and extremism:*

- Raise the issue of internal, white nationalist extremism more frequently in policy conversations, rather than focusing solely on extremism, implicitly or explicitly, as a problem emerging from outside the West, or from Muslim populations within the West.
- Reframe extremism as a challenge for all societies and cultures, and a policy issue that requires equal and collaborative global partnerships.
- Appreciate that religion is not inherently violent or peaceful, rather than facilitating its foregrounding as a cause and solution for violence by diplomatic interlocutors keen to obscure relationships between such violence and their own policy and governance conduct.

### *On religious freedom and sexuality:*

- Present human rights, freedom, and democracy as ideals that advance people's lives, rather than products of 'Western/European civilization'. This could create spaces for governmental and NGO actors to mobilize colonialism as an argument against action on certain human rights issues, as per the example of Uganda
- Elevate the voices of indigenous actors who are campaigning for action and implementation of human rights for women and LGBTQI people, instead of making pronouncements on specific human rights issues in the name of European and North American governments.

### *On development and 'harmful traditional practices'*

- Remove the word 'traditional' from this language. Instead refer only to 'harmful practices'.
- Expand the language around harmful practices to include 'conversion therapy', sexual harassment, and intimate partner violence against women in 'developed' countries, which continue to be severe issues affecting women in these societies.
- Similar to terrorism, acknowledge that the eradication of harmful practices is an issue affecting all societies globally, not merely in the Global South. Utilize language and implement policy partnerships that emphasize and practice equal partnerships.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson, E. K. and C. M. Gruell. 'Universal or Particular or Both? The Right to Freedom of Religion or Belief in Cross-Cultural Perspective' Report commissioned by TPNRD. 2018. Available at <http://religionanddiplomacy.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/TPNRD-FORB-in-Cross-cultural-Perspective.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> López-Calvo, Ignacio, 'Coloniality is not over, it's all over.' Interview with Dr. Walter Mignolo, *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 6(2): pp. 172-196

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