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Religions in foreign policy

Religion-based actors as peace partners in international relations?

Peter Bender

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Religious communities frequently work with special motivation, specific credibility and international networks for peace on a global level - even though some perpetrators of violent acts who repeatedly invoke religion cause significant foreign-policy crises. New efforts for peace and challenges in international relations thus require increased competence in and sensitivity to religion in foreign and security policy, and the willingness and qualification to work with religious communities in a spirit of partnership. Numerous states and international organisations have increasingly directed their focus to the peace potential of religions, recognised the strategic meaning of religion-related peace policy and initiated corresponding cooperation. Religions which have assumed responsibility for peace and a foreign policy that has competence in religion could jointly make an important contribution for the peaceful coexistence of humanity. This applies even more so as European societies, which are increasingly becoming secular, are often confronted with communities outside of Europe that are steadily becoming more religious. How can religion-based actors be included into foreign policy as partners? Through which subjects, formats or forums?

Religion-based actors as global peace partners

The institutions, content, methodology and instruments with which states and international organisations address religion in foreign policy differ greatly. For most states and organizations, the international promotion of religious freedom, the struggle against radicalisation and religiously disguised violence, mediation, interreligious dialogue, and, in the geographical context, the Middle East region are of particular concern.

Religion-based actors are valuable sources of information for the early recognition of developing conflicts, or conflicts that are at risk of escalating, and are possibly more flexible and adaptable than governments or state institutions when establishing contact with conflict parties. In particular, foreign-policy coopera-

tion in the areas of conflict prevention, mediation and reconciliation work are of significance. Religious communities and religion-based actors can play a constructive role - in particular, when religion is a part of the conflict.

Religion-based actors enjoy particular trust and are often recognised as independent and neutral. Equally, they are not viewed as actors striving for power/political self-interest, nobody fears that they could impose material sanctions and their religious-ethical motivation for peace is conceived as credible. In comparison to secular actors, they are equally often judged as being specifically competent in mediation, the solution of value conflicts, reconciliation and coming to terms with false conduct and guilt due to their theological training and their experience in providing spiritual guidance (cf. Weingardt 2016: 30-32).

Religious peace initiatives seem particularly promising when they have proven to be immune against instrumentalisation. The following could be the criteria for this:

"Respect for the complexity of their written traditions, structural tolerance in the form of moderate institutionalised discourses, a high degree of autonomy potential towards the state and society as well as a diversified inner-religious public." (Hasenclever/De Juan 2007: 16)

Promoting such a form of religious education could be an important task for a "religious foreign policy" (Hasenclever/De Juan 2007: 16) - also for taking religious "instrumentalisation prophylaxis as a challenge of peace policy" seriously (Hasenclever/De Juan 2007: 16).

The framework conditions of peace efforts and reconciliation with religious partners after violence consist of the following (Bread for the World 2016: 13-15):

- communication on the basis of ethical foundations,
- religious practice,
- sufficient time and suitable places for trauma relief,
- spiritual immersion and recuperation,
- additional training and peer guidance, and
- support through external partners

A "*Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation*" developed and promoted by *Religions for Peace (RfP) International*, the Sikh organisation *Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha (GNNSJ)* the Fetzer Institute and the *Guerrand-Hermes Foundation for Peace* could be a basis for (inter)religious reconciliation work.

Religion-related foreign policies of selected states – priorities, institutions and examples

The cultivation of religious competence in the foreign services of various countries seems to be particularly successful if the following circumstances are given:

- Support by political leadership
- Formulation and implementation of a clear long-term strategy
- Systematic inclusion of external expertise
- Drafting of practice-orientated guidelines for situations specific to foreign posts
- Exchange with religious actors
- Communication of foundations based on international conflicts
- Not only the conflict potential, but also the peace resources of religions should be considered in the training for diplomats.

Germany

The Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) with their respective intermediary organisations are the principal actors of Germany's religion-related foreign policy. The responsibility for peace borne by religions, religious freedoms, religious dialogue, intercultural and interreligious cooperation as well as the engagement of religion-based actors for sustainable development are core issues.

The Federal Foreign Office implemented a task force "Religions' responsibility for peace" (AS-FR) in October 2016. It is assigned to Department 6 (Culture and Communication) and has been created to establish and cultivate contacts to religious representatives and religion-based actors and experts, and civil-society organisations that deal with the responsibility that religions have for peace.

The federal government's commitment to international religious freedom is to be distinguished from this and is to be seen as part of its human rights policy. In 2016, the Federal Foreign Office presented a report to the federal government on international religious freedom and Germany's international efforts in securing this fundamental right. In 2018, the federal government introduced an officer for global religious freedom, who is currently assigned to the BMZ.

The BMZ specifically aims for religions to become strategic cooperation partners and initiated the programme "Religions as Partners in Development Cooperation" in early 2016. The Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) seeks to enter into dialogue with the initiative "*Religion matters*", provides information in the sections "Values and Religions" and refers to the internet platform *International Partnership for Religion and Sustainable Development* (PaRD).

France

Despite *laïcité* religion is an established subject of French foreign policy. The foreign ministry *Ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Développement international* (MAEDI) and the defence ministry *Ministère de la Défense* (MINDEF) are the principal actors. Prospective analyses, policy-advisory research, the protection of Christians in the Middle East, the training of diplomats, promotion of inter-religious dialogue as well as the contact with religious representatives are at the centre of their activities. The French ministry of defence implemented a special working unit for religious issues - *pôle religions* - in 2009. The white book on defence and national security recognised this as an important element of globalisation as early as 2008.

Great Britain

The British *Foreign & Commonwealth Office* (FCO) increasingly deals with religion, in particular with *Freedom of Religion or Belief* (FoRB) and the religious literacy of the foreign office employees. The FCO addresses religion in four areas: on the multilateral level at the United Nations and the European Union, with bilateral contacts to abolish religiously discriminating laws in partner states or to address individual cases of religious persecution, in project work such as promoting interreligious dialogue or providing information on religious freedom, and finally in the training of diplomats. The FCO regularly meets with religious representatives from the United Kingdom and the rest of the world.

Italy

Religion and the cooperation with religious actors are important topics for Italian domestic and foreign policy, including freedom of religion, Mediterranean policy, interreligious and inter-cultural dialogue. The foreign ministry *Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale* is the principal actor. The defining characteristics are dialogue and cooperation with science, political consulting, with catholic and inter-religious organisations such as the movement *Comunità di Sant'Egidio*. The geographical proximity to the Vatican as the centre of the Catholic Church is a special feature. Conferences and seminars, and contacts to the diplomatic networks of the Holy See, are important elements of religion-related Italian foreign policy. The cooperation with the many religious organisations in Rome has great potential.

USA

The religion-related US foreign policy since the new administration took office in 2017 is hard

to predict. It is still open to which extent the institutions implemented by US president Obama and secretary of state Kerry and the policies regarding religion in the US foreign policy will remain unchanged or will be completely revoked. It is often assumed that the religious right in the USA is now increasingly exerting influence on US-American foreign policy and increasingly emphasising the international freedom of religion in a confrontational manner, denouncing the persecution of Christians in Islamic countries, or supporting the Israeli government's policies regarding religion, Jerusalem and settlements.

Detailed recommendations aiming at the new administration and the US Congress are formulated by the *Religious Freedom Institute* (RFI) and the *Center on Faith and International Affairs* (CFIA) and, in 2017, in the Policy Brief "*US Foreign Policy and International Religious Freedom*". There, they demand a cross-party foreign policy for religion, additional training of all US diplomats on the freedom of religion, the inclusion of international freedom of religion in the national security strategy and the implementation of sub-committees on international freedom of religion in both chambers of Congress.

Religion-related activities of international organisations

United Nations (UN)

Thematic approaches to religion in the UN policy and the relations of the United Nations to religious organisations are diverse and have gained significance. The UN Secretary General, the General Assembly, the *UN Alliance of Civilizations* (UNAOC), the *UN Task Force on Religion and Development* (UN IATF-FBOs), the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) and the UN Special

Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief are the principal actors. The subjects are the promotion of peace, the freedom of religion, intercultural and interreligious dialogue as well as religions and sustainable development.

For the first time, the UN Secretary General published a report, "*Interreligious and intercultural Dialogue, understanding and cooperation for peace*", on the UN's work with religions in 2008. Since 2003, the UN General Assembly has been dealing with interreligious and intercultural dialogue in the form of annual resolutions and has been celebrating *World Interfaith Harmony Week* in the first week of February since 2010. In 2005, the *United Nations Alliance of Civilizations* (UNAOC) was initiated for intercultural dialogue between the "West" and the Islamic world. It goes back to an initiative of Spain and Turkey after Islamist terrorist attacks in Madrid and Istanbul in 2004.

The cooperation of specialised UN agencies with religion-based actors and addressing religion in the work of the UN has been coordinated by the *United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Engaging Faith-Based Actors for Sustainable Development* (abbreviated: *UN Task Force on Religion and Development* or UN IATF-FBOs). No less than 19 UN institutions work together in this agency. The UNESCO is also active in interreligious dialogue, for example through UNESCO chairs for religion, religious peace, interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

European Union

The European Union has been dealing with religion in its foreign relations for more than two decades. Internally, it also maintains regular relations to religious representatives. Here, the principal actors are the European Commission, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

and the European External Action Service, the European Parliament, the Euro-Mediterranean Anna-Lindh-Foundation and, since 2016, the EU Special Envoy for the Promotion of Freedom of Religion or Belief outside the European Union. Core issues are the non-discrimination on religious grounds, intercultural and interreligious dialogue, religious diversity and the commitment to persons persecuted abroad on religious grounds.

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The *Organisation of Islamic Cooperation* (OIC) recurrently releases statements on international religion-related issues, in particular when Islam or Muslims are affected. Violent acts purported to have been performed in the name of Islam such as the attacks against Coptic Christians on Palm Sunday in Egypt in 2017 were clearly condemned.

A symbolic forum of OIC and EU foreign ministers was started with the Istanbul Process on intercultural and interreligious dialogue between western and Muslim countries in February 2002 as a conscious step in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. - A decisive crisis intervention against the dispute around the Mohammed caricatures in Scandinavia media in 2005 came in the form of a statement by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the EU Representative for Foreign Affairs Javier Solana and the Secretary General of the OIC Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu at the headquarters of the OIC in Dschidda (Jeddah) in February 2006.

The newly implemented *Center for Dialogue, Peace and Understanding* (CDPU) at the OIC Secretariat General in October 2016 is intended to counter extremism and radicalisation as the "voice of reason" (*Sawt Al-Hikma*) via the internet, videos and social media, and to function as a resource centre in cooperation with anti-

terror agencies, UN institutions and experts. This should occur through religious education, references to Koran and Hadith sources and moderate counter narratives.

The OIC participated in the peace efforts against the ethnic-religious violent conflicts between Christians and Muslims in the Central African Republic 2013/2014 with visits of high-ranking representatives and humanitarian aid on location. The OIC has an Islamophobia monitoring centre called *Islamophobia Observatory* and has drafted a detailed annual report of Islamophobia in various countries since 2007.

Dialogue partners and cooperation opportunities worldwide

Russia

Religion has a (geo)strategic significance for Russian foreign policy; in particular interreligious dialogue. Russia would like to portray itself internationally as a multi-religious country, as a global political intermediary between East and West, North and South, Christianity and Islam, and would like to gain soft power in the field of religious foreign policy. Russia thus also uses its observer status in the OIC to gain access to actors and institutions whose doors are usually not open to the US and the EU.

Since 2003, there has been a working group between the foreign ministry and the Russian-orthodox church in addition to the advisory bodies of the Russian president, the *Council for Co-operation with Religious Associations* and the government of the Russian federation and the *Commission on Religious Associations*. In 2007, an *Advisory Council* on the cooperation between the foreign ministry and the Muslim organisations was set up. Working contacts between

the Russian foreign ministry and the *Advisory Council of the Heads of Protestant Churches in Russia* and the catholic Russian bishop's conference also exist.

Turkey

Currently, religion-related foreign-policy cooperation with Turkey seems difficult because the bilateral relations between Germany and Turkey, and also the relationship between Turkey and the EU has deteriorated dramatically since the summer of 2016. This is even graver as the Turkish state's religious authority *Diyanet*, the Turkish mosque association in Germany DITIB and even individual Turkish clergymen in Germany faced accusations of being active as informants and charges of espionage.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, improving the preparation of the seconded Turkish Imams for Germany and Europe with language courses, knowledge of geography and culture, conveying intercultural and interreligious competence, and extending existing cooperation in this area with the state and religious institutions of Turkey seems to be constructive from the perspective of foreign policy. Further points of contact for a cooperation with the Turkish government or religion-based actors in the Turkey could be the *UN Alliance of Civilizations* (UNAOC) (a former co-initiative of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan), or indirectly via the OIC, or with Turkish scientists and religious representatives in a multilateral context.

Morocco

Morocco has a fundamental interest in supporting moderate Islamic religiosity and religion-based international cooperation. The kingdom understands itself as a nation which is connected to Europe historically and demo-

graphically with a regional claim to leadership and with a special religious-cultural heritage. Morocco was repeatedly the host of international conferences on peace between the religions.

The implementation of the Marrakesh Declaration against violence against religious minorities in Muslim countries, signed in 2016 in the Moroccan city by hundreds of politicians and scholars from over 120 countries upon invitation by King Mohammed VI could be a connecting point in the religion-based cooperation in the field of foreign policy as well as the Rabat Action Plan 2012, initiated by, among others, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Iran

The loosening of Iran's diplomatic isolation is at risk due to the US administration's withdrawal from the treaty on the nuclear programme. Due to the religious dominance in the political system of the Islamic Republic and given the human rights situation in Iran, cooperation with the country is a very sensitive political issue. That Iran does show some interest in cooperative religious foreign policy, wants to present itself as a religiously pluralist country and seeks to break the isolation through religious dialogue, offers some connecting points for Germany's foreign policy.

The protestant-Lutheran church in Germany (EKD) already had contacts and dialogue seminars with Iranian institutions in the 2000s. The *Institute for interreligious Dialogue* (IID) in Teheran, the *Center for Dialogue among Civilizations* in Teheran and the Centre of interreligious studies in Qom are noteworthy in the field of theological research. With the programme "Academic Dialogue with the Islamic World" 2013-2015, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) supported the reli-

gious-scientific cooperation between the Goethe-Universität Frankfurt, the Institute of Religious Sciences and Jewish Studies Potsdam, the University of Religions and Worldviews in Qom and the Women's University *Al-Zahra* in Teheran.

The *International Center for Religion & Diplomacy* (ICRD), a think-tank in Washington, also recommends *citizens diplomacy*, meetings between citizens, visits to Iran and personal exchange to improve the (US) relations with Iran. A municipal example for this from Germany: the city of Freiburg has entertained a German-Iranian city partnership since 2000 with the university city Isfahan, which was continuously cultivated, also in times where the encounters between high municipal representatives were suspended.

It is worth considering whether religious representatives or (non-tourist) visits to religious institutions or theological universities could be integrated in citizens diplomacy formats. It is also worth checking whether, in the context of preparing participants in geographical and cultural issues at the German-Iranian project for extended visits to companies, "Iran-Horizonte", information on religion and the constitutional law of religion in Germany should be offered.

Israel and the Palestinian territories

There are many intensive region-related and civil-society relations between Germany and Israel; in particular through churches and other religion-based actors. Given the sensitivity of German-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian relations, due to the complicated religious and denominational situation at the interface of three world religions, a particularly cautious and balanced choice of partners and projects is essential for cooperation.

Actors with local experience who could provide advice on the basis of their experience and insights are the German church representatives and theologians/religious scholars such as the *Dormitio-Abbey* (Theologisches Studienjahr Jerusalem), which participates in awarding the peace prize *Mount Zion Award* (MZA) for interreligious understanding, the forum of former students of the Theologisches Studienjahr Jerusalem, the local offices of political foundations, the BMZ-supported Willy-Brandt-Zentrum (WBC) in Jerusalem, Forum ziviler Friedensdienst ZFD, Pax Christi and Aktion Sühnezeichen, and also the representation of the Holy See.

Of course, orthodox and oriental Christians as well as Jewish and Muslim institutions should be contacted. The recognised human rights organisation *Rabbis for Human Rights* RHR, which is active in Israel, is a potential cooperation partner. As Israel is a technological leader in water supply, and water supply is a very important issue for the Palestinian territories and Israeli-Palestinian cooperation, it would be interesting to review if the cooperation implemented by BMZ/GIZ in Jordan with religion-based actors in the area of water management would also be possible in the Palestinian territories.

Jordan

Jordan is internationally very active in promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In 2004, the Jordanian monarchy facilitated inner-Muslim consensus formation on critical religious questions with the *Amman Message*. This gave rise to an international network of moderate Muslim leaders. The *Royal Aal Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought* (RABIIT) in Amman is important for theological dialogue. The *Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* in Amman

is also a core institution. The prince of Jordan, Hassan bin Talal, is a prominent figure in the worldwide interreligious dialogue. Providing support to Jordan for its religion-related foreign policy suggests itself as an option to Germany.

Given the country's refugee situation, Germany could potentially be able to offer an exchange of experiences in providing spiritual counselling to refugees, trauma treatment, and on peace and reconciliation through religions/representatives of the clergy. It is unclear whether the German-Jordanian university or cooperation in higher education of both countries can also serve to convey technical issues such as the energy transition to renewables in German churches and can make it fruitful for mosques/religion-based actors in Jordan.

Lebanon

Lebanon offers a multi-religious mosaic which is unique in the Middle East. However, religion is also strongly politicised and confessionalised. In order to counter segregation, GIZ and the Ziviler Friedensdienst (ZFD) support the joint training of theology students, leaders of youth groups and media creatives of various religious communities in the areas of dialogue, non-violent conflict resolution and the deconstruction of stereotypes. Possibly, the *Adyan-Foundation* in Beirut, a Lebanese NGO for interreligious studies and spiritual solidarity, could be another partner. It is active in the areas of intercultural training, peace and social justice, school education, diversity management and the media.

Other Lebanese institutions active in the international/interreligious context are the *National Dialogue Committee/Islamic-Christian National Dialogue Committee*, the *Middle East Council of Churches* and the *Arab Muslim-Christian*

Dialogue Group. The London-based think-tank *Centre on Religion and Global Affairs (CRGA)* has an office in Beirut that offers a platform for trust-building exchange on sensitive topics and innovative perspectives to politicians, religious representatives, experts and civil society in the Middle East and North Africa with the programme *Beirut Conversations*.

Facing the large numbers of refugees in Lebanon and the fragility of religious balance, German foreign policy is particularly called upon to support the country. Germany could support interreligious cooperation in refugee aid and the Lebanese institutions in de-radicalising school education, and peace and reconciliation-oriented counselling for refugees by collaborating with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the USA or France.

Saudi-Arabia

Saudi-Arabia conducts an active, worldwide religion-related foreign policy. The *King Abdulah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)* in Vienna, which is supported by Saudi-Arabia, Austria, Spain and the Holy See as observer, is an important actor. The KAICIID supports academics and interreligious peace work worldwide. The KAICIID supported the foundation of a network of Christian and Muslim theologians from the Arab world for interreligious dialogue in Limassol (Cyprus) in 2017.

As massive limitations and even complete prohibitions are in place for religion-based actors in Saudi-Arabia, the options for religion-related cooperation with Germany are very limited - and are of high political sensitivity due to the human rights situation. It is thus even more surprising that the US think-tank *International Center for Religion & Diplomacy*

(ICRD) has been working with the Saudi education authorities for years in order to modernise religion-related materials for teacher training and school books, and to remove contents that propagate extremism, "Islamic State" and *Al Qaida*. Apparently, the Saudi foreign minister has even advocated that the project is exempt from *US State Department* budget cuts.

Supporting interreligious cooperation

There are several internationally active dialogue and cooperation partners which would be suitable options for the peace-oriented support of interreligious dialogue through a religion-related foreign policy such as the foundation *Weltethos Tübingen*, the research and network-based *Interreligiöse Arbeitsstelle (INTRA)*, the support of the *European Council of Religious Leaders (ECRL)* (in Europe), *Religions for Peace (RfP)* in New York (worldwide), the *Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions (CPWR)* in Chicago or the *United Religions Initiative (URI)*. They each have different abilities and points of focus. In this context, it is important to differentiate the aims, levels and topics of intercultural/interreligious dialogues, cooperation and peace work (cf. Bender 2013; 295-297) There are also several institutions in academic research that are dedicated to interreligious cooperation whereas the focus on foreign policy and international peace work is not yet so widespread.

Among others, the *Religions for Peace (RfP) European Directory* (for Europe) and the ambitious peace-map project of the *King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID)* offer overviews of internationally active initiatives for religious dialogues. "*A Common Word*", a letter by 138 high-ranking Muslim scholars to the religious leaders of Christianity with his-

torical impact, (Weingardt 2014: 126-130), the *Beirut Declaration on "Faiths for Rights"* on human rights in 2017, the *18 Faith for Rights Commitments* with reasoning deduced from the diverse traditions of various religions and the *Parliaments of the World's Religions* in Chicago 1893 and 1993, Cape Town 1999, Barcelona 2004, Cape Town 2009 (Weingardt 2014: 109-114), Salt lake City 2015 deserve particular mention.

It is not only important to make these international interreligious dialogue initiatives and agreements more well-known in intrareligious discourse and at a grassroots level, but also to orient them towards and specifically apply them to peace work. At the same time, there are many committed and exceptional interreligious initiatives in the respective countries that are largely unknown beyond their regions even though there might be a lot to learn from them on an international level. Here, the creation of networks is important.

Successful cooperation

Cooperation with religious communities and religion-based actors is particularly successful where cooperation partners are diligently identified and selected, interaction is on an equal footing and their autonomy as partners from the religions is respected, where the targets of cooperation are jointly defined, an exact situation and context analysis is conducted and expertise-based solution competences are activated and promoted.

Of course, the political stability in the partner countries, the mutual trust in the general bilateral relations, the functional ability of the institutions in the country are also decisive framework conditions. As important as the selection of and the contact to credible, com-

mitted, cooperative, reliable individuals and their long-term dedication are, in particular in the dialogue with religious representatives abroad, it is also important to make sure that cooperation is not dependent on persons, and to secure it structurally and institutionally, in order to achieve sustained success.

One should not seek *the* single best model for religion-related foreign policy:

"The new knowledge of international relations that today's foreign policy-makers are looking for is surely marked by the plural, the local, the societal, the culturally specific – and, perhaps most importantly we have argued, the religiously specific". (cf. Petito/Thomas 2015: 51)

However, a focus of religions' responsibility for peace as well as partner networks with foreign religion-based actors could define innovative trends for a religion-related foreign policy.

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