

RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: CHALLENGES FOR NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

A Workshop at the Orfalea Center for Global &
International Studies

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The Workshop Goals

The workshop brought together a dozen scholars and a similar number of leaders of international non-government service and human rights organizations to discuss the role of religion in international NGO activities. According to Mark Juergensmeyer, the director of UCSB’s Orfalea Center and the convener of the workshop, religion is important in contemporary global politics because “it gives a sense of public identity in an era of failing confidence in the nation-state.” International NGOs are part of a “resurgence of global civil society” in which religion and international NGOs both “compete and collaborate with one another.” Hence the workshop touched on an interesting and important feature of global civil society—the relationship between religion and non-profit service organizations. The point of the workshop was not only to offer solutions, but to identify some of the hard questions and areas for further discussion.



Left to right: Ankur Patel (BAPS Charities); Fr. William Headley (Kroc School of Peace Studies, USD/Catholic Relief Services); Thomas Tighe (Direct Relief International); Ahmad El Bendary (Islamic Relief); Victoria Riskin (Human Rights Watch).

Is Religion Anti-Modern?

According to Katherine Marshall, who held numerous leadership positions during her 35 years at the World Bank where she remains a senior advisor, one of the common opinions at secular inter-governmental institutions is that ‘religion is dangerous’, and that it ‘opposes modernization.’ Marshall laments the assumption that ‘with modernization religion becomes less important.’ She pointed out that there are only one or two religious specialists on the staff of the World Bank. Since religion can be associated with strong and often emotionally laden opinions on issues such as women and reproductive health rights, these religiously-defined areas become a battleground between secular and religious conceptions of rights and obligations. “Everyone brings in their own experiences” about religion-related issues, she noted, so that it becomes difficult to have “an adult conversation about religion.”

A Positive Role for Religion

When it comes to building trust and relationships, faith-based organization often have an advantage in facilitating the processes of mutual recognition and respect. Having a religious outlook can serve as a common denominator for spiritually diverse groups and therefore constitute a constructive factor in international aid. “In our work in Kashmir, for instance,” commented Daniel Philpott of Notre Dame in light of his activity with the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy (ICRD), “we often found that identifying ourselves as people of faith actually carried more credibility with our interlocutors—even though they were of a different faith—than using uniformly secular language.”



Indigenous religions presentation at Monterrey. (Photo courtesy of Katherine Marshall.)

Religious Networks for Development

“We have been working in Ghana with religious organizations for about 12 years,” noted Dr. Steve Eskow of the Pangaea Network. “Our thesis is that rural illiterates who cannot follow the media or read books, who cannot learn the conventional way about condoms or bed netting or solar energy, go to church every Sunday. The church is an oral medium. The minister has the impact that other media have. We have been...working under the notion that churches are also networks, and that if you do a conference in Accra and provide the minister or the imam with posters, solar lights, and sermon material, you begin to create a kind of community intermediation and activism and change that no other collaboration can equal.”

“In our 24 years of working in the field of relief and development, the most important question that has been raised...is, are we there to proselytize, are we expecting a return on our contribution or are we working for the sake of humanity?”

- Ahmad El Bendary

The Common Values That Link Religious and Secular NGOs

Beneath both secular and religious NGOs is what Cecelia Lynch of the University of California, Irvine has referred to as “deep ethical structures.” Both are part of “a global moral community” as Juergensmeyer noted, explaining that they are defined by “a sense of commitment and personal obligation” and that they “respect a diverse cultural world.” Scott Appleby of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies remarked that the challenge is to “integrate an awareness of how identities shift,” pointing out that “there are adaptations and not only continuity.” In other words, he said, we must learn to deal with “anomalies” and leave the strict distinction between ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ behind in order to embrace pluralism.

How Can NGO Leaders Remain True to Their Own Values?

None of the religious NGOs represented at the workshop would knowingly limit their aid to fellow believers. All pursue a common mission of helping those in need regardless of their spiritual background. Similarly, secular organizations like Direct Relief International try to remain impartial when forming indigenous partnerships. Thomas Tighe, the director of DRI, noted that his organization’s secular outlook must adapt in order to cooperate with religiously-based indigenous groups abroad. The participating secular and religiously-based NGOs exemplify how relief organizations may strive for an uncompromisingly unconditional stance in their work, committed to helping people in a universalistic manner without thereby universalizing the spiritual or secular underpinnings of their particular organization.

Being “Spiritually Flexible”

“We are strict vegetarians,” explained Ankur Patel of the Hindu service organization BAPS charities, “but after the South Asian Tsunami we worked with fishermen and fishing villages to reconstruct their storehouses.” Patel said that his organization provided aid in the form of fish and meat to those people who used to work as fishermen and whose diet included fish and meat. After consulting the spiritual leader of BAPS, the leaders of his organization decided that in this case they could modify their strict vegetarian rules. According to Patel, there are times when “one must be spiritually flexible” in order to help those in need in a non-self-interested fashion.



A literacy lesson for Mayan women by Catholic diocese near San Marcos, Guatemala. (Photo courtesy of Katherine Marshall.)

Religious Literacy

Richard Falk, formerly of Princeton University and now a distinguished visiting professor of global studies at UC-Santa Barbara, observed that we live today in “tension between religion as a source of conflict and judgment of others, and religion as a foundation for reconciliation and needed solidarity” to cope with global problems such as poverty, global warming, the energy crisis, and so on. According to Falk “such needed solidarity cannot emerge from a secular mentality.” The intellectual problem reflecting a nearly dogmatic secular age is “why political science and international relations as a way of understanding the world totally missed religious research.” It is a “secularist fallacy,” Falk argued, that has “dominated our understanding of what is important intellectually.”

Working in Pakistani Madrassas

“We have been in Pakistan for four years,” said Doug Johnston, president of the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD), “where we always partner with an indigenous institution.” His program director is a Pakistani-American who had attended a madrassa and who conducts key workshops in Pakistan that are aimed at reforming the curriculum. Johnston explained that his goal was “to expand the curriculum so that it incorporates the social sciences, women’s rights, religious tolerance and develops critical thinking skills.”

Johnston described ICRD’s experiences with Pakistani madrassas this way: “Initially indigenous leaders feared a secularization of their curriculum. This explains why former state efforts to reform have failed. Instead, we always make clear that we are there to discuss values we hold in common. I usually cite a passage from the Qur’an that emphasizes cooperation and good work. Our program works because we make the local people part of the mission, so they feel it is their reform process. By obtaining a sense of ownership, they are motivated and take it on themselves. So far we have reached about 500 madrassas out of 15,000. This may only be the tip of the iceberg, yet the number is going to increase as we have been training local leaders to continue the reforming process.”

Does it Matter How Aid is Perceived by Recipients?

Sometimes international relief operations have a social and cultural impact that can be perceived as corrosive to traditional cultures. Katherine Marshall, who is currently a senior fellow at Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, pointed out that “genuine concerns about effects of aid [such as] disruptions of communities [and] loss of culture and values” exist, and need to be taken seriously. In such cases, Western aid organizations run the risk of being perceived by recipients as representing the interests of “the power of the U.S. and the multinationals.”

“What stands in the way of effective collaboration or partnership between religious communities (or individuals) and international NGOs... [is] lack of expertise by both parties in the ability to negotiate, translate, incorporate, and honor specific religious values, practices and beliefs.” - R. Scott Appleby



Catholic Bishop Alvaro Ramazzini of San Marcos in Guatemala, with children. (Photo courtesy of Katherine Marshall.)



Dan Philpott conducting the work of faith-based reconciliation for the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy in Kashmir in March 2006. (Photo courtesy of Dan Philpott.)

Can There Be Universal Values?

“In the end, secular ideals of equality, egalitarian gender relations, and individual freedom are sometimes unpopular,” noted Victoria Riskin of Human Rights Watch, “so that one must ask oneself whether it is worth the effort.” She goes on to say that “our principle is to look for the victims and to be their voice, no matter whether this makes our job difficult or dangerous. We want to make sure that what we do and what we stand for is based upon a universal set of principles and not a reflection of some kind of hegemonic activity.”

Thinking Globally About Values

Are human rights embraced by all religious traditions? “In effect”, noted Victoria Riskin of Human Rights Watch, “all humans long for something transcendental, something spiritual and peaceful. That is something we all share.” She said that human rights are also something that all humans share. “Human rights today have a secular outlook,” she explained, “but they have evolved from religious traditions. The question is whether the human rights framework will be meaningful across all countries and religions. I believe that the world should be secular and religious,” she said, adding: “I like integrative concepts.”

A Paradigm Shift in Thinking About Religion and Secularism



Katherine Marshall (World Bank/Georgetown); Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Social Science Research Council). (Photographer: Victor Faessel.)

Scott Appleby noted a perceived bias towards secularism as a normative framework for dialogue, whereas in fact the world ought to be recognized as religious and secular simultaneously. Current categories that foster strict binaries are inappropriate for capturing the inclusiveness of the actual situation. What is needed is a fundamental paradigm shift, Appleby argued, in order to allow for a “flexibility of identity in order to avoid essentialism.”

The Need For Humility

When asked what religion brings to the efforts of NGOs, Ahmad El Bendary of Islamic Relief answered: “humility.” According to El Bendary, religion tempers the cultural self-righteousness that might accompany the act of charity. This point was underscored by others participants. Noting that efforts of mutual understanding are prerequisites for long-lasting partnerships and successful aid missions, Katherine Marshall stressed the need for humility in addressing recipients’ fears and responding to their opinions with “thought and respect.” Establishing commonality between recipients and the giving organization is a matter of finding “ways to discuss areas of disagreement” such as corruption and gender issues, as well as the recipients’ fears of a loss of tradition and culture.

Understanding Local Culture

For Ahmad El Bendary and Islamic Relief, the religious and cultural parameters of the various conflicts in Sudan were readily apparent, making the task of isolating local needs and providing aid simpler. However, said El Bendary, "... when we went to Darfur in 2004, we were faced with a very unusual situation." The circumstances of the conflict were obscured by the fact that the majority of those involved were Muslims who shared "...the same school of thought... the same culture, the same identity; the same everything." So the question arose: "What's the problem?"

After months of inspection, gathering information, and consultation with various groups in the region, El Bendary was impressed anew by the importance of "understanding the culture, and the different factors that are affecting the societies that we are dealing with," and arrived at this conclusion: "Without being able to really comprehend what's going on, you will never be able to deliver the help needed wherever it is needed... In my humble opinion you cannot deal [with local needs] without calculating religion in. Because without it you are missing the most important factor that will deal with the behaviors of the people" among whom one is working.

Challenging Conventional Wisdom

Questioning one's own assumptions is essentially the displaying of respect for culture, noted Cecelia Lynch. This was echoed by Saad Ibrahim of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Cairo: "Conventional wisdoms must be re-examined and paradigms constantly re-evaluated." He added that so-called "wild ducks" should be installed within aid organizations to provide intellectual critique in order to challenge conventional wisdom in a consistent, institutionalized manner.

Religion as a "Wild Duck" in Secular Organizations

Saad Ibrahim described religion as an unpredictable variable—a "wild duck"—that forces us to reconsider our assumptions and worldviews. Whether the wild duck perspective can be sustained given the very powerful and pervasive paradigms it challenges is a point of debate. Eventually "the wild duck will be tamed," argued Richard Falk, and hence become ineffective. "A wild duck cannot undermine the dominant paradigm because the paradigm is defended until anomalies become so powerful that they give people the courage to challenge it."

INGOs, RINGOs, BINGOs, and GINGOs

Saad Ibrahim explained that INGOs—international non-government organizations—are increasingly being supplemented not only by RINGOs (religious international NGOs), but also those run by businesses and government: BINGOs and GINGOs. In some parts of the world, he explained, governments are eager to control international NGOs or to replace them with their own programs. In these areas, said Ibrahim, the state is "eager to occupy the entire public space and squeeze NGOs out." This can go so far as governments creating their own NGOs—governmental versions of INGOs, or GINGOs. "In a sense," cautioned Paul Nelson of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, "what is more important than whether or not it's a state or non-governmental institution delivering a service, is what the mechanisms are that make that institution accountable to the people it serves."

Sustained Engagement

Several participants raised issues related to the need for long-term commitment in the work of establishing relationships so that NGO activity is most effective. In response to a question by Mona Sheikh of the University of Copenhagen as to how one presents alternatives to religious extremism and militancy, Brian Cox of ICRD underscored the point by relating something said to him in a conversation with a former militant: "Brian," he said, "it's not important enough to take the gun out of a militant's hands, you have to deal with the ideas that caused [him] to pick up the gun in the first place."





Dr. Ahmad El Bendary, founder of Islamic Relief, at the site of a relief project in China, 2003. (Photo courtesy of Dr. Ahmad El Bendary.)



Monterrey Mexico Parliament of Religions meeting Sept 2007, with Sikh leader Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh. (Photo courtesy of Katherine Marshall.)

Islam, Faith-Based Organizations and Legitimacy: A Prison Story

Saad Ibrahim discussed his experience with the de-radicalization of certain Islamists and Islam-based groups in Egypt; in one case, it was through secret correspondence written on small sheets of paper in prison. “It was the retreat of the state [in the 1960’s]—if not in terms of physical power, at least in terms of moral power—and it is that retreat of the state that enabled faith-based organizations to move in and have their ‘heyday’, which we are still living with. They are legitimate, not in the legalistic sense but in the socio-cultural sense.... Now the question becomes: could some of these militant, violent faith-based organizations be de-radicalized?”

“Yes,” Ibrahim continued. But it takes time and patience. “When 9/11 happened I was in prison [with Islamists]. They asked me: Why did the world make a fuss about my human rights colleagues and me, but did not care about them? [They had been in prison, some without charges, others without trial, for 20 years.] I told them: because there are perceived core universal values that we share with the west [where rights activists were protesting Ibrahim’s incarceration]. They responded: we share these values! I replied: the world does not know this. They responded: how can we let the world know that we share these values?”

Identity and Reentry

Sensitivities about identity and the role of who it is that convenes interactions between groups with apparently divergent positions is an issue of relevance to the success of NGOs working with local groups, noted former Red Cross director Mark Gearan, now president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Here the related question of the “counter-pressure of maintaining identity” among aid recipients or locals who engage closely with NGO workers was raised by William Headley of the Kroc School of Peace Studies at the University of San Diego. Recalling “the habituated social pressures of one’s own group,” he stressed that “when you go back out... into [your local setting], you have your own neighbors to deal with.” “Reentry” is challenging, agreed Aaron Hahn Tapper, co-director of the conflict transformation organization Abraham’s Vision, “because you still have the voices of polarization in regard to these conflicts.... Transformation is a process, and trust is really a key piece.”

God and the Market Economy

According to Thomas Tighe, of Direct Relief International, “people in cultures are not ‘economic sectors’—people are people, and many of them define themselves, their families and their whole histories in terms of religion. My biggest concern with the advent of globalization, [is that] the market has become god. The market says ‘it’s good if it sells,’ and efficiency is derived from that, productivity is derived from that, competition is derived from that, and it scares me. I think there is a big missing element [if we assume] that the principle motivating factor in human life is economic advancement. It certainly is an important one. But I think we have become blinded in the debate—and the market isn’t god.”

“The most important issue relating to NGO involvement is winning the kind of trust that is required to make a lasting difference.” - Doug Johnston

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS



R. Scott Appleby
Director, Joan B. Kroc Institute
for International Peace Studies,
University of Notre Dame

"What stands in the way of effective collaboration or partnership between religious communities (or individuals) and international NGOs... [is] lack of expertise by both parties in the ability to negotiate, translate, incorporate, and honor specific religious values, practices and beliefs."



Brian Cox
Senior Vice President,
International Center for
Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD)

"The challenge is to demonstrate with tangible results that religion can be an asset for peacemaking and preventive diplomacy."



Ahmad El Bendary
Founder and former CEO,
Islamic Relief (USA)

"In our 24 years of working in the field of relief and development, the most important question that has been raised... is, are we there to proselytize, are we expecting a return on our contribution or are we working for the sake of humanity?"



Richard Falk
Distinguished Visiting
Professor, Global &
International Studies,
UC Santa Barbara

"...international human rights NGOs are challenged to focus on the appropriate interplay of secular governmental authority and freedom of religion."



Mark Gearan
President, Hobart and William
Smith Colleges

"How can NGOs approach [religion in international affairs]? What are the expectations of donors? What are the expectations of host states?"



William Headley
Counselor to the President,
Catholic Relief Services;
Founding Dean, Kroc School
of Peace Studies, University of
San Diego

"...international NGOs [engage] in human contexts where God(s) and the perceived demands on the faithful are critically important to individuals, groups and a society as a whole."



Saad Ibrahim
Founder, Ibn Khaldun Center
for Development Studies,
Cairo, Egypt

"One of the challenges... is to examine with fresh eyes the conditions under which radical Muslim faith-based organizations are created and whether there may be lessons to be learned regarding pathways to de-radicalization."



Doug Johnston
President and Founder,
International Center for
Religion & Diplomacy (ICRD)

"The most important issue relating to NGO involvement is winning the kind of trust that is required to make a lasting difference."



Mark Juergensmeyer
 Director, Orfalea Center for
 Global & International Studies,
 UC Santa Barbara

"When worldviews collide, religion is often part of the clash of perceptions."



Paul J. Nelson
 Division Director of
 International Development,
 Graduate School of Public and
 International Affairs, University
 of Pittsburgh

"The increasing interest of many international development NGOs in... 'rights-based' approaches to their work opens the possibility [of] more... advocacy on behalf of human rights."



Terrill Lautz
 Vice President, Henry Luce
 Foundation

"Religion has been missing from the social science and international relations curriculum... [but it affects] many areas ranging from development and democracy to health and human rights."



Ankur Patel
 Program Officer, BAPS
 Charities

"The issue of 'otherness' intersects with a whole range of identities, but perhaps none... stronger than religion."



Cecelia Lynch
 Director, Center for Global
 Peace & Conflict Studies, UC
 Irvine

"It is interesting that specialists in world affairs have finally discovered the importance of both nongovernmental organizations and religion."



Marie Juul Petersen
 Ph.D. student, Institute for
 Regional and Cross-Cultural
 Studies, University of
 Copenhagen

"Religion is an ambiguous phenomenon, and... the relationships between religion and development can be expressed in a myriad of different ways."



Katherine Marshall
 Senior Fellow, Berkley Center
 for Religion, Peace, and World
 Affairs, Georgetown University

"The foremost problems... are lack of basic knowledge and lack of a framework that allows thoughtful dialogue about the ways that religion engages public policies and objectives, and vice versa."



Daniel Philpott
 Joan B. Kroc Institute for
 International Peace Studies
 and Department of Political
 Science, University of Notre
 Dame

"If NGOs are to operate effectively, then they must understand the beliefs, goals, and modus operandii of the local religious communities and organizations whose actions bear upon the NGOs' goals."

CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS



Victoria Riskin
 Founder, Southern California
 Committee and National Board
 Member, Human Rights Watch

"It is important that human rights groups continue to document and shed light on these abuses [of freedom of press and religion], bring media attention to repressive practices, and use the levers of influence wherever they can to protect the victims."



Mona Kanwal Sheikh
 Doctoral candidate,
 Department of Political
 Science, University of
 Copenhagen

"In Europe, the 'secular' self-perception of many international NGOs working with poverty reduction and democratization is often an obstacle to cooperation with faith-based organizations."



Aaron J. Hahn Tapper
 Founder and Co-executive
 Director, Abraham's Vision;
 Department of Theology and
 Religious Studies, University of
 San Francisco

"[It is not] enough for people from different walks of life to be brought together to talk... NGOs have to address social relations."



Thomas Tighe
 President, Direct Relief
 International

"Being non-sectarian, just like being a-political, requires a good political antenna."



Jonathan VanAntwerpen
 Program Officer, Social Science
 Research Council

"What stands in the way of building better bridges—between international NGOs (religious or otherwise), and academic social scientists?"



Pictured left to right: Cecilia Lynch (UC Irvine); Thomas Tighe (Direct Relief International); Mark Gearan (Hobart and William Smith Colleges); Jonathan VanAntwerpen (Social Science Research Council); Marie Juul Petersen (University of Copenhagen). (Photographer: Victor Faessel.)



Dr. Ahmad El Bendary, founder of Islamic Relief, at the airport meeting the arrival of aid supplies for the Lebanon humanitarian crisis in Sept. 2006. (Photo courtesy of Ahmad El Bendary.)

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