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From Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) Advocacy to Interreligious Engagement in Foreign Policy

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Abstract

In recent years, Western governments have strengthened their foreign policy tools, global advocacy efforts and international coordination to protect Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). There is, however, a growing feeling that the current FoRB promotion approaches appear overall to be failing, as religious persecution and discrimination continue to increase in many parts of the world. Criticising the secular policy mindset embedded in the current approaches, this article argues for a new postsecular foreign policy of religious engagement and advocates a distinctive strategy of “interreligious engagement” illustrating how interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be crucial policy tools to promote FoRB. This strategy is designed to break away from the predominant view among politics-makers in which religious actors are seen either as perpetrators or victims of FoRB violations. Instead, I argue, they should also be seen as responsible partners in combatting intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

Keywords: Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), postsecularism, religious engagement, interreligious dialogue, foreign policy
1. Introduction

Religious persecution and discrimination are increasing in many parts of the world. From the rise of the so-called Islamic State which has led to mass atrocities against Christians, Yazidis, Druze and various Muslim groups, to escalating violence between Sunni and Shia, such conflict is widespread. It is apparent in the removal of crosses and the destruction of churches and Uyghur “re-education” camps in China, in the repression of Rohingya Muslims at the hands of the Burmese Buddhist nationalist government and the spreading of anti-conversion laws in India as well as in the increase of discrimination against Muslims and in Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in the West.

The fundamental human right of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) seems to be under threat from a diverse set of actors and ideologies, from secular oppressive governments to religious extremist movements. This affects many religious believers, across all religious and belief communities, including atheists – both minority and majority religions as well as individuals and other vulnerable groups. Religion – as part of what has been described as the global religious resurgence (Thomas, 2005) or the desecularisation of global politics (Berger, 1999) – appears as both the perpetrator and the victim of violations of this fundamental human right. While recognising that governments have been strengthening their foreign policy tools and global advocacy efforts to respond to this challenge and promote FoRB, in this paper I argue for a new foreign policy approach to addressing this issue, moving away from “naming and shaming” state-led advocacy to bottom-up collaborative strategies based on what I call interreligious engagement.

Before I proceed, however, two comments about the scope of this article and one definitional clarification are in order. First, my analysis aims to be an intervention into a policy debate among diplomats, experts and other practitioner-stakeholders who work on issues of religion and foreign affairs and have witnessed the emergence of something, in my view, of an artificial divide between the camp of the supporters of “the promotion of religious freedom” through foreign policy against the supporters of “religious engagement” in foreign policy (Joustra, 2017; Bettiza, 2019). Too often the former sees the idea of engaging religious actors as little more than feel-good interreligious dialogue that avoids the urgency of combatting persecution, while the latter views FoRB advocacy as a narrow, even parochial, human-rights agenda that misses the complexity of the role of religion in different societies and cultures. Against this background, my argument rejoins a different policy orientation which calls for the need for the representatives of these two fields to engage more in coordination and cooperation, on the grounds that promoting religious freedom and engaging religious actors are separate but complementary functions (Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 2018).

Second, this article assumes the standard international law definition of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (FoRB), as enshrined in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in multiple international and regional human rights instruments (Bielefeldt et al., 2016). From this perspective, FoRB is an integral part of the international human rights framework and cannot be dissociated from other rights, such as for example, the freedoms of expression, assembly and association. I recognise, however, that today in the words of the former UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB “freedom of religion or belief is under pressure also on the conceptual level” (Bielefeldt 2012, 20). Once a self-evident truth, religious freedom is now subject to a growing scholarly debate and, unfortunately, partisan politicization, which originated in the so-called ‘American culture war’ (Hunter, 1991), that was exported to Europe and recently turned into a global cultural war (Clifford, 2012). The new critics of religious freedom essentially argue that religious freedom is a Western Protestant invention (Asad, 2003, Sullivan et al., 2015; for this debate see Philpott & Shah, 2016 and Ferrari 2016). As for the policy and international dimension of the debate, they
argue that FoRB promotion is a form of cultural imperialism politically driven by different geopolitical interests, including classic missionary ones (Hurd, 2015; Mahmood, 2015) and that is often used as a weapon to undermine LGBTQI+ rights and gender equality (Clifford, 2019; for a different conciliatory position see Endsjø, 2020). While there are some well-taken points in this perspective, this theoretical debate is way beyond the scope of this paper.

Finally, one definitional clarification. In this article, following the common practice in the policy-oriented literature on religion and foreign policy (see, for example, UN, 2017 & Trotta & Wilkinson, 2019) I use the term ‘religious actors’ as way to identify: 1) a type of non-state agency in International Relations, comparable to other non-state actors like, for example, civil society and business ones (Haynes, 2001; Thomas, 2005); and 2) the widest possible range of different religious organisations, communities, movements, leaderships, across and within different religious traditions. I prefer to use ‘religious’ rather than ‘faith’ in defining these actors as religious captures better the communitarian and elements of belonging embedded in a tradition than faith, which is more often associated with individual belief and spirituality; and while I value the theoretical warnings from the scholarly work on the impossibly of a transhistorical and transcultural concept of religion and the problematic distinction of the very categories of “secular” and “religious” (Cavanaugh, 2009; Asad, 2003), my argument here is focussed on policy where these arguments have yet to gain traction.

The argument proceeds as follows: Firstly, I note the rising salience of FoRB issues on the global scene in the context of the rising religious discrimination noted above. Secondly, I document a growing diplomatic reaction to this in terms of the creation of new instruments and initiatives to advocate for FoRB. I then show how there has been a shift towards a range of more bottom-up approaches – as opposed to state-led and ‘top down’ interventions. Thirdly, building on criticism of the secular policy mindset embedded in current FoRB-promotion approaches, I put forward an argument for a postsecular sensibility in foreign policy and advocate a distinctive strategy of ‘interreligious engagement’ in international affairs, illustrating how interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be brought together to promote FoRB. This strategy is designed to break out of the current mindset in which religious groups are seen either as perpetrators or victims of FoRB violations. Instead, I argue, they should be engaged as partners in the protection of FoRB. The failure to do this adequately signals a problem in the way in which religion and its freedom is conceptualised in the foreign policy response to combatting intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. I conclude that the broader policy failure to address the global violations of FoRB relates not only to the scale and intensity of the foreign policy response but also to a problem with the way in which religion and its freedom are conceptualised in the foreign policy response to combatting intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

2. Religious discrimination in global affairs

Both quantitative and qualitative indicators and evidence point unequivocally towards the fact that respect for FoRB has continued to deteriorate (Pew Research Center, 2017, 2018). In the last ten years, the two UN Special Rapporteurs on FoRB have both repeatedly used strong language and argued that this fundamental human right is under pressure and going through a significant crisis (Bielefeldt 2012; Shaheed 2017). Reports published in the last couple of years have pointed to the intersection of this crisis with the spreading of new authoritarian politics, counter-terrorism practices and intra-state conflicts (USCIRF, 2018; EP FoRB & RT, 2018; OSCE/ODIHR, 2019). Unfortunately, the current global health emergency seems to have amplified the FoRB crisis for, as the U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres (2020) has
noted, the current Covid-19 pandemic keeps unleashing “a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering”.

FoRB violations are manifested in a multiplicity of ways. Thinking in terms of a continuum of violation intensity, upholding FoRB requires combating discrimination, intolerance, persecution, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief. At the extreme of the continuum of FoRB violations is the choice still faced today by many believers – as the Daesh and Rohingya crises have tragically shown – to either give up your religion or belief or face death or exile. From a legal perspective, violations of FoRB are broadly categorized into two different, though inter-linked, dimensions. On the one hand, there is the direct denial and interference by states, which was initially understood to be the core of this right. On the other is the failure of states to sufficiently protect this right, since it has increasingly been recognised that states have a responsibility to take steps to prevent interference with this right by non-state actors under the respect, protect, fulfil framework (Berry, 2017; Karp 2020).

From an international political perspective, a third international level of FoRB violations could be added: the fragile-state/conflict level which emphasizes the degeneration of FoRB violations into sectarian and communal violence in the context of collapsing states and regional instability. The recent cases of sectarian violence and genocides along religious lines in Iraq and Syria exemplify this third international level of FoRB violations. These latter, therefore, occur at three levels: the state/legal level, which reflects the direct dimension of state denial; the non-state actors/socio-cultural norms level, which focuses on the role of societal actors as FoRB violators; and, finally, the international level of regional or intra-state conflict.

Firstly, the state/legal level reflects the fact that FoRB can be violated by a state’s laws or policies that prohibit or restrict its exercise. This is increasingly intertwined with international dynamics, as some of these violations quickly become international “crises”. Classic examples are laws on apostasy, blasphemy, proselytism, the registration of religious communities, places of worship and religious symbols in the public sphere. Dozens of cases linked to these examples have generated international crises, amplified by global media coverage of news events. From the Asia Bibi blasphemy case in Pakistan to the Pastor Brunson accusation of proselytism in Turkey and from the ban on cattle slaughtering in India to that on the Burkini in France, arguably the process of globalisation has intensified and transnationalised these violations of FoRB in a context of the transformation of relatively homogenous national religious landscapes and new challenges for established models of secularism and patterns of religion–state arrangements (Roy, 2009; Casanova, 2010). Furthermore, in the post-9/11 context, various “anti-extremism” or “national security” laws – such as, for example, the recent guidance paper on FoRB and Security published by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR), highlighted with reference to its member states (OSCE/ODIHR, 2019) – have, de facto, increasingly been affecting the right of FoRB in many different countries.

Secondly, the non-state actors/socio-cultural norms level of FoRB violation has, in the last few years, become the hot spot of what is overall regarded as a deteriorating trend globally. In particular, the growth of a trend towards social hostility between communal groups based on religion or belief throughout the world has been widely reported (Pew Research Center, 2017, 2018). The human right of FoRB can, indeed, be violated by negative stereotyping, stigmatization, hate speech, intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief (Fox, 2016). This form of religious or belief discrimination is part of a social trend throughout the world which is thriving on the breakdown of established collective identities and concerns about social cohesion, exacerbated by other social conditions including economic insecurity (Sassen, 2014). This is often reflected in processes of “othering” and the construction of self-identity through opposition to a negatively valued, dangerous or threatening “religious Other” (Said, 2001; Juergensmeyer, 2000). Recently, this situation has been reinforced by the
emergence of different streams of populist politics and a combination of religious nationalism and civilizational politics. This can be observed in the cases of Islamophobia in the “Judeo-Christian” West, anti-Islamic and anti-Christian discrimination in “Hinduist” India or anti-Islamic discrimination in the “Buddhist” South-East, together with discrimination against Christian and other religious minorities in the “Islamic” Arab world (Bettizza & Petito, 2018; DeHanas & Shterin, 2019).

Thirdly, the fragile-state/conflict level of FoRB violation can be read as an intensification of the above societal trends linked to – and in the context of – political instability and regional conflicts. This happens when FoRB is violated as part of sectarian and communal political violence between religious groups or between groups also defined by a religious element in the context of fragile/collapsing states and regional instability. Often these are complex political conflicts and struggles for power, where the prominent and acute role of FoRB violators is adopted by a combination of non-state and security actors in the context of the de facto absence of the legitimate authority of a state. The most serious cases can result in forms of genocidal violence, as recent events in Syria and Iraq, as well as in Myanmar, illustrate. This trend for sectarian violence has pushed different organisations reporting regularly on the global violations of FoRB to introduce a new focus on the responsibilities of key non-state actors in addition to the traditional focus on states. For example, the annual UScirf (2017) report extended its state framework of reporting to non-state actors such as Daesh, the Taliban and Al-Shabaab. States remain arguably the main direct violators of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, even when the violations approximate the category of genocide, as the case of Uyghur Muslims in the Xingjian region of China shows. However, in a globalized international society fragmented and fractured along novel lines of identity politics, societal trends – often intertwined with civilizational and religious narratives – have acquired a growing salience as sources of FoRB violations.

3. Foreign policy responses to FoRB violations: from advocacy to a bottom-up approach

To respond to this challenge, governments have been strengthening their foreign policy tools, global advocacy and international coordination in a bid to protect and promote the human right of Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). This includes the creation of new observatories (France and Italy), new offices and roles (Norway, Canada, the UK, Denmark, Germany and the EU), new resolutions and guidelines (UN HRC Res 31/26, EU FoRB guidelines) and new multinational and transnational networks such as ICGFoRB (diplomats) and the parliamentarian IPPFoRB (Petito et al., 2016; Barker, Bennett & Farr, 2019). This new and expanding policy area is often referred to, in US foreign policy circles, as the international religious freedom agenda. In fact, it was in the US that the idea of promoting religious freedom through foreign policy first emerged. In 1998, with the approval by the US congress of the then-bipartisan International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the US created the Commission on International Religious Freedom (UScirf) in order to expand the US commitment to protect religious freedom beyond the domestic sphere – as established by the First Amendment of the US constitution – into the international arena. The UScirf is an independent federal body, part of a complex institutional mechanism designed to enable the US government to promote religious freedom internationally through its foreign policy (Gunn, 2004; Farr, 2008).

These recent foreign policy initiatives, following and expanding on the American lead, have different characteristics and aims which often reflect the different national legal conceptions of FoRB and state-religions arrangements. In the last decade, they have contributed to the creation of a dense networks of FoRB-related bodies and initiatives. This is a significant addition to the toolbox of existing international mechanisms such as the UN
Special Rapporteur on FoRB and of other international organizations that provide legal assistance to countries in the process of legislating on FoRB – such as the OSCE-ODIHR panel of experts on FoRB and the Council of Europe’s Venice Commission. A first group of these new government-developed instruments aims to provide information about the situation of FoRB in different countries. Examples are the Observatoire Pharos, created in France in 2012 and the Observatory on Religious Minorities in the World and on the Respect for Religious Freedom created in Italy in 2017, both initiatives conceived as partnerships between the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs and civil society. In this framework, monitoring and evaluating the social and legal developments that can affect the respect of FoRB provides a basis of data with which to inform public opinion and the work of policy-makers.

The most relevant set of initiatives, however, has been the creation, by an increasing number of governments, of specific roles and offices to promote FoRB all over the world through foreign policy, following the model of the US Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. While they are now referred as Special Envoys on FoRB and their offices are usually located either in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or in Departments for International Development/Cooperation (see, for example, Denmark and the Netherlands for the former and Germany and the EU for the latter), some governments have also created positions at ministerial level or under the direct responsibility of the Prime Minister (such as in the UK or Hungary). In the last few years, two important multinational and transnational FoRB networks have been created in order to strengthen the effectiveness of this growing international constellation of FoRB initiatives and bodies: the inter-governmental International Contact Group on FoRB (ICCFoRB) and the International Panel of Parliamentarians for FoRB (IPPFoRB), both of which have strengthened international coordination and cooperation respectively among diplomats (Ministries of Foreign Affairs) and parliamentarians (National Parliaments) working in this policy area. These networks initially emerged as a way of strengthening transatlantic cooperation but are now gradually expanding beyond the Western world – as manifested, for example, by the creation of the Commonwealth Initiative for FoRB (CIFoRB) and a range of Latin American and African initiatives (Green & Toft, 2018).

There is, however, a growing feeling that the current FoRB-protection approach is failing and governments have started to realize that top-down approaches like high-level declaratory statements and government-to-government activity have limits in terms of their reach and influence, particularly in matters of religion (UK APPG IFoRB, 2017). Therefore, a new foreign policy orientation to promote FoRB has been emerging which emphasizes bottom-up approaches and collaborative strategies with local stakeholders on the ground. As a result, governments have started to fund development interventions designed to redress religious discrimination affecting individuals and communities, support coexistence beyond sectarian lines and promote inclusivity in religiously heterogeneous communities. For example, the UK government has decided to fund a £12 million programme to champion FoRB worldwide (UK DFID, 2018) and the US government has provided, through its international development agency, over $370 million since 2017 to advance religious freedom and pluralism (US AID, 2020).

Drawing on ideas and practices designed to deal with other complex human-rights challenges (Nyamu-Musembi & Cornwall, 2004), this new bottom-up approach calls on governments to develop innovative ways of engaging – on the ground and in a collaborative way – with actors equipped to speak with authority and act effectively to bring about change regarding FoRB. This represents an important addition to the more advocacy-oriented traditional government-to-government approach to improve FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination worldwide, responding to criticisms that have called for less “naming and shaming” and megaphone diplomacy on matters of FoRB (Hafner-Burton, 2008; Marshall, 2013). However, who are these appropriate local actors and stakeholders in dealing with issues
of freedom of religion or belief and its violations? Surely, civil society organizations and experts speaking with authority on the topic – but what about religious actors themselves, the very subject of this right?

Unfortunately, there is still, I would contend, a crucial problem in the way that religion is implicitly conceptualized in all these initiatives to promote FoRB through bottom-up development interventions. Policy-makers continue to see this challenge through a secularist, rather than a postsecular, prism. As a result, religious actors continue mostly to be seen by policy-makers as either the victims or the perpetrators of FoRB violations – and not as partners in building long-term strategies to advance FoRB for all and foster pluralism, social cohesion and sustainable peace. I want to argue that this shift of policy orientation from top-down foreign policy advocacy to bottom-up international development interventions will work only if it is embedded in a post-secular foreign policy framework – that is, in a post-secular sensibility aimed, in general, at the removal of secular blind spots and, more specifically, at the creation of new forms of partnership with religious actors to promote human rights, development, humanitarian assistance and peace-building. This is particularly important because even the new bottom-up orientation described above continues de facto to conceptualize religion as either the victim or the perpetrator of FoRB violations – in one way or the other it is always on the receiving end of “secular policy” to promote this right rather than a partner, a co-constructor of a post-secular policy to combat discriminations based on religion or belief. In contrast, a post-secular sensibility and framework argues for these new bottom-up and collaborative strategies to be crucially based on engagement with religious actors. More specifically, I argue that interreligious dialogue and collaboration – what I call interreligious engagement – are crucial policy tools to promote FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

4. The post-secular turn in global affairs and the new religious engagement approach in foreign policy

As foreign policy initiatives and tools to protect FoRB abroad have multiplied, the level of violation of this fundamental right has unfortunately not decreased. On the contrary, the evidence reviewed above seems to suggest that it has been growing and has now reached new and unprecedented levels, especially in its societal and sectarian form. My hypothesis is that the broader policy failure to address the global violations of FoRB relates not only to the scale and intensity of the foreign policy response but also to a problem in the way that religion – and its freedom – are conceptualised in the foreign policy response to combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.

Despite the increasing recognition of the centrality of religion to global affairs (Johnston & Sampson, 1994; Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003; Toft, Philpott & Shah, 2011), the perpetrator/victim prism underpins and reproduces a problematic secularist way of understanding religion in international relations in making sense of the role of religion in the FoRB policy agenda. This secularist way of understanding manifests itself in two apparently opposite forms. On the one hand, the still-powerful idea that religion is destined to become something of the past, as the progress of modernisation will imply the unavoidable secularization of societies; on the other, the widely held assumption that the growing role of religion in international affairs is always a militant and violent-prone form of politics or that religion poses an inherent threat to international order and stability. This understanding – still predominant in Western academic and political circles (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer & Van Antwerpen, 2011) – does not recognize that religion has been transforming and becoming a crucial component of modernization and the articulation of programmes of alternative
modernities (Eisenstadt, 2000). Also, however, and perhaps more importantly, it fails to recognize that religion is politically ambivalent: it can promote both political violence and conflict but also peace-building, development and non-violent civic engagement (Appleby, 1999, 2015).

A secular policy mindset overlooks the ways in which religious leaders, communities and other religion-based organizations might help governmental and international organizations to de-escalate violence and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. This radical change of policy mindset assumes a more reflexive post-secular understanding of the role of religion in international relations and has started to inform a new policy-oriented discussion – now referred to as “religious engagement” in foreign policy. The idea of religious engagement points to a new policy strategy and to the ways in which governments and international organizations can engage religious non-state actors (religious leaders, communities and various religion-based organizations) in a wide spectrum of global issues to promote humanitarian assistance, development, human rights and peace-building.

Against the well-known secular background of international relations (Philpott, 2002; Thomas, 2005; Hurd, 2008), this new concept of religious engagement could well represent a significant manifestation of the emergence of a post-secular turn in global affairs and of a post-secular sensibility in foreign policy. Over the last few years, the notion of post-secularity, post-secularism or the post-secular has gained increasing relevance in social and political discussions and, more recently, in the study of international relations (Mavelli & Petito 2014). This term has been employed in different ways which, in part, reflect the conceptual diversity and interconnection between secularisation as a sociological thesis and secularism as legal/political theory. Charles Taylor has effectively captured the essence of this post-secular turn, arguing in his volume A Secular Age (2007, p. 534) that the post-secular condition may be conceived as “the challenge to the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization” – the idea that modernization will bring about the inevitable withering away of religion is no longer an unquestionable/hegemonic narrative. More importantly, in the context of my argument, the post-secular has emerged as a normative call to include religious voices in current discussions on the political and social challenges faced by our societies – against the prescriptions of the political philosophy of secularism (Habermas, 2010).

Following the spirit of this new post-secular turn, Ministries of Foreign Affairs of countries such as France and the United Kingdom, Canada, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy and Hungary have, in recent years, started to strengthen their capacity to engage religion in order to “make better policy and to make a bigger difference”, as the title of a recent conference sponsored by the UK Foreign Office suggests. A significant stage in this development was the release of an influential report by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs entitled Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy (Appleby & Cizik, 2010). Reflecting on the failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, the report shows how the US failed to understand the key role that local mainstream Islamic communities played in providing sanitation, education and other social services when the state structure no longer existed – as is the case with any so-called “failed state”. Framing religion exclusively through a counter-terrorist framework prevented constructive engagement with religion as part of the solution to the building of stability, the central objective of the international community’s new comprehensive approach to security and development.

Based on this evaluation, the US State Department launched, under the leadership of John Kerry, a new “US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement”, which paved the way for the creation of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs in 2015 within the US State Department, designed to advise the Secretary of State. The aim of this new US strategy is to encourage(s) U.S. government officials to develop and deepen their relationships with religious leaders and faith communities as they carry out their foreign policy
responsibilities” (US AID, n.d.). It is also designed develop a more robust engagement with religious leaders and communities abroad – specifically to promote development and humanitarian assistance, advance human rights, including religious freedom and prevent and resolve conflict. Rhetorically at least, this represents quite a paradigm shift, from the post-9/11 framing of religion – read Islam – through a much narrower counter-terrorism prism.

The transition from an understanding of the political role of religion in global affairs – over and above the securitization paradigm (i.e. religion as a security problem) – to the concept and practice of religious engagement, is not easy. There is also a degree of unavoidable ambiguity at present regarding the notion of religious engagement, which will hopefully be overcome as more conceptual work is done on the topic (see, for initial attempts, Birdsall, Lindsay & Tomalin, 2015; Mandaville & Silvestri, 2015; Petito & Thomas, 2015; Brown, 2020). I would argue, however, that the predominant understanding of this new policy strategy and practice – especially among policy-makers – has, unfortunately, been an instrumentalist one. In other words, religious engagement has mostly been conceived of as an addition to the toolkit of foreign policy instruments with which states can achieve their aims, in a context where religious actors have finally been recognized as representing a crucial dimension of the social fabrics of many societies of the world and as having a growing socio-political role and impact. This perspective fails to understand an important radical (or prophetic, in religious language) normative dimension embedded in this new post-secular development. In fact, I would contend that religious engagement in foreign policy not only has the practical capacity to deliver where other forms of strategic engagement – for example with civil society or business – fail but, more importantly, also has the potential to improve the knowledge base for foreign policy and, through new secular–religious partnerships, to stretch the political imagination and create new practical innovations with which to respond to global policy challenges.

Often unaware, religious non-state actors, through encounter, dialogue and the daily experiences of lived religion, access the poor, the marginalized, the ignored and the forgotten on the periphery of societies: they are de facto constructing a new, radical form of knowledge from below on how the international system works (Petito & Thomas, 2015). In any case, the new policy strategy of religious engagement requires a new set of skills and mindset for both governments and religious actors as preconditions for building new capacity aimed at delivering innovative government–religions partnerships (Birdsall et al., 2015). Ultimately, religious engagement is a call for a new dialogue and mutual learning between secular and religious institutions in the acknowledgement and respect of their different domains, responsibilities and missions, recognizing that collaboration may be crucial when facing some of the new global challenges and to strengthen the common good.

Clearly, engaging religious leaders and communities can also help to advance human rights, including FoRB, especially in a context characterized by the growth of the worrying global trend of social hostility between communal groups based on religion or belief, as outlined at the beginning of this paper. Religious actors – in dialogue and collaboration across religious and belief differences – must be seen as responsible partners in the creation of a long-term solution to religious intolerance and discrimination and in the fostering of the equality of rights and appreciation for religious pluralism. Therefore, I conclude by putting forward here a post-secular argument for integrating a significant religious-engagement dimension in any foreign-policy response to promote FoRB, making religious groups part of the solution, beyond seeing them as victims or perpetrators. In particular, I argue for interreligious engagement strategies, based on the idea that interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be crucial policy tools to promote FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief.
5. Interreligious engagement as a policy strategy with which to advance FoRB

“Interreligious” here refers to the fact that the object of policy engagement is specifically interreligious actors, groups, coalitions, platforms and activities – not a single or multiple separate religious actor(s). Interreligious engagement strategies can include a variety of forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration, ranging from theological exchanges to day-to-day socializing and common social action by different religious, spiritual and philosophical groups and individuals on specific social, economic or political issues. Some activities can be formal and/or high-level meetings between official representatives, often with a view to emphasizing commonalities, whereas others can be informal and/or grassroots initiatives at the local level, as in neighbourhoods and schools.

Interreligious dialogue and collaboration as a sustained, global practice is a relatively new phenomenon and has only significantly deepened over the last two decades. Probably, the most significant trend of this growth has seen interreligious dialogue moving steadily from theology to practical collaboration. As a recent Woolf Institute report effectively explained: “Once a field of dialogue-centred practice rooted in theological concerns, the interfaith movement has evolved into a concerted, if not always coherent, effort to mobilise religious resources to respond to pressing social and political issues” (Fahy & Bock, 2018, p. 5).

Despite greater recent recognition of its political impact, there is a large body of evidence showing that religious and interreligious actors are rarely welcome at the leading global policy tables (Marshall, 2017). There have been, however, some promising developments in this regard, specifically on the FoRB agenda, inspired by the following simple but revolutionary principle: if it is true that all religions are minorities somewhere, it is then not inconceivable to also think of majority religions in a particular country as key stake-holders in protecting the freedom of minority religions vis-à-vis the state. This innovative insight, which carries the hope of addressing the state/legal level of FoRB violations, has been assumed as the basis of the Rabat Plan of Action and the Beirut Declaration, which have recently been institutionalized through a new stream of UN work in the field of human rights, the UN “Faiths for Rights” initiative launched in 2017. Posing the language of human rights and the language of religion as mutually reinforcing, the UN Faith for Rights initiative and, in particular, the 18 commitments drafted under this initiative, provides religious justification for the protection of FoRB, showing that the secular language of rights and the language of religion are not necessarily opposed (UN OHCHR, 2017). In fact, scriptural reasoning activities – in the form of religious leaders working cooperatively together for the common purpose of identifying religious justification for the protection of human rights – have potential as interreligious engagement strategies. There is an enormous, unexplored, repository of cultural and religious resources and arguments with which to advance FoRB and combat discrimination based on religion or belief from within and across religious traditions; creating the conditions for their global emergence and local implementation through interreligious engagement strategies has significant impact potential. For example, in some non-Western contexts, expressions like “inter-communal harmony” and “inter-religious respect” may be used to express genuine concern for FoRB. Furthermore, where human rights may be viewed as a Western import, a key concept like dignity, which has both secular and religious meaning, may be a good alternative to advocate for the promotion of FoRB (Adyan Foundation, 2018).

As for the FoRB violations related to the growing intolerance, social hostility and sectarian violence which, as we have noted, can even reach the level of regional or intra-state conflict, research and policy have begun to recognise, over the last few years, the positive role that religious leaders and interreligious collaboration can play in promoting peace and inclusive societies (Hayward 2012; Appleby, 2015; World Bank, 2015). This recognition has led to the creation of new international initiatives such as the UN-led “Fez Process”, which has produced
a plan of action for religious leaders to prevent incitement to violence (UN, 2017) and a global platform like The International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), bringing together governments, international organizations and religious actors to harness the positive impact of religion in sustainable development and humanitarian assistance and to promote, for example, peaceful and inclusive societies in the spirit of the SDG 16. These developments appear to recognize the post-secular insight that religions actually possess resources – such as forgiveness – that the state does not and, therefore, that collaboration between different religious communities involved in conflict is vital. This is particularly important when governance is weak, as in context of transitional justice. While there is no one-size-fits-all to interreligious collaboration and any efforts are context-specific, there would appear to be potential in a policy strategy of interreligious engagement – to promote FoRB and combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief – that would harness informal grassroots interreligious collaboration, with the appropriate measure of elite participation in the person of some high-ranking religious leaders.

The idea of interreligious engagement is predicated, on the one hand, on a careful understanding of the diverse forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration (ranging from theological exchanges to day-to-day socializing and common social action) and their potential social impact. On the other, the idea rests on the appropriate form of engagement and partnership that states and international organizations can develop with interreligious actors, groups, coalitions, platforms and activities in order to advance FoRB, combat intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief and foster the development of peaceful and inclusive societies. This complex process requires an improved level of religious literacy within government. Policy-makers should be able to understand the religious perspectives and constraints of religious actors in specific national-cultural contexts if interreligious engagement strategies are to be successful. While this does require a degree of understanding of religious/theological doctrines, what is more important to this enterprise is an understanding of the socio-cultural dimension of religion and its complex embeddedness in the social fabric of societies, as well as the historical development of their specific forms of state-religious arrangements. In particular, a good mapping of the diversity and varieties of religious actors and practices in a specific national context is a necessary starting point for an improved religious literacy among policy-makers and for effective FoRB-promoting strategies (Petersen & Marshall, 2019).

As for interreligious engagement strategies, all forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be impactful in advancing FoRB, provided that the policy design and implementation have carefully joined together the local and the global levels and the secular and the religious dimensions. Among the forms of interreligious dialogue and collaboration which carry the most potential in terms of combatting intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief are those that recognize and respect the differences of the participants – way beyond the platitude of a vague, minimal, common denominator – and strive to involve “difficult” religious actors (for example, Salafi, conservative Evangelicals, Hindu nationalists or orthodox Jews) beyond the “usual suspects” (for example religious actors that have been involved in the interreligious dialogue movements for decades). It is also interesting to note that interreligious dialogue and collaboration represent arguably one of the most dynamic and promising areas of active citizen participation and new socio-political leadership – especially among young people and women – against the background of a contemporary scenario of democratic crisis marked by disengagement, disenchantment and a rejection of public responsibility and the search for the common good.

Of particular importance in this respect is the challenge for states to strike the appropriate balance between facilitating interreligious dialogue and collaboration and not undermining the individual right to freedom of thought conscience and religion. Rather than seeking to lead or
influence interreligious engagement, the primary role for states is to facilitate and provide an infrastructure or environment which would enable interreligious engagement to take place. The state can further provide financial or political support for interreligious engagement activities; places within the state’s purview, including schools, universities or museums, can provide ideal fora for interreligious engagement activities. By facilitating interreligious engagement in this way, states fulfil their obligations to secure the right to FoRB. If states, however, seek to operationalize interreligious engagement in order to further a political agenda or legitimize differential treatment between religious communities, interreligious engagement is unlikely to achieve its aims. Furthermore, interreligious dialogue and collaboration should not be high-jacked by governments and/or majority religions as an official public relations exercise to respond to criticisms of state and societal violations of FoRB in specific states.

Here it is worth noting that there is a certain scepticism in some policy and expert circles about the very usefulness of interreligious dialogue when dealing with violations of FoRB. One good example is the argument – forcefully made through a call for “a moratorium on interfaith dialogue” by the director of the £12 million DFID-funded programme to promote FoRB (Tadros, 2019). This is, to some extent understandable as, in recent years, we have seen a proliferation of high-level interreligious dialogue initiatives whose real impact on the ground (beyond their declaratory result) has been minimal or arguably, sometimes, even counter-productive – for instance, when some governments, like that of Saudi Arabia, have used it as a sort of external PR exercise to arguably hide the poor state of affairs of FoRB in their internal domestic realm. Tadros (2019) argues that, if we are serious about redress for victims of violence based on religion or belief, we need to move beyond interfaith dialogues because they are elitist, exclusionary, evasive of the role of religious leaders of one’s own faith, uncritical, reductionist and unaccountable.

This position, however, while pointing to some of the limitations of more-traditional forms of interreligious dialogue, not only reproduces some of the well-rehearsed stereotypes and secular blind spots on religion (being elitist, exclusionary, uncritical, unaccountable) – which we can only hope more religious literacy could contribute over time to removing – but also, more importantly, overlooks the remarkable and well-evidenced social and political effect in the last few decades of interreligious dialogue and collaboration at all stages of peace-building (Smock, 2002; Hayward, 2012; Garred & Abu-Nimer, 2018). Furthermore, it does not take into account the most promising new trends and shifts in interreligious actions, from theological exchanges to common social action, from global high levels to local grassroots, all very often driven by young people and women rather than the “usual” religious suspects. This can be seen in the impressive innovative interreligious work – done, for example, on peace, by a Christian community such as the Community of Sant’Egidio, on active coexistence by a non-confessional/secular organization like Coexister, on Holy Sites by an NGO like Search for Common Ground and on the idea of dialogue by an Islamic-inspired movement like Hizmet.

Of course, recognizing that religions can play a positive role in tackling FoRB violations does not mean that everything is reducible to religion; therefore, state actors must be careful not to overburden religions with tasks for which they should not have responsibility. Furthermore, the instrumentalization of religious actors by political actors may also be problematic, as the legitimacy of religious actors is undermined if they are viewed as permitting state interference in religious matters. My argument is not one about the root causes of tensions between religious communities – as these causes may well not lie in religion itself but, for example, in socio-economic factors. In some way, the issue of root causes is not what is at stake in this discussion, as engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue and collaboration can actually be an effective tool with which to combat discrimination and persecution, even if the religious factors are not the predominant or exclusive factor driving them (Mandaville & Silvestri, 2015).
6. Conclusions

We have entered a new epoch-making transformation in the ideological-normative structure of international society which is increasingly marked by a new form of ideological politics in which civilizational, religious and culturalist references play a more important role than before. This amplifies the worldwide growth of the already worrying trend of FoRB violations in the form of social hostility between communal groups based on religion or belief. Against this backdrop we need, more than ever, a new and reinvigorated approach to interreligious dialogue, collaboration and activism, strategically facilitated and supported by carefully designed post-secular partnership with governments and international organizations. These interreligious engagement strategies, I have argued, are potentially more impactful in advancing FoRB than a foreign policy of advocacy or secular developmental interventions. They carry the promise of a new politics of hope.

The implications of my argument suggest the following elements of such a strategy. First, to identify interreligious engagement as a priority of Ministries of Foreign Affairs’ strategy to protect FoRB, combat intolerance and promote inclusive societies. Second, to establish funding streams in different government departments for the implementation of interreligious engagement strategies on the ground, linking also to other relevant policy agendas such as the SDGs. Third, to recognize that, if interreligious engagement is to advance FoRB, high-level interreligious dialogues need to be strategically joined up to interreligious collaboration on the ground if they are to achieve impactful implementation through, for example, educational programmes and social action. Fourth, to recognize that states should seek to facilitate interreligious engagement through the provision of facilities and infrastructure, while remaining impartial in matters of FoRB, not seeking to influence religious doctrine or to further a different political agenda. Fifth, to ensure that stakeholder participation in interreligious engagement is context-specific, comprehensive and aimed at including actors beyond the usual suspects. Finally, to ensure this, the context should determine whether it is appropriate to use the language of human rights or, instead, to focus on identifying common values based on religious language.

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Declaration of interest statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.
Notes


2. It is interesting to note that, with the new Trump administration, the Office of Religion and Global Affairs was closed because – contrary to the argument developed in this paper – it was perceived as a threat to the work of the US State Department Office for International Religious Freedom, even if the overall strategy still remains operational as part of the broader set of tools of US foreign policy and development assistance. See https://www.usaid.gov/faith-and-opportunity-initiatives/us-strategy (accessed 10 July 2020).


References


Global Restrictions on Religions.


