



Approaching Religious Literacy in International Affairs: A Conference Report

Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Clare D. Gooding & Sasha Lipton Galbraith

To cite this article: Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Clare D. Gooding & Sasha Lipton Galbraith (2018) Approaching Religious Literacy in International Affairs: A Conference Report, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 16:1, 1-15, DOI: [10.1080/15570274.2018.1433594](https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2018.1433594)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2018.1433594>



Published online: 06 Mar 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 721



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



APPROACHING RELIGIOUS LITERACY IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: A CONFERENCE REPORT

By Elizabeth H. Prodromou, Clare D. Gooding and Sasha Lipton Galbraith

Genealogy of the Conference

In early November 2017, a conference entitled “Approaching Religious Literacy in International Affairs”¹ convened at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Participants from Serbia to Yemen to Washington DC and New York gathered to discuss how academic and professional engagement with religion—religious ideas and practices, texts, and other resources, actors, institutions, and organizations—is relevant to their work in the various fields, spaces, and geographies of international affairs. The conference challenged students and faculty at The Fletcher School to think critically and creatively about the intellectual frameworks, normative assumptions, and professional skills that shape and inform the ways in which international relations (IR) scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners—the Fletcher learning community—engage with religion. In short, the conference explored the category of religious literacy, an emerging concept explained by one of the conference keynote speakers, religious studies scholar Diane Moore, as “... [entailing] the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses” (Moore 2016a, 4). The speakers, comprised of academics, policy-makers, and practitioners in core fields of

study at Fletcher—conflict resolution, security studies, human security, international business, and humanitarian affairs—shared ideas and experiences that exemplify not only the utility,

Elizabeth H. Prodromou is Visiting Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution at The Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, Tufts University. She is non-resident Fellow at the Hedayah Center for Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism. She served as Commissioner and Vice Chair (2004–2012) on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and as an advisory member of the US Secretary of State’s Religion & Foreign Policy Working Group (2011–2015). She is co-editor and contributor to *Eastern Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education*, and *Thinking Through Faith: New Perspectives from Orthodox Christian Scholars*. She is a Contributing Editor on *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*.

Clare D. Gooding is a Master of International Business candidate at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy where she studies business development and operations in developing markets. She formerly worked in humanitarian operations and in East Africa as a caseworker for the US refugee resettlement program. She is currently researching the commonalities of investment screen criteria within Catholic Social Teaching and Islamic Finance.

Sasha Lipton Galbraith is a Joint Master’s Candidate at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and Harvard Divinity School. At Fletcher, she focuses on program design, monitoring, and evaluation in the humanitarian sector, and at Harvard Divinity School she is exploring the complex interplay between religions, conflicts, and peacebuilding. She has worked with various NGOs and international organizations around the world supporting educational and humanitarian programming.

but the necessity, of religious literacy in their work.

This student-run conference was organized under the auspices of the Religion, Law and Diplomacy (RLD) Initiative at the Fletcher School. The RLD initiative was inaugurated in 2015 by a faculty advisor and student core, with the aim of building sustained faculty–student collaboration that would situate the study of religion within a broader set of curricular and practical opportunities available to Fletcher students. A foundational, intrinsic component of the RLD Initiative has been building competency in religious literacy in preparation for life’s work in international affairs. Given the centrality of The Fletcher School in the American academic context of professional schools of IR,² the launch of the RLD initiative reflected the growing recognition of the significance of religion in the study and practice of contemporary IR.

The RLD Initiative acknowledged the need for an institutional pivot towards the concept of religious literacy as part of the broader scholarly inquiry into the causes, consequences, and remedies for the neglect of religion in social science and policy research. After two well-received annual conferences under the RLD initiative, this year’s third annual conference under the RLD umbrella turned explicitly to the topic of religious literacy in order to explore the claim that how, where, and what we study about religion matters profoundly for knowledge reservoirs and intellectual expertise in the international affairs sector. Improved religious literacy leads to realistic, innovative, efficacious strategic policy-making and grassroots practitioner programs dealing with religion in contemporary world affairs. If literacy means knowledge of a particular field, the possession of an education (generally, or about a specific subject), and proficiency and aptitude in a particular subject, our conference on “Approaching Religious Literacy in International Affairs” was designed to explore the proposition that competency, expertise, and foundational knowledge about and in religion is a *sine qua non* for sophisticated analysis and meaningful responses to many of the world’s most complex phenomena. In this regard, the conference aimed

to demystify, to render unexceptional, the category of religion as a subject of inquiry for future policy-makers and practitioners, thereby busting open the silos that have long limited the study of religion in the American Academy to departments of religion, religious studies, and to schools of theology and seminaries.

The run-up to the conference over two semesters included a spate of activities that created a ripe context for the conference and that also suggested the traction, impact, and continuing interest that had been generated by the RLD Initiative during its first two years of activities.³ Indeed, since its inception the RLD Initiative has received support from a range of institutions, centers, departments, and programs in The Fletcher School, as well as from the broader Tufts University community, suggesting the resonance of the RLD mission with an impressively diverse set of intellectual and programmatic stakeholders within The Fletcher School and across Tufts University.⁴ The more than 35 meetings between the RLD students and university faculty and administration, as well as a fireside chat with Fletcher faculty⁵ on their paths to work as scholar-practitioners of IR, reflected a general consensus that knowledge about religion has value for improving the quality of research, conversations, and actions related to religion in contemporary world affairs, but these same preliminary meetings also underscored the need to unpack systematically the definition, parameters, and operational possibilities of religious literacy, a “... a stretchy, fluid concept that is variously configured and applied in terms of the context in which it happens” (Francis and Dinham 2016, 257). A generous grant from the Henry R. Luce Foundation’s Initiative on Religion in International Affairs allowed for a concentrated exploration of religious literacy for the next two years of the RLD Initiative.

A Comment on the Category of Religious Literacy

The comments of two Fletcher colleagues in the weeks immediately preceding the conference succinctly encapsulated and validated the logic of exploring the category of religious literacy as a tool for understanding the ways in which religion

matters in security, business, and conflict resolution in contemporary IR. One colleague observed, “Isn’t it obvious that religion is everywhere and cannot be kept separate from politics?” while another colleague cautioned, “You’re not asking us to talk about our personal religious views, are you?” Almost a quarter century has passed since Jose Casanova’s *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Casanova 1994) and Samuel Huntington’s “The Clash of Civilizations?” (Huntington 1993) almost simultaneously inaugurated the sweeping reconsideration of modernization theory and the secularization thesis, the unifying epistemic framework for making sense of religion in the

modern world understood as formally originated with the Treaties of Westphalia. Both works acknowledged that the analytical claims and predictive utility of the modernization-secularization paradigm had failed in the face of empirical evidence of religion’s “... pervasive, nuanced, and pressing...” (Dinham and Francis 2016, 3) presence in today’s world, and their arguments were a clarion call

for IR experts to take religion seriously in assessing the sources of order and disorder in the Westphalian system. At the same moment, Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson’s evocatively titled *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (1994) called for a correction to the neglect of and bias against religion in the classical diplomatic toolbox for US foreign policy-making, proposing instead that sophisticated knowledge about religion could reveal the range of possibilities in which religion might create new stakeholders, mechanisms, and ethical foundations for conflict resolution and durable peace. Seminal events in the post-Cold War era—among them, the wars of Yugoslav succession and the Rwandan Genocide in the 1990s, al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attacks on the United States and the rise and fall of the Islamic State in the 2000s and 2010s, and the globalization of transnational faith-based organizations responding to humanitarian crises

and human rights needs from West Africa to Mediterranean Europe to East Asia—quickly generated a flood of research on religion and modernity. This is evident in the ubiquitous titles on the rediscovery, return, rethinking, and resurgence, of religion—but the Kuhnian paradigm shift apparent in such works remains a work in progress. At best, there has been a slow, highly contested, and imprecise breakdown in “... the stringent and one-way boundary maintenance [accounting for] ... the long-standing exclusion of religion and religious actors from the systematic study of world politics in general and international relations in particular” (Shah, Stepan, and Toft 2012, 3). At worst, the

staying-power of the normative assumptions of the modernization-secularization epistemology, coalesced in sentiments about the putative irrationality, inherent violence, and anti-modern/Westphalian nature of religion, has sustained the ambivalence of many scholars of IR regarding the legitimacy of studying religion.

The “so what?” attitude of our one Fletcher colleague and the “oh, no, never!” attitude of the other epigrammatically encapsulated the value of exploring religious literacy as it relates to IR. We deliberately turned to the category of religious literacy because of its potential for resolving “... the paradoxical situation ... [whereby] religion has become one of the most influential factors in world affairs in the last generation, [yet continues to be] one of the least examined factors in the professional study and practice of world affairs” (Shah, Stepan, and Toft 2012, 3). Steven Prothero’s definition of religious literacy, that is, “the ability to understand and use in one’s day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives” (Prothero 2008, 11–12), provided the broad framework for the conference. It was applied to three case studies,

SOPHISTICATED KNOWLEDGE
ABOUT RELIGION COULD
REVEAL THE RANGE OF
POSSIBILITIES IN WHICH
RELIGION MIGHT CREATE
NEW STAKEHOLDERS,
MECHANISMS, AND ETHICAL
FOUNDATIONS FOR CONFLICT
RESOLUTION

representing three main fields of study and training at The Fletcher School, in order to analyze the relevance of religious literacy for security in the Balkans, for success in international business, and for conflict resolution in the war and humanitarian crisis in Yemen. By selecting these case studies we also aimed to use the category of religious literacy for a self-critical conversation about *where* knowledge about religion is acquired, *who* participates in the production and dissemination of such knowledge, and *how* such knowledge is operationalized for policy and practitioner efforts. In this regard, we drew consciously on Bethke Elstain's provocative and thoughtful insights on the problematic of "God talk" (Elstain 2004) in the public space, as the conference exploration of religious literacy constituted a form of God talk about the American university environment as a space for knowledge generation, information dissemination, and civil conversation about peace and conflict in the international arena.⁶

By using the category of religious literacy for the aforementioned purposes, we were fully aware of a paradox built into the conference, in that the burgeoning scholarship on religious literacy, marked by an exciting and necessary inter-/cross-disciplinarity, leaves no doubt that the concept of religious literacy is by no means uniform in its definition and application. Nonetheless, we concur with the claim of Francis and Dinham (2016, 257), who argue that, despite the "... the sheer complexities referred to by the 'religious literacy' idea, and the challenge of ... [specifying] a stretchy, fluid concept that is variously configured and applied in terms of the contexts in which it happens," the elastic and contested nature of the concept does not detract from the intellectual and applied value of basic knowledge about and capacity to discuss religion in contemporary IR. Instead, the theoretical and methodological project of clarifying and deploying religious literacy actually enhances clarity about the category of religion and, therefore, holds lessons for scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners seeking to understand the effects of religion on peace and conflict, order and disorder, life and death.

Anatomy of the Conference⁷

All panelists, as well their respective moderators, were charged with thinking about two main questions in examining their respective case studies: First, what does religious literacy mean, from your professional vantage point, for the case study under consideration; second, and more broadly, what does your professional trajectory suggest when it comes training a diplomat, a businesswoman, or a soldier to be an effective, transformational leader in a religiously pluralistic world?

Security Operations

The first panel explored the linkages between religious literacy and security, with a case study of security operations in the Balkans. The panel assembled individuals working at the intersections of religion and security, and cutting across academic, policy-making, and practitioner boundaries: Sonja Licht, President of the Belgrade Fund for Political Excellence, former Co-Chair of the International Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, and longtime activist in the Yugoslav dissident movement; Col. Robert E. Hamilton, Professor of National Security and Strategy at the US Army War College, with experience in strategic war planning, defense cooperation, and security assistance in the Caucasus and Southwest Asia; and, Dr. Elizabeth Prodromou, faculty member in the Program in Negotiation and Conflict Resolution at The Fletcher School and former Commissioner on the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, with expertise in religion and geopolitics in the Balkans and Middle East. Dr. Monica Duffy Toft, Professor of International Politics at The Fletcher School and a former Russian linguist in the US Army, moderated the panel. The three panelists engaged in a lively and, at times, contentious discussion about religious literacy and illiteracy as a crucial element of a fulsome analysis of the Balkan Wars of the 1990s and of current tensions in the successor states of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).

Toft opened the panel with a reflection on the progress she has seen throughout her career on the study of religion in IR.

When I started researching this in the late 90s early 2000s, we IR scholars were asking the question *whether* religion matters. It was a question mark for my field (IR), shamefully. And now we are asking questions about *how* religion matters and about how religion might motivate people, values, and culture. (RLD Conference 2017)

Hamilton began by suggesting that, in the 1990s, the US military failure to develop an institutionalized religious literacy in the Balkans was a missed opportunity. Hamilton explained the consequences of this failure, and offered a structural explanation for why it is so difficult for military actors to develop religious literacy for the countries in which they are working. “We have this idea of frequent, short-term rotations into and out of conflict zones. The longer rotations are six months to a year. I think those are disruptive to our attempts to build cultural knowledge, religious knowledge, religious literacy” (RLD Conference 2017). While Hamilton observed that this structure of short-term rotations is unlikely to change anytime soon, he noted that there is institutional awareness of the need for change.

Hamilton presented a general hypothesis of the role that religion plays in conflict, which he suggested is applicable to the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s.

My practical and academic experience leads me to believe that, as these conflicts escalate and become bloodier, it becomes more likely that they will acquire a religious character. My idea here is that religion—if you can frame the conflict as a conflict for your immortal soul—is a powerful way to motivate fighters to make sacrifices that bring military advantage. (RLD Conference 2017)

He claimed that, although identities are important in conflict, they are also constructed, and that violence in the Balkans should not be reduced to ancient hatreds tied to religious or ethnic identities.

Prodromou emphasized that religious literacy is crucial for security operations, in terms of

enabling policy-makers and practitioners to develop a precise understanding of the salience of religion to conflicts and in terms of helping to integrate religion (concepts, organizations, and leadership) into definitions and applications of security that extend beyond state considerations and that take into account human security.

Prodromou began with a critique and deconstruction of the two most common lenses through which religion applied to the wars of Yugoslav succession in the Balkans during the 1990s: either religion was posited as the explanation for all aspects of the conflict, since religious beliefs drove the dormant, but still active, “ancient hatreds” that determined the breakdown of the SFRY; or religion was seen as irrelevant to the causes of and potential solutions for the conflict in a region that was obdurately secular (equated with atheism) by virtue of the communist experience. Prodromou argued that both of these conventional treatments of the Yugoslav wars were erroneous, reflecting the dominant religious illiteracy of the international policy-makers who exercised the greatest influence on the regional security environment, while also enabling local religious and political leaders to instrumentalize and politicize religion for purposes of conflict objectives. She suggested that religious literacy as applied to the Balkans, both then and now, requires regional expertise and, above all, knowledge of the history of religion as part of the processes of state-formation and nation-building in the region. Prodromou focused on context and experience in building religious literacy useful to security operations:

Taking a long historical timeline for thinking about the region helps us to understand the religious pluralism that has constituted the region and the way in which that religious pluralism has contributed to cultural richness and long periods of stability as well as periods of instability and violence. (RLD Conference 2017)

Prodromou also challenged IR security experts, scholars, and practitioners to develop religious literacy as a tool for developing a more comprehensive understanding of security,

particularly insofar as engaging religious actors in conversation about security frequently foregrounds the importance of human security in calculations about peace, war, and overall security needs and interests.

We can think about security in the conventional Westphalian terms of states protecting their borders from external threats or responding to internal threats to the territorial integrity and citizens of states, but religious literacy is especially helpful in pushing security experts to human security in assessments of (in)stability in the Balkans for the past quarter century. (RLD Conference 2017)

She argued that knowledge of religious history and religious actors (local and external) was frequently lacking in making sense of the security calculus that communities applied as stakeholders in the SFRY and, especially, in thinking about what institutions and actors could be deployed to provide human security, durability, and threat reduction since the end of the wars.

Prodromou suggested that “religious ideas held data and signifiers about how Serbs, Croats, and Bosniacs thought about freedoms from want, fear, and violence” during the 1990s, and she proposed that meeting current security needs in Bosnia–Herzegovina implies attention to human security needs, many of which can be addressed by religious organizations active at the grassroots level (RLD Conference 2017). She noted that “the nexus between religion and security points to the ways in which religious communities are very much embedded in the public sphere and are part of either responding to or undermining human security.” Prodromou pointed to the Dayton Accords as an example of deficits in religious literacy in the approach of the international community to providing security and stability in the Balkans:

I think that, although they were billed as a victory because they put a stop to the first stage of the Yugoslav wars, the Dayton Accords embedded the same kinds of misunderstood religious and cultural

cleavages into the institutional structures and politics of the region in a way that have made them a self-fulfilling prophecy and have captured the region. (RLD Conference 2017)

Prodromou urged the importance of reexamining the Dayton Accords at this historical juncture, given that there are signs of state breakdown in Bosnia–Herzegovina and because the Accords are being considered by some policy-makers as a template for stabilization and post-conflict peacebuilding in Syria.

Licht also emphasized that international actors, especially US foreign-policy-makers and NATO practitioners, were not particularly literate in the religious history of Southeastern Europe. Licht critiqued the religious illiteracy of international policy actors, as cause for what she characterized as the “disastrous policy decisions in the 1990s” that continue to undermine stability in the region to the present moment (RLD Conference 2017). Licht’s analysis of the Balkan wars of the immediate post-Cold War period was based on a counterfactual claim, namely, that the violent breakup of the Yugoslavia could have been avoided; she argued that the wars occurred not because of religious causes *per se*, but both internal and external actors pursuing their narrow interests at the expense of stability in a region burdened by the simultaneity of political regime change, economic regime overhaul, and integration into a European and global order that was itself in a state of profound transformation. In Licht’s own words,

I am coming here with the thesis that it was not necessary. It could have been avoided. If only the basic actors [in the region and internationally] would first act a little bit less in their own separate interests, and second, if the world would understand that this is not one of many conflicts where we can walk in, give a few slaps, give them advice, and walk away. Because this is how it started. World powers—especially the Europeans and the Americans (the Russians were not that important, because they had their own problems at that

moment)—walked in with the idea that they knew what they were doing. They didn't. They thought that, with a few meetings, they would pacify all those characters who, in fact, were losing power since communism was falling apart, and therefore, were finding a new tool [to prolong and to reinforce their own power]. (RLD Conference 2017)

Licht identified nationalism as the tool of choice for local leaders Slobodan Milosevic, Franjo Tudjman, and Alija Izetbegovic in their quest to sustain their personal political power in the post-Soviet, post-communist Yugoslav context. Nationalist ideology, and religion as a core component of competing, exclusivist nationalism, became a tool adroitly deployed by these three leaders. Licht explains that nationalism did not emerge in the Balkans because leaders, such as Milosevic, were inherently nationalist. Rather, it became clear in the post-Soviet Union era that communism was no longer viable, and mobilization through nationalist ideology was the most practical way to stay in power. Licht asserted that the best way forward (the best way to avoid state breakdown of Bosnia–Herzegovina and, especially, to avoid the use of religion as an instrument for repression and/or resurgent violence) for the region is to formalize the timeline and to accelerate the process of European Union membership for the Yugoslav successor states. She also underscored the importance of robust, yet carefully vetted and evaluated, integration of religious leaders, communities, and organizations into civil society processes that prioritize rule of law and inclusive citizenship.

International Business

The second panel, a case study on religious literacy in global business operations, was inspired by Ernst and Young's (EY) 2017 announcement of a new training program

entitled "Religious Literacy for Organizations." The point of departure for the panel was a discussion of the rationale for the decision by a "Big Four" accounting firm to offer training in religious literacy to its clients. Panelists considered whether or not this move to incorporate religious literacy training might be viewed as a "best practice" for global business. Moderated by Paul Lambert, Assistant Dean at Georgetown's McDonough School of Business, the panelists included Dr. Brian Grim, President of the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation and an expert on international religious demography and the socio-economic impact of restrictions on religious freedom; Dr.

Ibrahim Warde, Professor of International Finance at The Fletcher School and leading scholar of informal and Islamic finance; and, Joyce S. Dubensky, CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding where she directs workshops and practical programs on religious bridge-building

RELIGIOUS LITERACY AND
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ARE
GOOD FOR EMPLOYEE
PERFORMANCE AND MORALE,
GOOD FOR BUSINESS
BRANDING, AND GOOD FOR
THE BOTTOM LINE

and combating prejudice in the workplace and in areas of armed conflict.

Using both hard data and case-study examples, this panel drove home that high levels of religious literacy and religious freedom are good for employee performance and morale, good for business branding, and good for the bottom line. Grim drew from his field research to report that 5.8 billion of the world's total population of 7.6 billion people now identify as religiously affiliated and the growth of those religiously affiliated is projected to be 23 times greater between 2010 and 2050 than those who identify as religiously unaffiliated (Grim and Phillip 2015). He also noted that research indicates that \$1.2 trillion dollars is contributed each year to the American economy by religiously affiliated people and organizations. Despite this contribution to the economy, however, religious-based workplace complaints have doubled over the past decades and one third of American workers have experienced or witnessed workplace religious discrimination.

Dubensky discussed the EY training manual, which she assessed as reflecting a trend she is seeing in many of the companies in Tanenbaum's corporate membership program; these are corporations that want to be proactive in creating environments of religious freedom and inclusion (RLD Conference 2017). From Disney to Merck to PWC, these companies have invited Tanenbaum to conduct environmental audits on religious inclusion, as well as to provide materials on religious diversity and inclusion for orientation and recommendations for human resources policy on managing religious diversity in the workplace.

Dubensky noted that the religious groups that Tanenbaum sees targeted most in workplace discrimination in US corporations are minority religious groups, such as Jews, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians. However, Tanenbaum also sees numerous cases of discrimination against evangelicals and atheists. Dubensky asserted that responding to instances of religious discrimination in the workplace is a matter of law, well-being of employees, and significantly, of the ability to attract and retain the best talent in the global workplace. Dubensky shared the anecdote of a hiring episode at a financial company, in which the hiring officer was surprised by the decision of a job candidate to go with another firm. When asked to explain the rationale for the decision, the candidate explained that the competition was known to be more "hijab friendly" and for being welcoming, inclusive, and for creating an institutional culture in which all employees, regardless of religious identity, felt that they had the potential to rise up and reach their goals.

Dubensky concluded by noting that the data shows that religious accommodation policies and clear procedures for reporting complaints about religious discrimination increase morale and enhance employee retention rates. Religious literacy policies not only improve employee productivity, teamwork, and collaboration, but also improve client relations. Dubensky provided a clear summation about the significance of religious literacy for enhancing the ability of corporations to understand their clients and marketplace.

Additional evidence of the impact of religion in international business and of the importance of religious literacy to performance in a globalized marketplace lies in expressed customer preferences for investing in accordance with religious beliefs and ethics. Warde offered the example of the Islamic Finance industry, currently estimated at nearly \$2.0 trillion in total assets worldwide (IFSB 2017). Warde pointed out that The Fletcher School had been ahead of the curve in understanding the linkages between religious ethics and global business, given that Fletcher had added a course on Islamic Finance to the curriculum a decade ago. Warde noted that the anticipated Initial Public Offering (IPO) of Saudi Arabia's Aramco, the world's largest oil and gas company, is expected to be the largest IPO in history. It will use *sukuk*, an Islamic finance vehicle. Warde pointed out that Islamic finance is far more than just "interest free" finance, because Islamic finance is based on Islamic scriptural requirements to avoid speculation and interest (usury). Warde's observation that all three monotheistic religions have almost identical teachings on the moral economy and common prohibitions of usury suggested the range of potential linkages between religious literacy, business, and finance; religious literacy reveals the faith-based teachings that frequently inform the cultural context and ethical principles regulating financial transactions and business relations in a globalized economy.

Warde also pointed out how religious literacy can either prevent or help to analyze fraudulent financial transactions and unethical business relationships, as evidenced by ponzi schemes, which often use affinity groups to gain trust. Because religious arguments can be instrumentalized for ethical growth or for fraud and unethical behaviors in the marketplace, religious literacy becomes equally important as both a positive and negative factor in international business. Thus, institutions must be very careful as they craft products to make sure they are always looking to do the best for their customer and not to exploit. This takes time and Warde urged that banks and financial institutions should not skimp on authentic religious literacy learning just to make a profit. Dubensky

concluded with Warde's analysis, and elaborated that religious literacy in a religiously plural, globalized marketplace is crucial for corporate efforts to design best practices holding managers accountable for the religious and cultural factors which shape and inform corporate activities.

Humanitarian Action

Protracted crises around the world have left an estimated 164.2 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 47 countries (Development Initiatives 2017). In 2016, international humanitarian assistance reached a new high of \$27.3 billion and, yet the UN still reported a 40 percent shortfall of the amount needed to respond adequately.

Within these staggering numbers, the second keynote of the conference, Sean Callahan,⁸ stated that religion is a powerful force to convene a global humanitarian response (RLD Conference 2017).

Callahan is a graduate of The Fletcher School and, after 29 years with Catholic Relief

Services (CRS), he now leads the organization as CEO with a budget of close to \$1 billion and over 5000 staff.

Callahan introduced his discussion about contemporary humanitarian action with the claim that religion is a reality in the provision of emergency and humanitarian relief. Noting that religion is embedded in culture and shapes the way of life in local contexts, Callahan emphasized that religious literacy for humanitarian actors involves humility and readiness to listen. Elaborating on the recognition of international policy-makers that religious literacy is a requirement for sound diplomacy and international engagement, Callahan referenced former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright's comment that "There are some who might want to engage in such a bridge-building effort without bringing religion into the conversation—to them I say, 'Good luck.'"

Callahan outlined complex linkages between religious literacy and resource efficiency in humanitarian action. Noting that a core

responsibility of humanitarian and development work is to use resources wisely, Callahan observed that religious leaders and ideas have the capacity to inspire, convene, and mobilize people to action. Collective action offers the possibility for mobilization of collective human, financial, and institutional resources that can be brought to bear for humanitarian and development purposes. Religious literacy can become indispensable for engaging and activating the response of religious communities in emergency and development situations.

Callahan explained that CRS, as a Roman Catholic organization, relies on religious literacy as part of mobilizing its own communities, and

likewise, is involved in coordination with other religiously affiliated organizations and with global and grassroots religious communities, relying on the collective strength of religious message and action for purposes of emergency and development work. Callahan differentiated between CRS

RELIGIOUS LITERACY CAN
BECOME INDISPENSABLE FOR
ENGAGING AND ACTIVATING
THE RESPONSE OF RELIGIOUS
COMMUNITIES IN
EMERGENCY AND
DEVELOPMENT SITUATIONS

work which is not

an interreligious or interfaith project, 'but which, de facto, involves 'working inter-religiously day in and day out. CRS is staffed by people from diverse religious backgrounds, and the CRS teams develop, absorb, and consume interreligious literacy amongst themselves, while at the same time valuing CRS's core principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

Callahan argued that, just like in business or diplomacy, trust is the key to effective humanitarian work; trust-building requires transparency in terms of values, principles, and ethical foundations and commitments. He noted that the current moment of "America First" in US foreign policy makes it imperative for CRS to be clear about its faith principles and values, in order to respond to what he posited is a deep suspicion around the world to US organizations engaged in

global humanitarian action. He pointed to CRS' clear religious identity as a positive factor, rather than impediment, to the organization's efficacy, and offered an anecdote from CRS work in Afghanistan to illustrate his point. In Afghanistan, after receiving worrying reports about staff security, Callahan was assured by an Afghan staff member that CRS' Catholic mission actually protected, rather than endangered, its wholly Muslim staff: the Afghan staff member communicated that, because CRS was identified with 'People of the Book,' the local population understood that CRS was in the country because of its Christian call to promote the common good.

Callahan reiterated the importance of humility as a component of religious literacy in international humanitarian work, particularly in acknowledging and taking responsibility when organizational actions generate tensions and contradictions vis-à-vis local religious customs and practices. Illustrating continuities between the two keynote speakers, Callahan's observations recalled Moore's definition of religious literacy as "the ability to discern and to explore the religious dimensions of political, social, and cultural expressions across time and place."

Callahan concluded by emphasizing the significance of religious literacy for global youth education as part of development work. He noted that 60 percent of Africa's population is under 25 years of age, with that population doubling by the year 2050. CRS is working with communities across the African continent to bring education to the most vulnerable. Callahan pointed out that education as a development activity requires trust-building and clear disclosure of values in order to ensure that local religious communities understand that CRS is working cooperatively with local actors to empower them, not to convert them. Using another anecdote from Afghanistan, Callahan recounted CRS' success in trust-building through religious literacy towards the goal of education and development. He noted that, although the Afghan Taliban wanted to control local education, local religious elders approached him directly to ask for CRS' assistance with the hidden schools that were being run by Imams.

Religious literacy, Callahan said, is a key part of acting boldly in the world and thinking big.

His keynote rounded out a day of intense academic and practitioner conversation by turning to an active religious community which is practicing and promoting religious literacy within its own ranks. This was an important example for conference attendees that religious literacy is not just for those looking in, but for religious organizations as they act out.

Conflict Resolution

The final panel, "Religious Literacy in Conflict Resolution," focused on a case study of Yemen, where the violent conflict and state breakdown underway since 2015 is generating one of the world's worst humanitarian emergencies. Joyce Dubensky, CEO of the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, moderated the panel. Panelists included Sheikh Abdul Rahman Al-Marwani, Founder of the Dar Al-Salaam Organisation (DASO) in Yemen; Darko Mocibob, Deputy Director of the Middle East and West Asia Division in the United Nations Department of Political Affairs; Dr. Eileen Babbitt, Professor of Practice of International Conflict Management at The Fletcher School; and Father Bryan Hehir, Professor of the Practice of Religion and Public Life at Harvard Kennedy School.

Al-Marwani offered a pre-recorded video, in which he discussed the religious motivations for his peacebuilding work. He discussed his path to becoming a practitioner of interreligious dialog and peacemaking in terms of his faith and identity as a Muslim, and particularly, as a Sufi; he also emphasized the importance of his childhood religious education in inspiring his work in mediating tribal conflicts, running disarmament initiatives, and working with religious minority groups in Yemen, including the very small Jewish population. Al-Marwani concluded with a plea to international governments for religious literacy and engagement when working on conflicts in the Middle East. "I hope that governments pay attention to traditional and religious leaders because they carry a lot of weight, especially in the Middle East in peacebuilding in tribal communities, because terrorism and extremism are a key component of internal conflict."

Hehir began his remarks with a comment that echoes the claims made in the literature review of this article, namely, that Westphalian Peace had an implicit goal to secularize world politics. Hehir explained that Westphalian peace impacted

where world politics was taught, in the academy, and how world politics was conducted, in diplomacy. The tradition of world politics held right up through the end of the 20th century when a number of events made it impossible to do world politics well unless you had an ability to understand religion. (RLD Conference 2017)

In the case of Yemen, Hehir explained that “it’s a multidimensional case and religion has a capability to offer a multidimensional response.” Hehir sees the conflict in Yemen has having regional, national, and global causes and implications, and argues that religion is intertwined with politics at each level. “Therefore it is really a question not whether you take religion into consideration, but whether religion can be turned into a positive force rather than a negative force” (RLD Conference 2017).

Babbitt introduced the value of comparative experiences for the Yemen case when it comes to the matter of religious literacy; she referenced her extensive experience facilitating and training in conflict resolution and peace processes with the UN, US government agencies, regional intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs. Noting that “conflict resolution requires immersion in and a deep understanding of the context in which it is being done,” Babbitt connected the necessity of local, bottom-up, practitioner efforts at peacebuilding with religious literacy, pointing to Al-Marwani’s work as emblematic of the significance of religious literacy in practitioner work for sustainable peacebuilding (RLD Conference 2017).

These bottom up processes of people who live in and are of the country, who can provide the bridges between various identity groups, have the trust, the cultural

knowledge, and the religious belief systems that provide a trust factor in bringing groups together are incredibly important. (RLD Conference 2017)

Babbitt also touched on the need to integrate practitioner efforts at the local level with the strategic and programmatic efforts of policy-makers in international organizations.

Mocibob echoed Babbitt’s emphasis on understanding context before beginning mediation work, also stressing the need for better mechanisms to integrate bottom-up and top-down efforts and suggesting that religious literacy can either enable or impede such integration. Mocibob explained that it is vital “to understand the root causes, the conflict drivers, who are the spoilers, who are the allies, what are their objectives—their publicly- stated objectives and, also, those that are not in the public eye” (RLD Conference 2017). Mocibob summed up the key functions of the UN in the conflict in Yemen: first to assist in the implementation of a two-year transition plan, and, second, to facilitate and support efforts towards sustained conflict prevention.

Mocibob argued for discretion and precise analysis in understanding religious and non-religious aspects of the Yemen conflict, echoing the comments of Prodromou and Licht regarding the failures by international actors to differentiate between religious and non-religious drivers of conflict in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. Mocibob observed that “it is, therefore, important not to ignore, but also not to overemphasize the religious aspects of the conflict” (RLD Conference 2017). Mocibob suggested that religious actors can help to influence society and reduce the expressions of sectarian tensions that are starting to emerge.

Where religion can play in the interim is mitigating the consequences of this conflict. The parties started referring to each other in very sectarian terms. Houthis are called Persians even though they are Arabs and similarly they are calling their opponents *takfiris*, non-believers or outlaws of religion, and they are calling them Daeshites, you

know, the adherents of the Islamic State. (RLD Conference 2017)

Mocibob referenced the Balkan Wars in the 1990s, observing that religious illiteracy enabled the instrumentalization of religion by local leaders, who manipulated sectarian identities for material interests and conflict objectives and who quickly recognized that international actors, knowing little about the religious context and experiences of the parties to the Yugoslav wars, adopted religious terms and markers that were incorrect and politicized.

Lively debate took place regarding a question that was raised by Dubensky. Following a claim by Mocibob that the conflict has surpassed the point where a bottom-up solution would be sufficient to resolve it, Dubensky questioned whether local religious leaders would become stakeholders in a political solution that was not bottom-up, given that they have thus far been excluded from the process. Panelists suggested the importance of simultaneity in both top-down and bottom-up peace negotiations in Yemen, and Babbitt underscored the need for inclusiveness in conflict resolution efforts: “When or if there is a political settlement, if people haven’t been involved in constructing it, you do run the risk of people rejecting what the political elites agree” (RLD Conference 2017). Mocibob also recognized Dubensky’s concern, but explained that from the UN perspective, different points within a conflict call for different actors to be present in the negotiations.

When we had the National Dialogue Conference before the conflict, the UN mediator at that time did involve the traditional leaders, women’s organizations, and civil society, including religious ones, in that group. Still, there were mechanisms for them to give their advice, and at that time, the structure was working very well. But once the conflict started ... the focus of mediation had to shift elsewhere. (RLD Conference 2017)

By way of conclusion, panelists were asked to give a closing thought about religious literacy and how it can be put into practice at the grassroots

and strategic levels—that is, for practitioners and for policy-makers, who oftentimes work in parallel processes. Hehir stressed that “Religion is here to stay. You have to leaven religious vision with strategic political content to put together a successful community” (RLD Conference 2017). Mocibob focused on the Middle East, concurring with Hehir’s general observation that,

I also don’t think that religion is going anywhere. But if we are talking about the Middle East, I would say that we need to understand religion, peacemaking, and regional dynamics; religious literacy is not simple. Be open minded and listen, and, if you are a mediator, then use it [religious literacy] properly to your advantage and to the advantage of the people of the country where you are mediating conflict. (RLD Conference 2017)

Conclusion

As part of the broader initiative on RLD, our conference on the topic of religious literacy offered some intriguing, if in some respects paradoxical, conclusions. A brief synopsis of major lessons from the conference suggests the outlines for an ongoing research agenda on the definition and application of religious literacy to the fields of security, business, and conflict resolution in IR.

One of the most striking takeaways from the panels was the expressed consensus on the need for building “a more developed knowledge of religion” (Davie 2016, xi), regardless of the particular field of research and sphere of action in IR. This consensus suggests a relationship between religious literacy, on the one hand, and peace and order, or integration and dynamism, on the other. Every panel and both keynotes also agreed that religious illiteracy generates, aggravates, and perpetuates conflict and blocks productivity, creativity, sustainability, and profitability. This is true—at both the sub-state and inter-state level, as emphasized by Prodromou and Licht, between religious communities and sects, as highlighted by Hehir and Mocibob, or within the local or global

workspace and business context, as elucidated by Dubensky and Grimm. The clear consensus that religious literacy is relevant for IR (put differently, there were no arguments to the contrary) seemed to be amplified by the notable attendance at the conference, since over 300 people, from the Fletcher, Tufts, and surrounding academic communities came out for the day's proceedings.

The aforementioned consensus, however, generates a series of paradoxes, all of which deserve additional inquiry. First, beyond the general notion that religious literacy involves the acquisition of knowledge about religious beliefs and practices, there was little agreement about a parsimonious, robust, generalizable definition of religious literacy. Instead, the religious literacy idea was revealed for its conceptual elasticity and, therefore, as what Francis and Dinham (2016, 257) succinctly identify as a "non-didactic idea,"⁹ which underscores the challenges in IR scholarship and policy-making and

practitioner work on religion in world affairs. In her keynote presentation, Moore emphasized the crucial importance of understanding religions and religious influences in contemporary IR "*in context and as inextricably woven into all dimensions of human experience*" (2016b, 31, Italics in original). The project of developing religious literacy for IR policy-makers and practitioners demands the acquisition of foundational knowledge rubrics of specific religions (teachings, practices, and structures), as well as working knowledge of the lived experience of those traditions at the local level, within political, social, and cultural contexts. In this sense, religious literacy is necessarily a complex, cross-disciplinary educational enterprise, requiring particular commitments to grasping the intersectionality of history, religious studies, and international politics. Paradoxically, results presented in this conference report suggest that, despite the general consensus about the utility of religious literacy for providing security, optimizing business practices and outcomes, and resolving conflict, there is no uniform definition

of, and therefore, educational model for operationalizing religious literacy. Further research on the design, applicability, and adaptability of religious literacy approaches with objective criteria for measuring impact in IR is a key finding from the conference.

Second, the "so, what?" and "oh, no!" comments of our Fletcher colleagues referenced at the outset of this article stand to gain traction from the lack of a parsimonious definition and model for religious literacy. After all, the fluidity of the concept and, above all, the obvious challenges associated with the acquisition of proficiency in religious literacy—the need to commit to digest historical material, to study of

THE DEVELOPMENT OF
RELIGIOUS LITERACY IS A
REQUIREMENT FOR
INFORMED, THOUGHTFUL,
ENGAGED CITIZENS OF THE
UNIVERSITY AND THE WORLD

theological texts and concepts, and to master the foundations of IR, a field of study that is, by its very nature, inter-disciplinary—may reinforce the notion that there is little point either in trying to capture a moving target (religious literacy) or in legitimizing a

topic (religion) still considered one of the world's greatest sources of irrationality, violence, and loss of human and material resources. The diversity of academic and non-academic views presented in this conference report take issue with both perspectives, yet the claims articulated in favor of the utility of religious literacy for the study and practice of IR will remain weak in the absence of evaluation mechanisms and metrics that offer compelling data to reinforce the study of religion in IR and to explain religious literacy as an organic component of the religion-IR nexus.

Universities have a unique role in shaping attitudes and possibilities for the acquisition of knowledge about religion in the contemporary world. The Fletcher Conference on Approaching Religious Literacy in International Relations acknowledged that role. In a world that the late sociologist of religion Peter Berger regularly characterized as being as furiously religious as ever, the development of religious literacy is a requirement for informed, thoughtful, engaged citizens of the university and the world. ❖

1. All information related to the conference is available at www.FletcherRLD.com. A video companion to this article is at: <https://www.facebook.com/FletcherRLD/videos/2009907875935913/>.
2. At the time of its establishment in 1933, The Fletcher School was the first graduate-only school of international affairs in the United States.
3. A list of all activities from the first three years of the RLD Initiative is available at <https://sites.tufts.edu/FletcherRLD/>.
4. The 2017 conference was supported by the following sponsors from The Fletcher School: The Fletcher International Security Studies Program, The Henry J. Leir Institute for Human Security, The Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, The Institute for Business in the Global Context, The Fletcher Office of Career Services, The Fletcher Student Council and Dean's Fund, and the Fletcher Office of Development and Alumni Relations; and from Tufts University: The Institute for Global Leadership, Tufts Hillel, Tufts University Chaplaincy, Tufts Department of Religion, Tufts International Relations Program, and Tufts University's Tisch Fund for Civic Engagement.
5. Fireside Chat with Professors Elizabeth Prodromou, Monica Toft, and Ibrahim Warde. October 25, 2017. The Fletcher School.
6. The continuing ambivalence and lack of clarity about how and where to conduct research, teach, and develop policy expertise and practitioner skills on religion in the American Academy, especially when it comes to international relations, is at the core of two representative volumes: See Beizerides and Prodromou (2017) and Snyder (2011).
7. All quotes in the following section are from the conference proceedings of the 2017 Religion, Law, and Diplomacy conference, referenced with the following citation: RLD Conference. 2017. "Approaching Religious Literacy in International Affairs." The Fletcher School, Tufts University, Medford.
8. Before his keynote, Callahan was awarded the Dean's Medal by Admiral James Stavridis, current Dean of The Fletcher School and Former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO.
9. See Francis and Dinham (2016, 261).

References

- Beizerides, Ann Mitsakos, and Elizabeth H. Prodromou, eds. 2017. *Easter Orthodox Christianity and American Higher Education: Theological, Historical, and Contemporary Reflections*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Davie, Grace. 2016. "Foreword." In *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by A. Dinham and M. Francis, xi. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Development Initiatives. 2017. *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2017*.
- Dinham, Adam, and Matthew Francis, eds. 2016. Religious Literacy: Contesting an Idea in Practice. In *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, 3, 30. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke. 2004. "God Talk and the Citizen-believer." In *One Electorate Under God? A Dialogue on Religion and American Politics*, edited by E. J. Dionne, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Kayla M. Drogosz, 13–19. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Francis, Matthew, and Adam Dinham. 2016. "Religious Literacies: The Future." In *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by Adam Dinham, and Matthew Francis, 257. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Grim, Brian, and Connor Phillip. 2015. "Changing Religion, Changing Economies: Future Global Religious and Economic Growth." Religious Freedom and Business Foundation.
- Huntington, Samuel. 1993. "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (3): 22–49.
- IFSB (Islamic Financial Services Board). 2017. *Islamic Financial Services Industry Stability Report 2017*. Kuala Lumpur: IFSB.
- Johnston, Douglas, and Cynthia Sampson. 1994. *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Diane L. 2016a. "Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks Regarding Religion." Religious Literacy Project. https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/imce/Craft_Teaching/CoT%20W17%20-%20Moore_%20Methodological%20Assumptions%20and%20Analytical%20Frameworks.pdf.
- Moore, Diane L. 2016b. "Diminishing Religious Literacy: Methodological Assumptions and Analytical Frameworks for Promoting the Public Understanding of Religion." In *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, edited by Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis, 27–38. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Prothero, Steven. 2008. *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*. New York: Harper Collins.

- RLD Conference. 2017. "Approaching Religious Literacy in International Affairs." The Fletcher School, Tufts University, Medford.
- Shah, Timothy Samuel, Alfred Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft, eds. 2012. *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Snyder, Jack, ed. 2011. *Religion and International Relations Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.