

## USA **Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy: When and How Does Religion Matter?**

SOLEIL SYKES  
VERANTWORTLICH  
UND REDAKTION  
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A DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE *FAITH, FREEDOM AND FOREIGN POLICY: CHALLENGES FOR THE TRANSATLANTIC COMMUNITY* REPORT PUBLISHED BY THE TRANSATLANTIC ACADEMY IN APRIL 2015.

**The relationship between religion and the liberal order often presents challenges for policy makers. Yet, recent developments demonstrate the need for policy makers to take religion and religious actors into account when addressing the transatlantic relationship, various forms of Islamism, religious freedom, and foreign policy concerns. The discussion, hosted by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015, provided an opportunity to examine questions of the intersection of religion and foreign policy, as well as consider the suggestions offered by the 2014-2015 report *Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Community*.**

Discussion of the relationship between religion and foreign policy provides a foundation for examining ongoing global challenges. The continuing threat of the self-styled Islamic State (IS), appropriations of religion by Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, questions of religious freedom and protection of religious minorities, as well as the role of religious activism in liberal states on both sides of the Atlantic are aspects of religion and foreign policy examined in the report and during the panel discussion.

Ms. Karen Donfried, President of GMF, emphasized the report's conclusion that the West often displays a "blind spot when it comes to religion." Consequently, the interaction between religion and the liberal political order in the West proved a central theme during the discussion. Expanding on his chapter "Religious Activists and Foreign Policy in the West", Mr. **Clifford Bob**, a senior fellow at the Transatlantic Academy,

professor and Raymod J. Kelley Endowed Chair in International Relations in the Department of Political Science and Graduate Center for Social and public Policy at Duquesne University in Pennsylvania, argued that religious actors can add stability to the democratic process in a way that makes them "more of an ordinary part of our politics" than the public or policy makers might acknowledge. Religious actors often forge coalitions, both on the national and international levels that highlight issues that might otherwise go unnoticed, such as human rights abuses during the Sudanese Civil War and the persecution of religious minorities by IS. The tendency for religious actors to form pluralist, nondenominational "cross-cutting cleavages" provides, in Mr. Bob's opinion, a level of stability to the democratic process as diverse communities cooperate to address political and social issues. Acknowledging that religiously-based policy is not always the best policy, Mr. Bob stressed that religious actors in liberal governments do not wield a disproportionate amount of influence compared to secular interest groups operating in society.

A further theme of discussion centered on transatlantic perceptions of religion and religious groups. Analyzing changes in the religious composition of the U.S., Mr. **E.J. Dionne, Jr.**, Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and professor at the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University, suggested that Americans are "not as crazy on religious issues" as some Europeans might assume. Citing the recent Pew Research Center study *America's Changing Religious Landscape*, Mr. Dionne stated that Americans under 25 are

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experiencing an “Europeanization” with respect to religion, with an increasing number of young Americans identifying themselves as religiously unaffiliated. However, Mr. Dionne suggests that despite the increase of the religiously unaffiliated in the U.S., religious tensions in the political arena will “heighten” in the short-run. Debates pertaining to religious policy issues face increased “polarization”, in Mr. Dionne’s perspective, particularly in areas of same-sex marriage and religious freedom laws, as U.S. society reacts to radical changes to previously standard social norms. Shifting attitudes and religious demographics also present challenges for America’s main political parties. The Republican Party, with its influential religious right wing, must contend with an electorate that increasingly shies away from traditional evangelical Christian views on same-sex marriage, birth control, and similar cultural issues. Democrats, on the other hand, represent a heterogeneous base of supporters whose religiosity ranges from largely Christian Hispanics to ardent atheists. Maintaining broad coalition support from voters with a range of religious orientations presents a challenge for Democratic leadership, particularly for candidates striving to maintain President Obama’s diverse electoral coalition heading into the 2016 election.

Concurring with Mr. Bob’s perspective that religion plays a normal part in political life, Mr. Dionne emphasized the role religiously-based policies and political activity play in both the U.S. and Europe. The prevalence of Christian Democratic parties in Europe and influence religious actors in European affairs, for example the Catholic Church’s involvement in the Solidarity movement in Poland during the 1980s, emphasizes Mr. Bob’s conclusion that religion provides an effective means of political mobilization and contributes to the liberal order, even in a comparatively secular Europe. Similarly, although the separation of church and state is much sharper in the U.S. than in Europe,

(Anne Jenichen’s chapter *A Transatlantic Religious Divide? Religious Minorities in EU and U.S. Foreign Policy* provides an intriguing analysis of transatlantic differences in church-state relationships and individual religiosity) religious influences frequently arise in policy, as evidenced by vestiges of Catholic social teachings in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal and the active role religious organizations played in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Even today, emphasis on social justice issues among American millennials reflects changes in religious emphases towards serving the poor and addressing social inequities, notably championed by Pope Francis. Religion continues to play a prominent role in American political and social life, but it is not a role as extreme as some European commentators would suggest.

Recent increases of radical Islamist groups and terrorist attacks provided a context for an examination of how Islamism in its manifold forms challenges the Western liberal order. Contributing to the discussion were Senior Fellow **Michael Barnett** and Fellow **Nora Fisher Onar**, both of the Transatlantic Academy, who contributed chapters focusing on the Western liberal order and Islam. Ms. Fisher Onar provided a compelling argument for the need to improve “nuance[d]” understandings of the various forms of Islamism, ranging from secular to Salifism, if Western policy makers are to create effective and realistic foreign policy in the Middle East. Such nuance is critical when examining the historical relationship between secularism and religion in the Middle East and its impact on liberal outcomes in the region. When religion and religious actors are ignored or “made...the enemy” by attempts to secularize governments and society, Mr. Barnett indicated the religion often “becomes a language of protest” in the Middle East, accounting in part for the extreme manifestations of Islam that dominate global news headlines. The failure of experts to openly discuss Islam and the



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role it plays in the political processes of the Middle East results in increased distortion of situations and an inability to craft stable political solutions.

Throughout these discussions on the intersections of faith, freedom, and foreign policy, an underlying theme, articulated by Bosch Public Policy Fellow and Religion Editor for DIE ZEIT **Evelyn Finger**, was that “reluctance,” whether on the part of governments or policy experts, “to point out when or why religion becomes a problem” exists. The tendency for religious influences in politics to be ignored, relegated to political extremes, or portrayed as antithetical to liberal democracies prevents an open conversation on the impacts of religion on foreign policy and its role, often constructive, in the liberal order.

*An online copy of the report “Faith, Freedom, and Foreign Policy: Challenges for the Transatlantic Academy” can be found on the Transatlantic Academy’s website, [transatlanticacademy.org](http://transatlanticacademy.org), under “Publications”.*