



Strategically Engaging Religious Peacebuilders: Shifting a Traditional Paradigm in U.S. Diplomacy

Joyce S. Dubensky
Clayton Maring





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Tanenbaum combats religious prejudice, hatred and violence—and works to create a more peaceful world where differences are respected. As a secular, non-sectarian nonprofit, Tanenbaum promotes mutual respect with practical programs that bridge religious difference and combat prejudice in schools, workplaces, health care settings, and areas of armed conflict.

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Since Tanenbaum identified its first religiously motivated *Peacemaker in Action* in 1998, we have been exploring the work of religiously driven individuals who dedicate themselves to the pursuit of peace. At first, Tanenbaum focused on studying their lives and activities. Now, we also work directly with the 28 living *Peacemakers* we have named through our biennial nominations process, who together form the Tanenbaum *Peacemakers in Action Network*.

From our two decades of collaboration and learning, Tanenbaum has gleaned some valuable lessons about the important ways these religious women and men, and others like them across the world, contribute to peacebuilding. Because of their on-the-ground proximity to local communities, they can be valuable partners in furthering aligned foreign policy objectives. This paper outlines how to institutionalize such mutual collaboration, while addressing long-standing obstacles to such partnerships.

THE SITUATION

ISIS, a global refugee crisis, rising autocratic regimes, and a sputtering peace process in the Middle East. These are complex foreign policy challenges that require multidimensional responses, including a willingness to address the impact of religion. Doing so, however, requires governments and Track I diplomats to engage with religious institutions and religious actors in meaningful ways, and to partner with them to further common policy objectives. Many individuals—both women and men, lay actors and people of the cloth—have much to offer, including local credibility, knowledge, and networks. But building relationships with them takes training, skill, time, and authenticity.

Foreign policy experts have increasingly recognized religion's permeating influence and the impact of religious actors in the public sphere (former Secretaries of State Madeleine Albrightⁱ and John Kerryⁱⁱⁱ are notable examples). Nonetheless, religiously motivated individuals remain largely off the radar. Constrained by entrenched convictions and historic blind spots, U.S. diplomats and institutions also lack sufficient preparation and support to constructively engage with a wide range of social activists, including those with strong religious affiliations. Inevitably, this limits the U.S. Government's arsenal of strategies for managing major foreign policy challenges.¹

¹ Similarly, such challenges confront governments worldwide as well as transnational organizations.

Shifting this traditional paradigm requires that these embedded attitudes and informational gaps be acknowledged and institutionally tackled. A long-term institutional commitment, evidenced by sustained support and resources, will therefore be essential. This would facilitate a needed expansion in the training provided at the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), to enhance Foreign Service Officers' skills in identifying and working with religious peacebuilders and their traditional and emerging networks. It would also invigorate key relationships with known religious actors and organizations to bolster work with religious communities worldwide. Such efforts would be invaluable for U.S. foreign policy and our nation's future. It can be done, but first, it is critical to understand the entrenched obstacles that are stalling this critical paradigm shift.

FIVE OBSTACLES THAT INHIBIT U.S. DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS PEACEBUILDERS

I. Identifying religious peacebuilders is difficult, given their internal diversity and that formal religious leaders are not always peace activists.

It is important for foreign policy personnel to prioritize partnerships with religiously motivated individuals seeking peace. This requires a nuanced understanding of who they are, and recognizing the breadth of their work and identities. Religious peacebuilders (like those exemplified in the Tanenbaum *Peacemakers in Action Network*) are diverse. They work in a variety of roles and, as lay actors and clergy, adopt differing approaches to realize societal wellbeing in what amounts to a lifelong vocation. Such individuals are potent

partners. Still, most are relatively unknown and often hard to identify.

This challenge is often compounded by a tendency to correlate value with roles of public leadership, skewing religious, social, and political engagement to those with visible power. In the case of religion, this can result in diplomats relying on engagement with people of the cloth—a group that is predominantly male across religious traditions. The trouble with this one-dimensional approach is that effectively liaising with religious communities (and religious peacebuilders) is much more complicated.

While many in the diplomatic community institutionally recognize that individuals may influence U.S. foreign policy goals through the exercise of political, social, cultural, and intellectual capital, few are well versed in recognizing individuals who exercise *spiritual* capital to foment social change that aligns with U.S. goals.^{iv} This reflects a common, but limiting, perception that only religious leaders wield such influence. This is a flawed framework that can make it harder for Foreign Service Officers to recognize and partner with many effective religious peacebuilders.

Take, for example, Afghanistan. The traditional religious hierarchy only includes men. In that fraught context, one finds Jamila Afghani, a Tanenbaum *Peacemaker in Action*.¹ Deeply versed in Islam and Islamic traditions, Jamila is an insider; working directly with imams and mosque leaders, she sought to reform social teaching in the mosque, dissuade mosque leaders from extremist positions, and promote gender equality in the family and in education. Without an official title in her faith, Jamila successfully garnered respect from religious leaders—even receiving the imprimatur of the esteemed Al-Azhar University in Cairo for her training materials. Clearly a

¹ Jamila Afghani and the other peacebuilders named in this paper have received Tanenbaum's *Peacemakers in Action* award.

religious actor with influence, Jamila is not traditionally recognized as a religious leader.

Other examples abound, such as the educator-duo from the north of Israel, Najeeba Sirhan, a Muslim, and (the late) Osnat Aram-Daphna, a Jew. These women were principals of neighboring elementary schools; Najeeba's is in a small Arab village that stands in sharp contrast to Osnat's resourced, modern elementary school in nearby Karmiel. Seemingly worlds apart, these women found one another and, together, connected a generation of children across social, ethnic, and religious lines. The children played together, happily did service projects together, and learned about each other.^v Over years of collaboration, Osnat and Najeeba's ties of trust even touched the students' parents. Their dream was to bridge the societal divide between their communities by establishing understanding and respect in practice. By all accounts, their vision continues to move forward.

Jamila, Osnat, and Najeeba are religiously motivated women and peace actors, though one might not automatically associate them or their work with religious peacebuilding. They are not persons of the cloth, nor are they recognized in their societies as religious leaders. But each is motivated by their faith to create a better life for those around them, like others from the multitude of religious traditions worldwide. They offer insights into local lives, needs, and strategies, as well as access to trustworthy networks for practical action. As such, they embody potential partners who should not be overlooked.

This is not to discount the efforts of religious leaders in peace work, though what they contribute may sometimes be too narrowly construed. An example is Reverend Jacky Manuputty from Ambon, Indonesia, whose grassroots activities stretch far beyond what his clerical title might suggest. Rev. Jacky has developed a peace

curriculum that he uses to train educators. He established an interfaith youth group called "Peace Provocateurs" that uses social media to counter harmful misinformation and interrupt acts that incite violence. He even organized an environmental awareness movement to focus attention on the sugar industry's exploitation of Indonesian islands. Recently, Rev. Jacky brought fellow *Peacemakers* from Nigeria for a weeklong collaboration to institutionalize interfaith mediation in Indonesia. His work was noticed, and he is now serving as Director of Interreligious Affairs for Indonesia's Special Envoy for Religious Harmony.^{vi}

Though each of these individuals is unique, they share a vocation of religious peacemaking with many others worldwide. A minute few of these individuals have been studied by Tanenbaum, The United States Institute of Peace (USIP), the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, and others. These studies show that religious peacebuilding and social action from the pulpit—and beyond—is effective across the breadth of beliefs, including Eastern and indigenous traditions, and that these exemplary individuals can provide real value to aligned U.S. foreign service efforts worldwide. Significantly, limited knowledge of who they are and the breadth of what they do makes it difficult to identify them. This impairs our diplomacy and, ultimately, our effectiveness as a global power.

II. Religious peacebuilding is often misinterpreted as an anomaly—one that is distinct from secular peace efforts.

Over recent decades, U.S. Government efforts overseas have increasingly recognized the value of partnerships in various fields such as human rights, development, security, and more recently, peacebuilding. Religious peacebuilders, however, have often been segregated and siloed due to a conceptual wall between the "religious" and

“secular” worlds (and a discomfort with the “religious” world). When we peek over this wall, however, we see that religious and secular experiences overlap, including in peace work.

Not surprisingly, religious peacemakers (both religious actors and leaders) use practices and techniques that derive from their religious beliefs. But they also use many other approaches to achieve their goals—including initiatives that engage with what many classify as the secular world. Tanenbaum’s South African *Peacemaker* Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge, a religiously driven woman pursuing a vision of a lived peace in arenas traditionally dominated by secular thought, exemplifies this complexity.

A Quaker, non-violent, political activist once affiliated with the African National Congress (ANC), Nozizwe was placed in solitary confinement for a year during the Apartheid era. She went on to lead intra-black reconciliation efforts critical to unifying the anti-Apartheid front, and helped negotiate the end of the Apartheid system in South Africa. She then participated in writing her country’s Constitution. Later, she transitioned to formal roles in government as Deputy Minister of Defense (1999-2004) and Deputy Minister of Health (2004-2007). More recently, she returned to the grassroots where she became involved in supporting women seeking to exit prostitution, an advocate for ending sex trafficking, and a leading public critic of the ANC.

Nozizwe’s religious convictions drive her. She is a religious peacemaker who works in fields many deem strictly secular. Accordingly, her activities cannot be defined solely as religious or secular. Rather, she is a blend. Nozizwe’s story highlights the reality that religious peacebuilding does not

exist in a vacuum, and is not separate from other social and political activities.²

III. Though the pervasive influence of religion is increasingly recognized, this awareness is not an institutionalized component of diplomatic calculations.

Religion is a powerful global force across political, economic, and social factors, as well as institutions at the local and international levels. As such, it is embedded in everything from policymaking to community norms. Data strengthens the point. Today, an estimated 8 in 10 people worldwide identify with a religious or faith-based group, making it critical to continue expanding our diplomatic grasp of religion’s influence in sensitive arenas of foreign policy.^{vii}

Indeed, in many areas where the U.S. is engaged militarily, religious life is indistinguishable from daily life —Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and the Lake Chad Basin (Nigeria, Niger, Chad, Cameroon)—where nearly 100 percent of the local populations are religiously affiliated.^{viii} Comparable levels of religious affiliation exist in other geopolitically important areas as well, such as Palestine (almost 100 percent), Myanmar (99.5 percent), Saudi Arabia (99.3 percent), Israel (96.9 percent), Ukraine (85.3 percent), Russia (83.8 percent), and the Middle East/North Africa region as a whole (at 99.3 percent).^{ix}

Given this, it is helpful that more nuanced perspectives on the influence of religion have

² It is worth noting that, beyond the phenomenon of religiously inspired individual peacemakers, diverse faith communities have also mobilized worldwide around societal concerns including environmental degradation, child abuse, human trafficking, corruption, poverty reduction, and other areas of shared religious/secular social interest. This is evident in documents such as *Laudato Si*, an encyclical from Pope Francis guiding Catholic thinking on environmental concerns and the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change issued by Islamic leaders.

evolved. Sometimes religious beliefs and identities drive prejudice, exclusion, and violence; but often, they mobilize critical resources to address material and psychological community needs at times of crisis. This reality, and clarity that religion's most significant impact is not as the driver of violence and conflict, is well-documented in foreign policy circles.^x Routinely translating this insight into diplomatic action and strategy, however, is difficult, given societal obstacles, limited resources, and the inability to identify and systematically sustain religious peacebuilding partnerships.

IV. Societal stereotypes unduly sway foreign policy practices, approaches, and strategies.

Crude narratives and inflammatory headlines not only influence the public's thinking—they also reinforce explicit and implicit biases about religion that can result in lost opportunities for partnerships, and in unsophisticated policy.

The U.S. Administration's pursuit of a Travel Ban, for example, distances the U.S. from some 150 million citizens of six Muslim-majority countries (while potentially alienating the world's 1.8 billion Muslims, including 3.45 million in the U.S.) in the name of national security.^{xi} Not only does this policy align with stereotypes, but it ignores well-known facts. For example, it incorrectly conflates Islam and terrorism even though the majority of terrorist acts in the U.S. are carried out by home-grown White Supremacists.^{xii} The truth is, terrorism and extremism exist in multiple religious traditions, as exemplified by Buddhist extremists now provoking attacks on ethnic Rohingya (predominantly Muslim) in Myanmar. The Travel Ban has grave foundational flaws which is why Tanenbaum joined in amicus briefs opposing it. It also has troubling foreign policy implications (including the potential to

alienate Muslim colleagues and peacebuilders), and an implicit policy of non-engagement with people from a particular religious tradition.

In contrast, there are also positive examples of diplomats and foreign policy actors acknowledging diverse religious beliefs and practices, and engaging with those religious actors. Consider United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. He maintains a sharp focus on violent extremism, and also supports the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect's development of a *UN Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes*. Based on contributions from 232 diverse religious leaders from 77 countries and formally launched in July 2017, this plan lays out concrete approaches for combating religious prejudice and violence. In February 2018, the UN took the next step by convening thought leaders together with religious leaders and actors on how to put this plan into practice. In so doing, the UN and its leading diplomat officially engaged religious actors to achieve international policy goals including, but not limited to, tackling violent extremism.

While this effort is still evolving, it provides an important example of expansive, pro-active diplomatic engagement with religious leaders and actors. It suggests what is institutionally possible, beyond the daily headlines and deafening societal stereotypes.

V. Diplomats are rarely well-prepared to engage effectively with religious actors and religion.

Diplomats can be uncomfortable engaging religious actors due to insufficient training, confusion about what is legally permissible, or bias favoring "secular" actors.

Societal stereotypes reinforce the discomfort. In a globalized world, failure to appreciate religious diversity, including examination of one's biases and blind spots, has real-world impact on the effectiveness of individuals in every kind of workplace. This is doubly true for Foreign Service Officers, who regularly deal with high-stakes intercultural interactions that affect U.S. standing in the world. The inevitable result is that access to reliable partners and shared information is limited, leaving many Foreign Service Officers and diplomats unprepared to understand local religious dynamics and how they are affected by, and affect, political and economic decision-making in areas of geopolitical importance to the U.S. It is in our nation's strategic interest to better prepare our personnel.

As the clock ticks, it is time to act.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Congress should designate funding for the State Department to institutionalize religious competency and enable it to better identify and partner with diverse religious peace-builders across the breadth of traditions and practice.

Religion is a vital societal force in the communities and conflicts where Foreign Service Officers serve, including among local populations unsupportive of a U.S. presence—a frequent reality. With training on intersecting religious, social and political landscapes, and skills development for identifying and constructively engaging with religious actors on the ground, foreign service personnel will be able to achieve better outcomes both in friendly and potentially hostile environments. Doing this, requires commitment and an investment.

Unfortunately, the current budget does not provide sufficient support for that objective. While increasing military expenses, the deal imposed modest cuts to development and non-defense diplomacy.^{xiv} As State Department officials identify priorities for their 2019 agency budget requests, they should seek Congressional financing to institutionalize religious competence in U.S. foreign policy. This is more than just a nice idea. It is critical investment for our nation's long-term security.^{xv}

Such resources would enable comprehensive religious competency training for Foreign Service Officers. It would also support a robust institutional presence in the State Department charged with building partnerships with religiously motivated actors. The resulting partnerships will enhance diplomatic efforts, our foreign policy toolkit will expand, and U.S. Foreign Service Officers will develop a deeper rolodex. Moreover, the U.S. would be standing alongside international institutions like the UN and governments worldwide that have also started to pursue this path.³

2. The Foreign Service Institute should expand training that prepares Foreign Service Officers to strategically assess religious dynamics affecting policy and diplomacy, and to identify and engage with aligned religious partners.

Religious competency is achievable through enhanced training by the FSI. Currently, the Institute offers basic courses for U.S. Foreign Service Officers in religion and foreign policy.^{xvi} The FSI needs to increase the number, level, synchronization, and intensity of such courses. By adding

³ Encouraging steps have been made in Germany, Finland, Indonesia, and other nations.

to and coordinating the valuable offerings that now exist, it can establish a track of training to build the necessary religious competence skills in intercultural engagement that can make our foreign service personnel more effective.

The objectives for such training must be well defined. Foreign Service Officers need enhanced capacity in mapping and assessing religious influences, applying such data strategically, and engaging with religious actors and communities. In essence, this involves a range of skills including partnership readiness. Personnel must be equipped to be transparent while simultaneously representing the interests of the U.S. Government. This requires diplomatic skills in cross-cultural and inter-religious communications and readiness to engage with an array of religious actors. Trust will be at the heart of these relationships—something that is possible when our involvement is open and does not instrumentalize such individuals or seek to use them to rubber stamp political or diplomatic actions.

Specifically, Foreign Service Officers must be trained to develop competencies starting with an understanding of their own cultures and beliefs, the impact of those factors on their world-view, and their own learned stereotypes and biases. That learning will lay the foundation for further training, including on: intra- and inter-religious dynamics; how to assess the influence of those dynamics on the social, political and community norms of a region; and skills for engaging individuals and communities of faith across contexts. Such engagement training should stress relationship building with religious individuals around common values and goals, how a person and/or network understands their faith, and how it influences their objectives.

If implemented as a long-term strategic commitment, the benefits will ripple across the State Department. Foreign Service Officers will be part-

nering with diverse networks and religiously motivated individuals pursuing social change, including individuals like Jamila, Osnat and Najeeba, Rev. Jacky and Nozizwe. And, over time, foreign service personnel across the State Department will be ever more versed in gauging critical religious dynamics as they affect foreign policy and the interests of the U.S. and our national security.

3. The State Department should engage trustworthy networks with religious and social affinities that can provide context, connections, and information in important arenas of U.S. foreign policy interest.

When the Department of State is resourced to institutionalize religious competence, it will be better able to work with available allies to identify and promote the positive forces of religion and more effectively address the way it is used to cause harm. Currently, key relationships have been undermined with the shifting sands of our foreign policy. A critical step would therefore be to engage established networks known to the State Department, and versed in religion and societal life at the international, national, and local levels. Examples of such consultative networks include: USIP, the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, the Religions for Peace global network, the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, The Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality (WISE), King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz International Centre For Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), and Tanenbaum's *Peacemakers in Action Network*, among others.

Drawing on these networks—already familiar to the DOS Office of Religion and Global Affairs—would offer foreign service personnel the ability to expand critical expertise in a time and resource efficient manner. Already knowledgeable about religious peacebuilding and social action, their experience can feed into the development of needed training materials at FSI. They can offer insights on trends and priorities in areas of strategic interest. Additionally, as colleagues and partners, these institutions and networks may be able to identify religiously- and socially-engaged individuals in strategic locations, who know their communities intimately. Potentially, this could expand U.S. reach and include previously unrecognized individuals and networks large and small.

Notably, these consultative networks can often reach religious actors beyond the familiar Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. This is important for advancing U.S. foreign policy goals, as our personnel need to work with the breadth of religious followers irrespective of theology or sect. Thus, for example, as Russian influence grows in U.S. political discourse, engagement with the Orthodox Church in Russia would offer another way to understand nuances in Russian politics and the role of the Church. Similarly, as we grapple with the Rohingya refugee crisis, diplomatic identification of and alignment with networks of potentially sympathetic Buddhists might strengthen local efforts to affect public opinion in Myanmar. And in India, diplomats would benefit from working with local Hindu actors to assess how internal Hindu attitudes and activities may affect relations with Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

There is no magic potion for resolving complex geopolitical issues. However, as other disciplines teach us, more perspectives, more information, and better tools allow for the iterative processes that can make success possible. For that reason, Congress should support the State Department in enhancing the apparatus for U.S. foreign services to address religion as a social, cultural, and political force. Funding and staffing such work, preparing foreign service personnel to competently engage religious communities, and building authentic relationships of mutual benefit with religiously motivated social actors is critical. Otherwise, we risk further undermining the considerable weight that U.S. efforts can still wield to create domestic and international accord and beneficial social relationships.

- ⁱ Engaging religiously motivated peace actors is relevant in the U.S. and also across the globe including for UN agencies, regional and even sub-national bodies.
- ⁱⁱ Scott R. Appleby, Richard Cizik (eds.). "Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy." Chicago: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2010. p. 57. Retrieved from https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/sites/default/files/2010%20Religion%20Task%20Force_Full%20Report.pdf.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Kerry, John. "John Kerry: 'We ignore the global impact of religion at our peril'." *America Magazine* (2015, September 2). Retrieved from <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/religion-and-diplomacy>.
- ^{iv} Berger, Peter L., and Robert W. Hefner. "Spiritual capital in comparative perspective." In *Spiritual Capital Planning Meeting*, pp. 10-11. 2003. pp. 10-11.
- ^v The Project that these two women created ended in 2008, after Osnat died of cancer. Najeeba has continued on, finding new Jewish partners from among teachers she met from Osnat's school. To read more about the story of Osnat and Najeeba, see: Dubensky, Joyce S., ed. *Peacemakers in Action: Volume 2: Profiles in Religious Peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- ^{vi} To read more about Rev. Jacky's story, see: Dubensky, Joyce S., ed. *Peacemakers in Action: Volume 2: Profiles in Religious Peacebuilding*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- ^{vii} Hackett, Conrad, Brian Grim, Marcin Stonawski, Vegard Skirbekk, Michaela Potancoková, and Ğ. Abel. "The global religious landscape." *Washington, DC: Pew Research Center* (2012).
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x Mayall, James and Sara Silvestri. "The Role of Religion in Conflict and Peacebuilding." *The British Academy*. pp. 28-45. September 2015. pp. 28-45.
- ^{xi} Tanenbaum has also made public statements denouncing this piece of poor public policy. See: <https://tanenbaum.org/blog/2017/03/a-hidden-impact-of-the-muslim-ban/>
- ^{xii} "Countering Violent Extremism: Actions Needed to Define Strategy and Assess Progress of Federal Efforts". United States Government Accountability Office, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.gao.gov/assets/690/683984.pdf>
- ^{xiii} Tanenbaum's years of experience in religious diversity training and crisis consulting workplace and healthcare settings shows that organizations receive a variety of benefits from building staff capacity in religious diversity and cultural sensitivity.
- ^{xiv} Davis, Julie Hirschfeld. "Spending Plan Passed by Congress Is a Rebuke to Trump. Here's Why." *New York Times* (2018, March 22). Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/22/us/politics/trump-government-spending-bill.html>.
- ^{xv} Substantial literature exists linking government investment in peace and positive social and economic outcomes, including the "peace dividend." Scholars have continued to build the case for the value of religious diplomacy and the intermingling of diplomacy and religious peacebuilding. See, for example, Omer, Atalia, R. Scott Appleby, and D. Little, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- ^{xvi} The FSI 2018-2019 Course Catalogue lists two stand-alone course offerings dealing with religion: *Religion and Conflict and Religion and Foreign Policy*. Other regional and country overview courses mention religion among the topics of study. It is Tanenbaum's contention that a track of courses should be formalized within FSI that takes a studied approach to developing religious competence and cultural sensitivity.