Reflexivity in External Religious Leaders’ Summit Communication Sequences (2005-2012) to G8 Political Leaders: The Social (Re)Construction of Cosmopolitan Responsibility by World Religious Leaders

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Abstract

Religious governance influence in international relations is underresearched. Using reflexivity as primary governance indicator, this case study examines the external communicational sequences of the only multifaith summits (2005-2012) whose purpose is communication to, and dialogue with, G8 and G20 political leaders about global responsibilities to empirically discern, independent of religious leaders’ self-identification, whether the quality of dialogue is indicative of governance behavior or unreflexive acts of international value struggle. Reflexivity is operationalized as historically embedded in social relations using methodological cosmopolitanism. Findings indicate that religious leaders use cultural capital to blur (not reify) social boundaries that inhibit international collaboration, and offer no evidence of unreflexive dialogue. Leaders use social capital to socially (re)construct boundaries for cosmopolitan responsibility to include the interests of the vulnerable that are impacted by, but excluded from, G8 and G20 decisions. This work contributes to the “empirical mapping” of religious governance in international relations with implications for their consideration as dialogue partners for global governance.

Keywords

sociology of religion, sociology, social sciences, social change and modernization, political theory, politics and humanities, political science, social movements and activism, sociology, risk communication, human communication, communication studies, communication, political sociology, religious studies, humanities, world religions, religious studies, international relations

Introduction

Globalization is characterized by democratic expectations among the governed despite the absence of a global government; the legitimacy of globalization is maintained by “government without government” (Mayntz, 2002). The stability of democratic legitimacy must allow for the “peaceful ‘play’ of power—the adherence by the ‘outs’ to decisions made by ‘ins’ and the recognition by the ‘ins’ of the rights of the ‘outs’” (Lipset, 1959, p. 71). The absence of a government results in accountability gaps that contribute to patterned vulnerabilities that non-governmental organizations (INGOs) bridge with the soft power of influence using knowledge to shape the debate through evolving norms. Nye (2004) defined soft power as “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion” via a variety of means including diplomatic relations, economic assistance, and cultural exchange. A country is considered to have more soft power to the extent that their culture inspires admiration and respect in other parts of the world. INGOs address the most difficult accountability challenges by representing the vulnerable and using the power of persuasion to strengthen, or undermine, the legitimacy of the global system (Risse, 2002). Willetts (1996) referred to them as the “conscience of the world,” exercising a form of bottom-up, rather than top-down, accountability (Newell, 2008, p. 124). In the absence of alternative contenders for formal political offices, the stability of global democratic governance becomes dependent on effective dialogue with civil society partners who augment statist politics with civic life politics where governments are vulnerable to public opinion (Keohane, 2003).

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Civil society participation in international governance is currently an *ad hoc*, complex, and messy process with numerous well-intentioned actors often working at cross-purposes in destabilizing ways (e.g., Gupta, 2008; Steiner, 2011a). Political scientists struggle to ascertain which of the numerous INGOs should be taken seriously as governance partners, and relying on self-identification does not address the need for quality control measures. Recognition by political decision makers is also problematic given that the INGOs most likely to hold decision makers accountable are the ones least likely to be recognized by decision makers that do not recognize a corresponding obligation for accountability on matters of global risk. Buchanan and Keohane (2006) developed a complex standard useful for identifying governance partners amid the throng of INGOs. They hoped their proposal would temporarily help guide the network of leaders tasked with identifying valuable INGO accountability partners, and assist reform efforts by bolstering “public support for valuable global governance institutions that either satisfy the standard or at least make credible efforts to do so” (Buchanan & Keohane, 2006, p. 406.) By developing the standard, Buchanan and Keohane (2006) hoped to clarify how the legitimacy of the global governance system “does not depend solely upon its own characteristics, but also upon the epistemic-deliberative relationships between the institution and epistemic actors outside it” (p. 411). Buchanan and Keohane most likely developed the standard with secular INGOs in mind; nonetheless, Steiner (2011b) compared the first 5 years of religious summity against their measure as a way of ascertaining the extent to which the World Religious Leaders’ dialogue process might be important for governance in transnational relations.

But the differences between secular and religious civil society INGOs should not be glossed over. The democratic principle separating church and state discourages religious involvement in politics to inhibit the governmental establishment of religion because of the historic destabilizing effects of theocratic religious surveillance of political decision making and the suppression of religious freedoms (Bhargava, 1998; Shabani, 2011). According to Rawls (1997), the “zeal to embody the whole truth in politics is incompatible with an idea of public reasons that belongs with democratic citizenship” (p. 767). Not all public religious impulses harbor such monolithic zeal; however, just as not all religious organizations are monopolistic (Habermas, 2003, 2006; Stark & Finke, 2000; Warner, 1993). Lack of attention to diverse types of religious public engagement may have ideological roots in liberal political philosophies such as that of John Locke (1689/1983) who argued that all religious reasoning should be excluded from the public square. But Locke’s reasoning was developed in a context that presumed a developing nation-state framework; Lock’s assumptions are not unilaterally applicable given the current post-Westphalian context, and his work has been critiqued as overly restrictive (Waldron, 1993). New governing approaches are evolving in a globalizing context that is devoid of any formal global governmental structure (Mayntz, 2002).

Jürgen Habermas (2003) considered religion, in certain contexts, to be an asset for strengthening the democratic process. Religion communicates meaning in ways philosophy and science cannot, and to repress it does more than unfairly exclude religion; separating faith-based reasoning from public discourse deprives “secular society from important resources of meaning” (p. 109)—including the beneficial type of religious reasoning (Habermas, 2006, p. 8). Max Weber expressed concern long ago over how the overrationalization of society might result in a dual crisis of management and meaning rendering bureaucratic governments unable to generate the political will needed for resolving social problems (Roth & Schluchter, 1979). Audi and Wolterstorff (1997) suggested that impartiality, rather than separation, is sufficient to meet the neutrality requirement for political engagement. Alternatively, Roger Finke has interpreted the separation of church and state as a political act of religious deregulation aimed at protecting the free expression of religious minorities in the religious market, potentially introducing a new era of religious diversity (Finke, 1990); the separation of church and state, according to Finke, may have been intended more as a removal of religious monopolization than a removal of religion, *per se*, such that diverse religious *inclusion*, rather than exclusion, might mark the future of democracy. Campbell (2006) and Willaime (2006) have indicated that further clarification of the complex dynamics of religious engagement in the ultramodern public sphere, with a particular emphasis on reflexivity, is needed. Transnational religion as a form of civil society may be emerging in a context of fading nation-states (Rudolph & Piscatori, 1997). That said, scholarship on religious soft power in international relations has been consistently described in terms of dual streams where religious non-governmental organizations (RNGOs) are described as either threats to, or reinforcers of, the global system, but not as civil society governance partners (e.g., Banchoff, 2008; Falk, 2001; Fox & Sandler, 2004; Haynes, 2009; Pettito & Hatzopoulos, 2003; Shani, 2009; Thomas, 2005). Religious influence in international relations has been primarily described in terms of a fundamentalistic impulse to remake the world in the image of particular monolithic religious worldviews (e.g., Bouma, 2006; Marty & Appleby, 1992). Ulrich Beck (2005) described how the Bush Government exploited the rhetoric of peace in the wake of the events of September 11 to silence dissent and spread the “American way of life” and American values as the only acceptable road to a singular modernity. Islamophobia also increased (Eck, 2001; Halafoff, 2006) and an international “lawless space” opened where human rights violations became justified by U.S. foreign policy (Beck, 2005). Scholarship focused on the return of public religion as a challenge to theories of secularization and predictions of fundamentalisms’ decline; little attention has been paid to qualitative shifts and diverse
approaches occurring within the repoliticized religious sphere (Halafoff, 2013). Where governance implications have been noted, as when Casanova (1994) concluded that some forms of international religious involvement might help modernity save itself “through a Habermasian practical rationalism of the traditional lifeworld” (p. 229), any positive contribution religions might make were said to be unintentional (p. 234).

Intentional governance as an explicit role for religion in international relations has yet to be recognized in religious soft power scholarship despite the “return of religion” to international relations (e.g., Banchoff, 2008; Fox & Sandler, 2004; Haynes, 2009; Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003; Snyder, 2011). Religious diplomacy also remains underresearched (Halafoff, 2013; Johnston, 2003). Anthropologists tend to offer anecdotal recognition of how religious INGOs have played pivotal temporary “governance” roles during times of social change such as when Apartheid in South Africa was abolished in favor of the new South Africa or when the Solidarity Movement rose to power in Poland (Berger, 2003). Halafoff has identified religious governance capability where religions “can act as both critics and partners of state actors, on matters of common security within a cosmopolitan, deliberative framework” (Halafoff, 2013, p. 18), but religious governance dynamics remains a theoretical box in need of further research (Halafoff, 2013; Steiner, 2013).

There are several historic shifts associated with religion’s return to international relations that merit research attention. The multifaith movement is one of the few global movements to show empirical growth during the early 2000s (Braybrooke, 2007; Halafoff, 2013, p. 16). World religions coming together in dialogue with one another to voice global ethics is historically unprecedented (Armstrong, 2007; Kung, 1991). Religious summitry where leaders of the world religions engage in intentional governance efforts toward serious, consistent and persistent credible conversation with the political leaders of the world is entirely new (Steiner, 2011b, 2012). Empirical investigation into the reflexivity of summitry communicational sequences furthers our understanding of religious governance beyond the self-identification and public involvement of religious leaders by lending insight into the quality of the communication itself. Accordingly, the research question reads as follows:

**Research Question 1:** In what ways, if at all, do the summits communicational sequences (2005-2012) between the world religious leaders and the G8 political leaders demonstrate reflexivity?

The unit of analysis for this sample is text based on nine statements derived from the World Religious Leaders’ Summits 2005-2012. First, I use methodological cosmopolitanism to operationalize reflexivity (Beck & Grande, 2010; Beck & Lau, 2005), and discuss how the dynamic interplay involving shifting scales and multi-level reflexivity variously affects the governance process. Second, I consider reflexivity in the case study of the summits from 2005 to 2012. Finally, I conclude by discussing the broader implications of these findings and suggest directions for future research.

**Theoretical Development and Data**

Reflexivity is an abstract concept, the operationalization of which is a complex process that inevitably involves the constructed interpretation of reality. The concept neither corresponds to nor accurately and exhaustively represents its object, but neither is the concept an arbitrary unbridled invention. The concept is twice interpreted: first, by the participants in the original context and, second, by the social scientist (Drysdale, 1996). Distinguishing interpretation from explanation, Max Weber said that interpretation without explanation is not yet knowledge, and explanation without interpretation is reification (Weber, 1904/1949). Social scientific knowledge is only constructed when explanation is constructed with interpreted concepts to avoid reification.
How reflexivity is operationalized affects the contribution that theories of religious reflexivity might make to understanding the complex ways in which dialogue facilitates trustbuilding across highly distrusting public networks or, alternatively, legitimizes existing modernist forms of governance via “the manufacture of consent.” Reflexivity has been variously defined as the ability to see oneself as object, self-critical reflection, or as thought turned in on itself freely examining its own presuppositions and assumptions. Such an overly agentic conception frequently reduces reflexivity to a cognitive process, the ahistorical operationalization of which—decontextualized from structural constraints—implies a world full of more emancipatory potential than what is practicably possible within actual embedded histories (Beck, 1994; Farrugia, 2013; Lash, 1999). Another reductionistic tendency is to conflate the *historical* movement toward *social individuation* (e.g., the detraditionalization of community, family, etc.) with *methodological individualism* (Chang & Song, 2010). Individualistic conceptions of reflexivity uncritically assume a teleology of self-mastery and imbue the theory with “sociologically unsustainable visions of personal sovereignty and political emancipation” that “celebrates a form of middle-class individualism” (Farrugia, 2013, p. 2). The danger in using an overly agentic conceptualization of reflexivity is that it may embed a form of cultural capital within the concept and unintentionally mask how underlying assumptions derive from structural privilege (Farrugia, 2013; Sweetman, 2003; Threadgold & Nilan, 2009). Efforts at countering these weaknesses with a historically sensitive empiricism, however, reveal a new problem running through sociological methods and conceptual frameworks—methodological nationalism (Beck & Grande, 2010; Sassen, 2000). Situating a study of religious soft power in the cosmopolitical realpolitik stream of cosmopolitan social theory allows me to operationalize reflexivity with attention to each of these weaknesses—ahistoricity, methodological individualism, teleology of self-mastery, and methodological nationalism—by emphasizing the historical development and structural embeddedness of diverse cosmopolitan coalitions of actors in specific diverse contexts (Beck & Grande, 2010). The nation-state becomes a variable associated with multiple paths into second modernity (Beck & Lau, 2005). International relations becomes marked by the complex interaction between nations entering from various paths including those marked by privilege, time compression, and the embedded structural constraints of a postcolonial history (Beck & Grande, 2010). Transnational relations are thus characterized by a “cosmopolitan dialectic” of the centripetal, unifying process associated with the formation of a “world risk society” and the centrifugal, diversifying processes associated with the coexistence and “hegemonic competition between different types and visions of modernity” (Beck, 2006, 2009; Beck & Grande, 2010, p. 419). Reflexivity emerges out of the macro context as nationalistic identities give way to transnational recognitions that nation-states are interdependent and entangled with one another. In contrast to the national perspective (which excludes the otherness of the other), the cosmopolitan perspective reflexively includes the otherness of the other (Beck, 2002, p. 18). It is a method of inclusive oppositions that unveils and rejects the logic of exclusive oppositions that underpins methodological nationalism (Beck, 2002, p. 19). This theory frame rejects the notion that Western institutions move from modernity to a 21st-century postmodernity in favor of an empirical research program that studies the historical ultramodern transformation of basic institutions such as religion, the nation-state, and the family (Beck, 2010; Beck & Lau, 2005). For Beck (2002), “the cosmopolitanization thesis’ is a methodological concept which helps to overcome methodological nationalism and build a frame of reference to analyse the new social conflicts, dynamics and structures of Second Modernity” (p. 18). The perspective is able to grasp how the pluralization of nation-state borders implopes the dualism between the national and international with an inner globalization that introduces a legitimation crisis of the national morality of exclusion . . . it produces questions as to the distribution of global responsibilities: Why do we have to recognize a special moral responsibility towards other people just because, by accident, they have the same nationality? Why should they be free of any moral sensibility towards other people for the sole reason that they happened to be born on the other side of the national fence? What loses any legitimacy is the fundamentally dubious assumption that such responsibilities are absolute within a border, while their absence is equally absolute outside this border . . . [Cosmopolitanism lacks orientation . . . There is, in any case, a greater felt need for an evident ethical dimension in the decisions. (Beck, 2002, pp. 19-20)

Beck (2002) described cosmopolitanism as involved, and put at risk by, a global market that is a new form of “organized irresponsibility” (p. 26). The task of those living in cosmopolitan societies is to define and construct a collectively shared future crisis without adequate forms of institutionalized action (Beck, 2002). The global sphere of responsibility within the cosmopolitical framework is accomplished rather than stable (Beck, 2002, p. 37):

Cosmopolitical realpolitik does not appeal (at least not primarily) to shared ideas and identities, but to power and interests to be brought into play. If we adopt such a “realist” perspective, the crucial question is how the hegemonic “meta-power games” of global domestic politics (Weltinnenpolitik) can be shaped and interests pursued in such a way that they serve the realization of common cosmopolitan goals . . . [H]ow can private vices be transformed into public, cosmopolitan virtues? (Beck & Grande, 2010, p. 436)

Reflexivity emerges out of strategies of self-limitation through the “recognition of the legitimate interests of others and their inclusion in the calculation of one’s own interests”
Historically contextualized operationalizations of reflexivity are admittedly conceptually ambiguous because the principles and institutions of “Second Modernity” are as normative as they are theoretical, but for our purposes here, the gains in being able to offer explanation, unmask privilege, be sensitive to diversity and identify social forces of constraint outweigh the costs associated with inadequate conceptual clarity and double interpretation (Beck & Grande, 2010, p. 435; Drysdale, 1996). According to Beck, Bonss, and Lau (2003), researchers bear a particular responsibility, having “invented modernity,” to “find answers to the problems of both how to conceptualize the possibility of ‘other modernities’ and how to arrange institutions of transnational, transreligious dialogue for its supply” (p. 8). The World Religious Leaders’ Summits is one of these transnational, transreligious social spaces where leaders gather to dialogue with the G8 political leaders about how decisions in a globalizing world impact the poor and the vulnerable. To adequately study this dialogue, the theory frame must be sensitive to diversity, social forces, interdependencies and structural constraints. Methodological cosmopolitanism incorporates respect for the particularities of diversity, sources risks in externalities (e.g., ecological risk, nuclear risk), as well as internalities (e.g., insufficiently regulated financial markets), presumes nation-state fragility and interdependent entanglement, and expands the scope of study to include those “for whom cosmopolitanism is not a lifestyle choice, but the tragic involuntary condition of the refugee or otherwise dispossessed” (Beck & Grande, 2010, p. 417). Methodological cosmopolitanism remains an appropriate choice despite its drawbacks and limitations because it operationalizes reflexivity in a way that captures the type of dialogue associated with the topics discussed at the Summits (e.g., food insecurity, environmental risk, etc.). According to Feindt (2012), whether and how the plurality of diverse perspectives are taken into account and become effective “are at the heart of the quest for reflexive governance” (p. 164).

**Data and Qualitative Content Analysis**

Illustrative data were used as informative evidence to develop, not test, the theory of religious soft power as reflexive governance. This study covers Round 1 of the summit process extending from 2005 to 2012. I conducted textual analysis of the communicational sequences between the communicants over the 8-year span. Summit statements are appropriate indicators of the dialogue process because each statement was written with the input and approval of all religious leader participants at each summit, and because each statement was immediately delivered at the conclusion of meetings to political G8 Sherpas and/or media representatives for public dissemination. Finally, as the methodological approach taken in this article is twice interpreted and therefore inexact, I have disciplined my interpretations by drawing the meaning units, specific characteristics, and underlying theoretical assumptions about reflexivity that require further illumination from the literature review. While there is no single correct meaning or universal application of research findings, I have made every effort to ensure the transferability of these findings to other settings and groups by offering a clear and distinct description of the analysis process to establish arguments for the most probable interpretations. According to Beck (2002), the pluralization of borders is the most basic indicator of reflexive modernization (at the macro level). When people are reflexive, dualisms implode and borders that demarcate categories such as national or international “are no longer predeterminate—they can be chosen (and interpreted) . . . redrawn and legitimated anew” (p. 19). Drawing on Beck (2002), I analyze the sample according to the following meaning units: (a) evidence of accepting the logic of inclusive oppositions, (b) evidence of rejecting the logic of exclusive oppositions, (c) evidence of cosmopolitan flashpoints, and (d) evidence of shared responsibility for governance of the future, (e) evidence of rejecting the logic of inclusive oppositions and accepting the logic of exclusive oppositions was identified as non-reflexive communication that serves to reify, rather than blur, boundaries. The texts were read through several times to obtain a sense of the whole before dividing the text into meaning units, condensed meaning units, codes, sub-themes and themes. Examples of meaning units, condensed meaning units, and codes are shown in Table 1. The whole context was considered when condensing and labeling meaning units with codes. When possible, I used condensed direct quotes during aggregation to reduce the amount of interpretive bias introduced in the abstraction process of moving from text to code creation and theme categorization. Examples of the aggregation process are shown in Table 2.

**Findings**

The illustrative data are theoretically consistent with Beck’s claim that reflexivity emerges out of social context as a requirement of surviving the modern social world. Religious leaders displayed “embodied dispositions,”
Table 1. Examples of Meaning Units, Condensed Meaning Units, and Codes.

| Meaning unit                                                                 | Condensed                                   | Category                                      | Theme                                        |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| “We acknowledge with genuine sorrow that all religions have at times been  | “We reject this misuse of religions [in    | Otherness of other modernities or religions   | Rejects the logic of exclusive oppositions   |
| misused in fomenting violence. We reject this misuse of religions and      | fomenting violence]” (Wrlls-J/S, 2008)       |                                               |                                              |
| commit ourselves to engaging our communities for the common good” (Wrlls-   |                                             |                                               |                                              |
| J/S, 2008)                                                                  |                                             |                                               |                                              |
| “Military power and economic dominance are the basis for inclusion in a    | “The voices of the other 172 members of     | Otherness of other modernities or religions   | Accepts the logic of inclusive oppositions   |
| G8 and G20 global leaders’ summit. The voices of the other 172 members of | the United Nations are absent . . . [The    |                                               |                                              |
| the United Nations are absent. In our faith traditions, we strive to       | voices of the weak and vulnerable] must be  |                                               |                                              |
| listen to the weak and the vulnerable. Their voices must be included in    | included in decisions” (Wrlls-C, 2010)       |                                               |                                              |
| decisions that affect them and all of us. At the summits in 2010, we       |                                             |                                               |                                              |
| expect leaders to put first the well-being of the majority of the world’s  |                                             |                                               |                                              |
| population, of future generations and of the Earth itself” (Wrlls-C,      |                                             |                                               |                                              |
| 2010)                                                                        |                                             |                                               |                                              |
| “The moral scandal of extreme poverty requires that the wealthy nations do  | “The structural inequities and power        | Otherness of other modernities or religions   | Cosmopolitan flashpoint                       |
| much more to assist the poorest countries in fighting poverty . . . The    | imbalances in trade rules that tilt toward  |                                               |                                              |
| structural inequities and power imbalances in trade rules that tilt       | the rich nations at the expense of the      |                                               |                                              |
| toward the rich nations at the expense of impoverished nations must       | impoverished nations must be reformed so    |                                               |                                              |
| be reformed so that people can earn a sustainable income and the private   | that people can earn a sustainable income   |                                               |                                              |
| sector can generate jobs and wealth for the common good” (Wrlls-UK, 2005) | and the private sector can generate jobs    |                                               |                                              |
| “[W]e stand together at this Religious Leaders’ Summit and call on the G8  | “[W]e stand together . . . and call on the  | Otherness of other modernities or religions   | Shared responsibility for governance of the  |
| . . . to work with us, with renewed vigour, commitment and creativity,     | G8 Heads of State . . . to work with us . .  |                                               | future                                      |
| towards the fulfilment of the MDGs and the promises of the 2005 G8. We    | towards the fulfilment of the Millennium     |                                               |                                              |
| call for concrete, discernible, life-giving and life-sustaining progresses | Development Goals ” (Wrlls-G, 2007)         |                                               |                                              |
| in the lives of our sisters and brothers and our planet. We both call for  |                                             |                                               |                                              |
| and pledge ourselves to the future of life, now.” (Wrlls-G, 2007)         |                                             |                                               |                                              |

Table 2. Example of Aggregating Codes, Categories, and a Theme.

| Theme                                      | Accepts the logic of inclusive oppositions |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| Category Codes                             |                                            |
| Codes                                      |                                            |
| Otherness of nature                        |                                            |
| “Shared concerns to face up to environmental dangers . . . [that] divide    |                                            |
| what should be our interdependent human    |                                            |
| communities” (Wrlls-J/K, 2008)             |                                            |
| Otherness of other ways of life            |                                            |
| “The voices of the other 172 members of    |                                            |
| the United Nations are absent . . . [The   |                                            |
| voices of the weak and vulnerable] must    |                                            |
| be included in decisions” (Wrlls-C, 2010)   |                                            |
| Otherness of the future                    |                                            |
| “[A]ll humans live in one world . . . [T]he well-being of one is related  |                                            |
| to the well-being of others and . . . the  |                                            |
| earth . . . [T]he past, present and future |                                            |
| are linked. (Wrlls-J/S, 2008)               |                                            |

frequently demonstrating “practical knowledge of the world and of a person’s place within it,” indicating awareness of social conditions—such as when they noted the 30,000 children that die each day because of poverty related conditions (World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–United Kingdom [Wrlls-UK], 2005), and political promises—such as when they asked G8 leaders to honor their earlier promise to increase aid by US$50 billion (World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–Germany [Wrlls-G], 2007). Religious leaders addressed controversial commitments with direct specificity such as stating that spending US$1.34 trillion in 2007 on defense expenditures “directly assaults the ecosystem and squanders monies that urgently need to be directed to sustainable development” (World Religious Leaders’ Summit
Statement–Japan/Sapporo [Wrlls-J/S], 2008). Leaders were specific about what governments and religions might accomplish together by illustrating actual examples of accomplishments rather than by appealing to utopian values:

In the past 18 years, a combination of health interventions and decreasing poverty levels resulted in a 28% reduction in global under-five mortality rates—from 90 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 65 deaths per 1,000 in 2008. Change is possible. (World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–Canada [Wrlls-C], 2010)

Leaders consistently emphasized intelligent engagement with real world problems in all nine texts, at one point noting that the “crisis of poverty . . . is not abstract. It involves real human suffering” (Wrlls-G, 2007). Policy recommendations were often specific, such as when they recommended that the G8 provide 0.7% of GDP for development assistance (World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–France [Wrlls-F], 2011), implement new Kyoto Protocols (Wrlls-J/S, 2008), and fulfill the Millennium Development Goals (Wrlls-C, 2010; Wrlls-F, 2011; Wrlls-G, 2007; World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–Italy [Wrlls-I], 2009; Wrlls-J/S, 2008; Wrlls-UK, 2005; World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–United States [Wrlls-US], 2012). At times, recommendations were “biting” as when they said that the “Economic Partnership Agreements” of the European Union need “a dimension of ethical responsibility and a convincing development agenda” (Wrlls-G, 2007). Leaders made reference to scientific academies (e.g., Japanese Science Academy in World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–Japan/Kyoto [Wrlls-J/K], 2008) or quoted respectable scientific sources such as The Academies of Science’s Climate Change Adaptation and the Transition to a Low Carbon Society statement (Wrlls-J/K, 2008) or The United Nations World Food Program’s Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping Report (Wrlls-US, 2012). Leaders made reference to current events such as the L’Aquila earthquake (Wrlls-I, 2009), the tsunami and Japanese nuclear disaster (Wrlls-F, 2011), and the Arab Spring (Wrlls-US, 2012). The needs of the vulnerable were always foremost with thematic emphasis on poverty (Wrlls-UK, 2005), religious freedom (World Religious Leaders’ Summit Statement–Russia [Wrlls-R], 2006), the position of Africa (Wrlls-G, 2007), environment, and shared security (Wrlls-J/K, 2008; Wrlls-J/S, 2008), financial and economic crisis (Wrlls-I, 2009), investment in peace (Wrlls-C, 2010), reforming global governance (Wrlls-F, 2011), and food security (Wrlls-US, 2012).

At no point did any of the texts reflect acceptance of world rejecting dialogue (e.g., rejecting a sense of responsibility for global risks).

There was, however, consistent evidence of rejection of what Beck describes as the logic of exclusive oppositions. Nationalism was criticized as leaders emphasized that no country, regardless of wealth and power, can cope with [today’s challenges such as AIDS, & weapons of mass destruction] on its own. We are all interconnected and share a common destiny . . . We reject double standards in international relations. The world should have many poles and many systems. (Wrlls-R, 2006)

Leaders clarified that they respect state sovereignty, but their support included commitment to “democratic and transparent cooperation among states and peoples. It follows that the security of one actor of international relations must not be detrimental to others” (Wrlls-J/S, 2008). A de-centered nation-state perspective was evident in how they viewed the G8 process itself. “The voices of the other 172 members of the United Nations are absent,” they noted, and the voices of the weak and vulnerable “must be included in decisions” (Wrlls-C, 2010). Violent defense of religious boundaries was just as consistently and persistently rejected by religious leaders as was nationalism. In 2008, leaders stated that “religious communities have roles in building peace . . . all religions have at times been misused in fomenting violence. We reject this misuse of religions and commit ourselves to engaging our communities for the common good” (Wrlls-J/S, 2008). In Japan, violent defense of boundary maintenance was rejected in all its forms:

Terrorism . . . is never morally justified whether it is perpetrated by individuals, groups or states. Moreover, military responses to terrorism injure innocent persons, provide additional motivation for terrorist groups and endanger basic freedoms in the societies attempting to protect themselves from terrorism . . . Every effort must be made to utilize non-violent means to thwart terrorism and resolve disputes to advance peace. (Wrlls-J/S, 2008)

Leaders rejected environment or society and present or future dualisms, claiming that “it is unethical to burden future generations with excessive pollution or other gross environmental imbalances. Development must be environmentally sustainable” (Wrlls-J/S, 2008). And when leaders met in Russia, they rejected ways in which a globalizing economy objectifies human relations, stating that “humans should not become either a commodity or an object of political manipulation or an element of the production and consumption machine” (Wrlls-R, 2006).

Alternatively, leaders accepted what Beck refers to as the logic of inclusive oppositions. Leaders blurred the society or nature dualism, expressing shared concern for the need to “face up to environmental dangers . . . [that] divide what should be our interdependent human communities” (Wrlls-J/K, 2008):

Many are considering sincerely whether we can survive on the Earth . . . We therefore now commit our resources . . . to the transition to a low-carbon society . . . We shall seek to qualify materialism and consumerism, control the overloading of desire to the point of the destruction of nature. (Wrlls-J/K, 2008)
Leaders blurred political boundaries, talking about how world politics “needs a solid paradigm based on moral values to address today’s challenges . . . the wellbeing of each is related to the wellbeing of others . . . [W]e all live in one world” (Wrlls-I, 2009). Leaders were clear that any concerted response to the entangled problems of the modern world would require international cooperation:

Current events around the world . . . make clear that people everywhere are demanding that their fundamental dignity be honoured. Countries must work together to ensure protection of the right to freedom of religion as well as political self-determination. Tolerance, openness and understanding of other peoples’ cultures social structures, values and religions are essential to the very survival of an interdependent world. (Wrlls-F, 2011)

Leaders blurred religious boundaries, stating how “religious traditions . . . summon their followers to the path of multi-religious cooperation for the common good” (Wrlls-J/K, 2008), but they also blurred the boundary between the sacred and the secular:

Our communities are ready to develop dialogue with the adherents of non-religious views, with politicians, with all civil society structures, and with international organizations . . . This dialogue should be conducted on an equal footing, in a responsible way and on a regular basis, with openness to any themes, without ideological prejudice. (Wrlls-R, 2006)

Leaders blurred the boundary associated with time, stating that

all humans live in one world . . . [T]he well-being of one is related to the well-being of others and . . . the earth . . . [T]he past, present and future are linked. Together, we must acknowledge past failings, face present challenges and accept our responsibilities to future generations. (Wrlls-J/K, 2008)

Other blurred dualisms include attention to how globalization is impacting the family, they expressed “concern for the status of women and children in many societies” and spoke about how “protecting them from violence and exploitation is a common task” (Wrlls-R, 2006). In Russia, attention was drawn to the plight of “illegal immigrants” and “the absence of adequate and uniform standards designed to protect them . . . as states re-evaluate their comprehensive policies” (Wrlls-I, 2009).

By dialoguing with G8 leaders, world religious leaders provide a form of cosmopolitan orientation to a “disoriented cosmopolitanism,” offering reasons, derived from the major religions of the world, for why G8 leaders should recognize a special moral responsibility toward other people who just happened to be born on the other side of the national fence. In 2005, they explained how they

believe God judges nations by what they do to the poorest. This means all of us in the prosperous world, governments, churches, the media and populations stand under judgement, to the degree that we fail to respond to such a situation with costly compassion and generosity, so that we may help in God’s name and by God’s grace to secure justice for the poor. (Wrlls-UK, 2005)

In 2006, they offered further reasons, explaining how leaders from 49 countries from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Shinto religious communities were able to reach agreement on how religion might continue to play a role in developing ethics and strengthening social order (Wrlls-R, 2006). In 2007, an even more diverse delegation explained the common belief in human dignity and justice whether it was rooted in the Jewish focus on the protection of the outsider, the Christian presence of God’s presence among the poor, the Islamic tradition of the equality of all human beings, the Hindu concept of Seva, or the Buddhist ethical philosophy embracing interconnectedness or the Shinto belief in humans as children of the Kami (Wrlls-G, 2007). In 2007, religious leaders started to point out that the Heads of State and Government, by adopting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, recognised that in addition to their separate responsibilities to their own individual societies, they had a collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, justice and equity at the global level and declared poverty alleviation as an overarching goal of international co-operation. (Wrlls-G, 2007)

By 2008, religious leaders stood united in their common commitment to justice and the protection of human life and the well-being of the planet. From that point on, the leaders focused more directly on offering reflections and recommendations to the G8 leaders, offering a form of moral will that might translate into increased political will by the G8 on behalf of the poor and vulnerable. They consistently appealed to the MDGs as a common point of agreement for shared governance with the G8 on behalf of the common good.

Although the initial focus was less concrete and more focused on “doing the right thing” in ways that might be considered utopian, religious leader statements quickly evolved toward concrete recommendations that could be realized with changed priorities—especially when it came to the defense budget. “[E]xtreme poverty at a time of unprecedented wealth is a moral scandal . . . [W]e call for the funds achieved from the reduction of defense budgets to be allocated in support of sustainable development and poverty reduction” (Wrlls-J/S, 2008). Religious leaders challenged short-term decision making, urging G8 leaders to make decisions with a longer time frame in mind:

[W]e are concerned about “short-termism.” The kinds of long-term responsibility and accountability by which we shall save our children’s future are not yet devised anywhere . . . we must appraise ruthlessly what we have achieved for our ailing world, in these times of planetary emergency. All religions hold life to be sacred and interconnected . . . This compels us to ask [that] you reformulate our governments’ policies to be fair to all life on Earth. (Wrlls-J/K, 2008)
Religious leaders challenged the highly consumptive economies of the G8 countries, noting that “industrialized countries have caused a disproportionate amount of environmental damage. The strategy of promoting endless development and high consumption lifestyles must be challenged” (Wrlss-C, 2010):

The concentration of the majority of the world’s wealth in the hands of a few, while an enormous number of people, especially children, live in abject poverty, is a global tragedy . . . [destabilizing] the world. We call upon all nations to return to a life of moderation, self-restraint and active justice. This will secure a hopeful future for upcoming generations and effectively function to cut the ground out from under the feet of extremists and terrorists. (Wrlss-R, 2006)

I was unable to find in the communicational sequences any evidence of rejecting the logic of inclusive oppositions and accepting the logic of exclusive oppositions as a form of unreflective communication that might serve to reify, rather than blur, boundaries.

Rather, religious leaders offered their reflections as a way of redefining the boundaries for G8 decision-making, challenging the G8 leaders to prioritize the needs of the vulnerable when they make their inevitable decisions. The texts became a form of cultural capital used by religious leaders to accomplish the social construction of cosmopolitan responsibility. Religious leaders used the language of “calling” to invite G8 leaders to redefine the boundaries of what they consider to be responsible decision-making:

[We] call on the G8 . . . and all peoples of good will . . . to life-giving and life-sustaining progresses in the lives of our sisters and brothers and our planet. We both call for and pledge ourselves to the future of life. (Wrlss-G, 2007)

Religious leaders consistently spoke of offering their reflections in a “spirit of collaboration and co-responsibility . . . working together across religious lines for the common good and with governments and other partners of good will” (Wrlss-F, 2011). They spoke of shared agendas, mutual concerns and responsibilities for shared governance:

We recognize that we share responsibility to be and act for the change we want to see. We reaffirm our own commitment to call on our communities . . . while building political support for the changes we seek. (Wrlss-C, 2010)

Religious leaders consistently emphasized the importance of choice:

The magnitude of poverty would be overwhelming were it not for the knowledge that this global inequity can be transformed . . . Change is possible . . . [Faith traditions call] us to a collective standard of mutual care. Poverty is frequently the result of food, energy and economic crisis originating in wealthier sectors of society. It is also the consequence of . . . greed . . . [W]e expect inspired leadership and actions to address poverty! Wealthy countries must . . . invest 0.7% of Gross National Income in development assistance. (Wrlss-C, 2010)

Religious leaders displayed an emotional rule that negatively sanctioned despair and world withdrawing emotional strategies by labeling them as irresponsible:

[T]o ignore [oppression] in our global community is irresponsible . . . In the spirit of optimism and countering any mood of despair, religious people commit themselves to be part of the solution, to pray and to act with compassion for all victims. We seek to be considered equal partners in the solution of these entangled problems. (Wrlss-J/K, 2008)

Religious leaders acknowledged that setting new priorities would be costly, but they offered to partner with the political leaders by generating moral will and delivering social services as a form of cultural capital offering political support for the negotiation of structural barriers to build better lives for the vulnerable:

humanity possesses . . . resources to [end] global poverty . . . What is missing is sufficient political and moral will . . . [W]e re-commit ourselves . . . to help generate that moral will at this critical historical juncture. We call upon . . . the G-8 leaders to provide courageous and costly political leadership by providing the resources and making the structural changes necessary to eradicate poverty. (Wrlss-UK, 2005)

Religious leaders seemed to recognize that different approaches need to be taken for different paths to modernity. For example, religious leaders recommended that international development assistance be given directly to those most in need with new delivery mechanisms “in those instances of failed or failing states” (Wrlss-F, 2011). Religious leaders called for collaboration as a counter to the hegemonic competition that tends to influence the decision-making process:

In developing countries . . . growth, poverty reduction and environmental stewardship must journey together. This requires innovative leadership in these countries along with increased collaboration between rich and poor countries. (Wrlss-C, 2010)

With each statement, the identified values are derived from diverse religious identities, but the consistent reference to current events, social problems, shared interests, mutual concerns, and the responsible exercise of power in the decision-making process cumulatively indicate that this dialogue process is about the negotiation and redefinition of the normative framework in which decisions have to be taken in the hegemonic “meta-power games” of the G8 Summit process.

Discussion

In this study, I advance our understanding of religious soft power as governance by empirically investigating reflexivity
in the case study of the World Religious Leaders’ Summits 2005-2012. Although religious and secular soft power is recognized as influential in international relations in the era of globalization, only the secular governance role of soft power has been widely acknowledged by scholars. Many studies of religious soft power use a dichotomist description that obscures a more complex and nuanced understanding of the interplay between religion, nationalism, and social movements. I shed light on this differential treatment of religious and secular soft power through empirical investigation for evidence of reflexive governance in the first round of the World Religious Leaders’ Summits.

Careful attention has been paid to understand reflexivity as a historically embedded process. Using data from nine summits held over a period of 8 years, I have described how the network of religious leaders reflexively interface with the G8 leaders to negotiate the legitimacy of their impending decisions in light of their moral responsibility to the poor and vulnerable of the world. Religious leaders do this by blurring boundaries that hinder international collaboration and cooperation, and rejecting those who would use violence to intensify those boundaries. Religious leaders offer cosmopolitan orientation to G8 leaders who gather to make decisions that impact a world put at risk by a global market that Beck (2002) describes as a new form of “organized irresponsibility” (p. 26). Religious leaders draw on their cultural capital to redefine boundaries for cosmopolitan responsibility to include the interests of the poor and vulnerable who are impacted by, but excluded from, the G8 decision-making process. By influencing the normative framework in which G8 decisions have to be taken, religious soft power influences international relations to the extent that G8 leaders accept moral responsibility for the poor and vulnerable, taking their interests into account when making the decisions that they must inevitably make. The findings illustrate a form of second-order reflexivity where religious soft power reframes the normative framework within which decisions must be made in ways that enable conversations over border conflicts to be transformed into conflicts over the drawing of boundaries.

This work advances our understanding of religious soft power by identifying an important transnational religious governance partner for international relations within a theoretical framework that captures the limitations of constraining social forces. The Summits of World Religious Leaders may be important for political leaders looking for governance partners representative of well-organized civil society networks that are deeply rooted in local communities strongly represented among the poor and vulnerable.

This study also offers an important corrective to overly agentic interpretations of religious soft power by operationalizing reflexivity using methodological cosmopolitanism. Religious leaders display awareness of real world events, limitations, risks, and possibilities in their dialogue for more justice on behalf of the poor. The theory frame provides a contextualized framework for the realistic management of democratic expectations as religious leaders dialogue with their constituency, as well as their political peers, about global risks and responsibilities. Religious leaders have been theorized to influence G8 leaders only to the extent that religious leaders are able to convince, and access their constituencies to politically pressure, political leaders to adopt strategies of self-limitation through the recognition of the legitimate interests of the excluded vulnerable others, and to include the interests of the vulnerable others in the calculation of their own interests in light of the realistic experience of global risks and material interdependencies. G8 leaders are the ones who exercise power and influence with the decisions that they make. According to Beck and Grand (2010), “the basic message of cosmopolitan realpolitik is this: The future is open. It depends on decisions we make” (p. 437). Religious leaders speak into that decision process with questions of “in whose interests” do the G8 leaders make these decisions.

Future research on reflexive governance will need to explore whether and how the plurality of perspectives offered by religious leaders is taken into account by third-party observers and/or the G8 leaders themselves. Further research is also needed to explore how governance dynamics operate within religious networks including the interplay between first-order and second-order reflexivity in the ongoing Summit process (Rhodes, 1997, 2003, 2007). In what ways is the Summit process affected by tensions between pressures to maintain action capacity and pressures to open up problem handling for further contextualization (Voss, Bauknecht, & Kemp, 2006; Voss & Kemp, 2005)? Are there points where the Summit process became so focused on problem solving that they ceased to ask the larger questions? Are there times when leaders were so focused on questioning underlying assumptions and priorities that the strategic capabilities of the gathering eroded? Does the Summit process vacillate between the two extremes, or does the process at some point open up to adopt a diverse portfolio strategy of experiments and alternate frameworks of problem definition, goals and options? Further research is also needed to determine the extent to which religious leaders actually represent their constituencies and are able to mobilize them toward political engagement on behalf of the interests of the vulnerable.

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