Religion and diplomacy: a British view from the Vatican

Nigel Baker

Former UK Ambassador to the Holy See (2011–2016)

ABSTRACT
Based on a long experience in the field of international relations, and particularly his last task as British Ambassador to the Holy See (2011–2016), the author advocates a need for governments to pay attention to, and better understand the role of, religion in human communities as a way to run effective internal and foreign activities. The formation of foreign affairs officials requires a more humanistic approach, which includes the comprehension of religion as a backbone for cultural identity, social engagement and human development. The lack of sensibility for the religious dimension of peoples often makes diplomatic efforts unsuccessful.

Introduction
The more we understand religion and the better able we are as a result to be able to engage religious actors, the more effective our diplomacy will be in advancing the interests and values of our people. (Kerry 2016)

Religion and diplomacy
They are not always considered comfortable bedfellows. Many diplomats think an understanding of religion is a dispensable luxury in relation to their work. I disagree, and the purpose of this article – buttressed by US Secretary of State John Kerry’s very clear endorsement – is to set out why. What follows is a personal rather than an official view. It is informed by my nearly five years accredited to the Holy See, and also reflects my experiences serving as a diplomat elsewhere, from Bolivia and Cuba to Central Europe. It is therefore very much a practitioner’s perspective, and a British diplomat’s perspective at that, but it also bounces off a great deal of excellent recent work being done internationally in this field at the interface of academia and diplomatic practice – itself a positive sign.

My thesis is that we have a problem in the UK, at least at official level in government, but also more broadly in the thinking of much of our educated elite. It is a problem that, by definition, the Holy See does not suffer from. And it is this.

CONTACT Nigel Baker Nigel.Baker@fco.gov.uk King Charles Street, London, SW1A 2AH
© 2016 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
shorthand, using the term popularised by Alastair Campbell and Baroness Warsi, it is that we do not ‘do’ God.

I do not intend that by defining it as a problem, we should consider – within government or elsewhere – becoming more religious. Nor that government should start promoting religion as a ‘good thing’, whether or not you agree with the Prime Minister that ‘Britain is a Christian country’. That job of persuasion is, after all, principally the role of people of faith and our religious leaders. What I mean is that, as our society and culture have become less religious – if not, perhaps, less spiritual in some ways – we have within government become less attentive to religion. Sometimes deliberately so. And becoming less attentive has meant becoming less understanding. Less literate, as some would have it.

Why is this a problem? Well, in the world I inhabit – that of international affairs – successful foreign policy in a multipolar world stands or falls as much on our understanding of the other as of ourselves. And in a world where, according to various different studies, 80–90% of African and Asians, or 60% plus of Americans, consider themselves to be religious, and only around a third of Britons consider the same (and a third or more claiming they have no religion at all), we clearly need to make a conscious, extra effort with religion if we are to grasp what is happening in the world around us.

A new panorama of old roots

This is sometimes posited as a new issue, or at least one that has only had relevance since 9/11. It is certainly discussed a great deal more now than when I joined the Diplomatic Service in 1989, when it was more or less invisible as an issue. There is a lot more work done now on the nexus of issues around religion and foreign policy than back then. And about time too. But while 9/11 may have been a watershed in terms of perception, it clearly wasn’t in terms of what was happening on the ground. Let’s just take two voices from the 1990s, before the Twin Towers, to illustrate my theme; the decade – if you remember – when history ‘ended’. One is the voice of reason, if you like, from a devout Muslim perspective, that of Bin Sultan (1994), Saudi Arabia’s brilliantly successful ambassador to the United States over two decades. He was quoted in the New York Times in July 1994: ‘Islam is not just a religion but a way of life’, he says: ‘We Saudis want to modernize, but not necessarily Westernize’. The other is the voice of what we would now call Islamic extremism, the Hezbollah suicide bomber Salah Gandour in his last testament before killing 12 Israeli soldiers in Lebanon in, wait for it, May 1995, 20 years ago: ‘I shall, God willing, shortly after saying these words, be meeting my God with pride, dignity and having avenged my religion and all the martyrs who precede me on this route … Let us continue until we achieve our desired target and the Godly gratification and thus arrive at our Godly promise. We belong to God and to God we shall return’. I wonder if we were really listening, to either voice.

Diplomats at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are told that our raison d’être is to protect and promote the prosperity and the security of the United Kingdom. As an overall aim, I think that is reasonable. But, how can we possibly do it, and how could we believe we were doing it well 20 years ago, if we cannot
start to comprehend the two voices I have just quoted? As the government seeks to implement its policies for tackling extremism at home and overseas, and grapple with a Middle East context that bears more resemblance to pre-Westphalian than post-secular Europe, some Vatican commentators have been heard to ask: Do Western foreign policy experts undervalue or fail to understand the strategic importance of religion? Many in the Holy See think so. Is there substance to the charge? If so, what is the answer?

It is hardly revolutionary to argue that religious differences within and between states have, historically, caused conflict. By asserting that, it does not mean in the least that I dissent with Pope Francis when he told the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, in January 2015, that: ‘Religious fundamentalism, even before it eliminates human beings by perpetrating horrendous killings, eliminates God himself, turning him into a mere ideological pretext’ (Pope Francis 2015a). In other words, modern violence in the name of religion is instrumentalising faith, not practising it. But, interestingly, in the very same paragraph, he recognised that there was a role to be played by religious leaders in tackling such violence, expressing: ‘my hope that religious, political and intellectual leaders, especially those of the Muslim community, will condemn all fundamentalist and extremist interpretations of religion which attempt to justify such acts of violence’ (Pope Francis 2015a). The point was, perhaps, made clear by the decoration of the room in the Apostolic Palace where we were sitting, the Sala Regia, where Popes since the Middle Ages have received kings, princes and other secular leaders. The frescoes, by Giorgio Vasari, celebrated key moments of contemporary Papal statecraft, including the victory of the allied Christian fleet at Lepanto with allegories of Christian graces trampling on Muslim vices. Directly behind where Pope Francis was sitting is a particularly vivid and triumphant portrayal of the massacre of the Huguenots on St Bartholomew’s Eve in 1572.

The power of dialogue and reason when facing religious extremism

We have moved on since then – or, at least, the Roman Catholic Church certainly has! The Holy See has recently celebrated 50 years since the promulgation of the Vatican II document Nostra Aetate (‘In Our Time’), in 1965. Given the long history of inter-religious conflict and persecution, this ‘Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions’ was arguably one of the most important products of the Council. On 28 October last year, Pope Francis hailed his message condemning religious hatred: ‘From enemies and strangers, we have become friends and brothers. “Yes” to the rediscovery of the Jewish roots of Christianity; “no” to any form of anti-Semitism and condemnation of any resulting injustice, discrimination and persecution’ (Pope Francis 2015b). He reinforced his message with his visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome in January 2016. In the same speech last October, he made another point for leaders of all faiths: ‘Mutual knowledge, respect and esteem’, he argued, ‘constitute the way that … is similarly relevant to relations with other religions’ (Pope Francis 2015b). And, I would add, equally relevant to leaders and policy makers not driven primarily by faith at all.
In other words, foreign policy and security analysis needs to incorporate an understanding of religion, just as much as knowledge of economics, international law, political studies and human rights. Andrea Riccardi, the founder of the Sant’Egidio Community and a former Italian International Development Minister, has also made explicit the link between religious conflict, past and present, and current geo-politics. ‘Religion’, he told diplomats and others gathered in Rome to commemorate Nostra Aetate last year, ‘has been used both as the fuel to stoke the fire of war, and as the water to extinguish it’ (Vatican Conference 2015). His implication was that 2015 was, in this sense, no different from 1965, or indeed 1565. Hence, the need to work harder at inter-religious dialogue, and religious engagement, and for policy makers to treat religion seriously. It should not, he argued, just be regarded as a quaint and colourful optional extra to our work on extremism, security or conflict prevention and resolution.

An excellent recent example was the meeting in January 2016 of over 300 ulema – Muslim doctors of theology and sacred law – in Marrakesh, to consider the relationship between Islam and religious minorities. In effect, it was addressing issues central to our times: Islam and terrorism, the interpretation by modern extremists of sacred texts, tolerance in Islam towards the other. To really understand the message of the meeting, one needed to know who was there, and who was absent? Their relative roles in the wider Muslim community. Who was paying? Why certain topics were chosen, and others not discussed (such as the citizenship of non-Muslims in countries self-identified in their Constitutions as Muslim). I hope our embassy in Morocco had someone covering the event, and understanding it. The meeting’s deliberations were essential to our foreign policy and work on extremism.

**Religion is not avoidable**

As it happens, hardly a day goes by without a Diplomatic Telegram (Diptel for short) coming through to the centre from our global diplomatic network that does not address aspects of the interaction between religion, politics and security. What is the attitude of President Sisi of Egypt towards religion in the Egyptian society, as he takes on the Muslim Brotherhood? Are we seeing a resurgence of Hindu nationalism in Modi’s India? Has the Pope’s visit to the Central African Republic made a difference in the difficult relations between different communities there fanned by political manipulation and Muslim–Christian suspicion? What exactly are President Putin’s motives in taking on the mantle of protector of the Christians in the Middle East, garnering praise from some unlikely quarters, including some British members of Parliament? To what extent are his relations with the Patriarchate of Moscow significant in his foreign policy? Why are concert- and restaurant-goers in Paris gunned down in the name of Allah? How will a democratising Burma manage the complex relationship between energised Buddhist nationalism and ethnic and religious minorities in the country? Are there religious factors behind the backlash at the UN against the so-called ‘neo-colonialist’ human rights advances on issues like gender and free speech? I could cite many more contemporary examples of international issues in which religion is an important factor. The post 9/11 world – the world in which our
own diplomats are operating, and from where they are reporting – seems hardly the one for which secular theorists planned.

The reason we have a diplomatic network is to understand this world. Ask anyone in Whitehall what the USP of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is, and most would say: the global network of well over 200 embassies, high commissions and delegations around the globe. Our diplomats with their analytical, foreign language and project management skills. Our world view. To make the best use of that, our diplomats need to be out of the office, engaging with all elements in society of the countries to which they are accredited, getting under its skin. And, as we know, outside Europe it is an increasingly religious world.

That can be difficult for us. As post-modern, secular and secularised societies, the UK and many of our closest European allies are seen as, if anything, outliers to this global reality. My hosts in the Vatican often remind me that if we do not understand religion, or what drives people of faith, we cannot understand much of the rest of the world as currently constituted, as the statistics I mentioned earlier constantly bear out. If anything, the trends are against us. There are now more Chinese Christians than members of the Communist party. The Global South, with its far higher levels of religiosity than the Global North, is increasing demographically in absolute and proportional terms. The new megacities, with their mega-mosques and mega-churches, are havens for religious revivals. As the January 2016 meeting at Canterbury of Anglican Primates demonstrated, global Christianity is increasingly becoming a post-Western faith. One reason why Justin Welby is such an effective Archbishop of Canterbury is that, in a previous life he has lived and worked in Nigeria.

The ‘lived reality’ gap between a British diplomat and the people she meets in the field is hardly new. One thinks of the callow, public school-educated district commissioners of the old Colonial Service in the farthest corners of Sudan or India. Famously, the FCO’s internal analysis of our failure to predict the Iranian revolution concluded that we were poorly equipped to spot or understand the religious and other grass-root drivers visible in the bazaars and mosques behind the overthrow of the Shah, and the cultural legitimacy of the Ayatollah in the Shah’s westernising Iran. We fatally underestimated the power of faith – networks, history, authenticity – as inflation, political opposition, a growing gulf between the richest and the poorest, and lack of economic trickle-down took hold. Sherard Cowper-Coles, a former British ambassador to Israel, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, described our 1979 performance as ‘a failure of imagination’ in his memoirs, despite Iran and the Middle East attracting some of the finest brains in the office at the time (Cowper-Coles 2012).

**Our limitations**

But, I am not sure how much we have done to redress the problem. Indicative, perhaps, of this continuing blind spot were the comments of one senior British diplomat at one of the Jubilee Dialogues hosted by the FCO in 2012. As the subject matter was religion and foreign policy, an event hosted by a British minister showed that some things had changed. But, 30 years of official thinking that had consigned religion to the Room 101 of policy analysis meant that the senior diplomat’s contribution was largely limited to the rather grudging comment that it was right for the FCO, when
looking at religion and foreign policy, to consider, and I quote, ‘the irrational alongside the rational’. He was clearly not convinced. The Bishop of London, sitting next to him, nearly fell off his chair.

So, despite some excellent analysis evident in Diptels from across our global network, we still seem to tie ourselves up in knots on issues relating to religion and foreign policy. We struggle to understand and engage with governments and societies where religion is considered a public – even state – affair, not a matter exclusively for the private conscience. We can appear tone deaf to concerns springing from religion, including when promoting our values and our development objectives. Our international aid administrators often appear to see religion, when they encounter it, as a problem to be overcome rather than as an opportunity to harness (although there are plenty of examples ‘from the field’ where engagement with religious communities and leaders has helped further development objectives, from anti-malarial work in Nigeria to overcoming Taliban resistance to anti-polio programmes in Pakistan). The first modern Pope from outside Europe often reminds us in his speeches of the dangers of an empathy gap between the West and its values, and the rest, and why this makes it more difficult for us to make the right decisions on critical foreign policy issues. He told diplomats in that same Sala Regia, on 11 January, that: ‘In facing the issue of migrations, one cannot overlook its cultural implications, beginning with those linked to religious affiliation’ (Pope Francis 2016). When our secular liberalism is open to interpretation as someone else’s neo-colonialism, we risk our messages falling on stony ground. And if we can’t get our messages across, we can no longer persuade others of the rightness of our views, the shibboleth of foreign policy since time immemorial.

This is also problematic when identity matters to politics, and where religion is essential to that identity. Some have criticised the British government for appearing to find it easier to speak out explicitly to support Yazidi rather than Christian minorities in the Middle East (or even just preferring the generic ‘minorities’, which implies concern, but a lack of understanding of specific contexts, circumstances and needs). We have been accused of allowing Assad and Putin to get away with their self-proclamation as the defenders of Christian, Alawite, Shi’a and other minorities in Syria, while the UK, it is claimed, is seen as siding with the same Sunni Jihadists (or versions of the same) that our extremism agenda is designed to counter. Some, like Wood (2015), argue that our and others’ insistence that ISIL/Daesh is not Islamic – or, at least, not inspired by a certain strand of thinking in Islam – is as much a product of wishful thinking (including of mainstream Muslims in our own society) as hard research. And, we sometimes seem muddled as to where religious practice and its many different manifestations appear in the hierarchy of human rights, perhaps because most of the religion and foreign policy work, we do tend to be pigeon-holed under ‘freedom of religion or belief’. We argue that human rights are indivisible and universal, and it is fair to say that the UK track record as defenders of human rights as enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration is, arguably, better than most. But, we struggle – and the fall-out from Charlie Hebdo has shown that we are not alone in this – when Article 18 on conscience and belief appears to come into conflict with other rights enshrined in the UDHR, including that on Freedom of Speech that immediately follows it. Indeed, that has been an issue in the domestic courts in recent years.
Improvements too: training and learning from others

None of this is to say that we have not made any progress. In the FCO, we have, especially with training. Since 2012, we have a well-regarded, if optional, one-day training course on religion and foreign policy, delivered by the Woolf Institute and attended by civil servants from across Whitehall. I have been invited to speak at the course from the point of view of a practitioner, and have been impressed by the range of officials wanting to attend from across Whitehall – DFID, MOD, UKTI as well as FCO (though attracting more senior colleagues has been more of a struggle …). Based on that success, we have started up a new, more in-depth course with the Woolf Institute on ‘definitions and narratives of global faith relations’. There is a brief module in the Diplomatic Academy Foundation course on religion and foreign policy, that all of our new recruits will take. In recent years, Wilton Park has taken a serious look at some of the relevant questions, including looking closely at foreign policy, religion and human rights, and similarly at development issues. The Ditchley Foundation has done the same. And a series of lunchtime debates organised by our Human Rights and Development Department within the FCO have, in recent years, brought questions of religion and foreign policy – not covered by economics, international law or international relations courses – to the attention of a large number of FCO colleagues, if in a sporadic way. There is evidence that the inter-relationship of religion and foreign policy is receiving closer (if still modest) attention in one or two other European capitals, including Paris, Vienna and within the European External Action Service, and the British Foreign Office has taken an active role in the cross-border thinking that that has generated. Faith-based actors, from Lambeth Palace to think tanks, are now a regular feature in ministerial and official diaries. I think it is true to say that the FCO of 2016, at home and overseas, is probably more open to religious leaders and interlocutors than at any time in our modern history. The Department for International Development has also put a welcome toe in the water, with the drafting a few years ago of ‘Faith Partnership Principles’ to underpin its interaction with faith-based NGOs and aid organisations.

The trouble is that a lot of this effort has been, if not ad hoc, then intermittent, lacking a systematic conceptual framework, genuine resources, and consistent senior level attention. I think that we still need to be better equipped. And, interestingly, the US seems to get it. For them, it really is strategic. Madeleine Albright’s book, *The Mighty and the Almighty*, is often quoted in aid here. After all, she wrote there that US diplomats ‘should […] reorient our foreign policy institutions to take fully into account the immense power of religion to influence how people think, feel and act’ (Albright 2007), John Kerry agrees. In a September 2014 article in the Jesuit magazine *America*, he wrote: ‘One of the most interesting challenges we face in global diplomacy today is the need to fully understand and engage the great impact that a wide range of religious traditions have on foreign affairs. I often say that if I headed back to college today, I would major in comparative religions rather than political science. That is because religious actors and institutions are playing an influential role in every region of the world and on nearly every issue central to US foreign policy…. The challenging array of foreign policy issues we face today demands that we recognize a
fundamental truth: Our foreign policy needs a more sophisticated approach to religion’ (Kerry 2014).

More importantly, Kerry has found resources to back up the words. Recent visitors to the Vatican include Arsalan Suleman, the US special envoy to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and Ira Forman, the special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism. Forman works alongside another special representative to Muslim communities, as well as David Saperstein, the ambassador at large for international religious freedom, another recent US visitor to the Vatican. These envoys now operate under the umbrella of Sean Casey’s 2013-created and well-staffed Office of Religion and Global Affairs (ORGA) at the State Department. The explicit function of the more than 20 officials working for the ORGA is ‘to advise the Secretary [of State] on policy matters as they relate to religion; support our posts and bureaus in their efforts to assess religious dynamics and engage religious actors; and serve as an entry point for individuals, both religious and secular, who would like to engage the State Department in Washington on matters of religion and global affairs’. Not only that, but the office is located just down the corridor from that of Secretary Kerry. The proliferation of envoys can sometimes lead to irritation and confusion. But, ORGA focuses their work, carries analytical punch and shows strategic seriousness. Not only that, but I have been impressed by the range and level of US foreign policy officials who have made a line for the Vatican in the time of my mission there since 2011, working on issues from Latin America to the Great Lakes. This is putting into practice Kerry’s view that diplomats should ensure that imams and archbishops are as common in their little black contacts books as politicians and military officers. The US–Cuba rapprochement, with the strong involvement of Pope Francis and the Catholic Church in Cuba, was perhaps the best example to date of such a systematic approach in action.

The US appears convinced that a more strategic approach to religion and foreign policy, underpinned by more religiously literate analysis, is helping it avoid some of the bear traps. We could learn from their approach. A recent British Council sponsored Anglo-American dialogue – organised by Leeds University’s Centre for Religion and Public Life, the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown University, and the Institute for Global Engagement – proposed a more ‘religion-attentive foreign policy’, and recommended the appointment of a director of religion and global issues at the FCO to be responsible for developing a cross government religious engagement strategy (Birdsall et al. 2015). Personally, I prefer this approach to the idea, often bruited, of a Religious Freedom envoy, as it is encompasses a broader set of issues in a more strategic way, and is less driven by specific concerns around religious freedom. Others have suggested devoting more resources to cross-cutting training, strengthening religious literacy across the FCO, and thereby equipping our diplomats, before they are posted around the world to destinations from Beijing to Bangalore, for their encounters with religion and its variety of manifestations in the countries to which they will be accredited. Even if, at a time of public spending austerity, we lack the money for new people and structures, there are plenty of people out there in the religious, academic and policy think tank worlds whom we could be consulting more systematically, empowering to help us, or supporting more directly. In the modern world, ‘doing God’ – sensitively, sensibly, without exaggeration – should be an integral
element in our foreign policy work and training. The US model offers one example of the way to go, even if we cannot deploy quite the same scale of resources.

The need for an identity and humanistic formation

It is also right that we look at religion and foreign policy in the context of our counter extremism strategy. One of our difficulties in tackling extremism is that religious fundamentalists often see themselves as reacting, negatively and sometimes violently, to us and everything we understand and believe in: the modern, secular, democratic society. Religious extremists tend to ascribe the marginalisation of faith in the public sphere to historical processes of modernity and secularisation, especially in the West. This leads them to a search for a golden past – a Caliphate in the case of Daesh – that supposedly existed before the modern corruption set in (something that is inherent, as far as they are concerned, in our ‘British values’). Proselytes are attracted by the very opposite of what we stand for – by we, I mean the secular, liberal, educated officials tasked to tackle extremism. And, to be fair, it is not just the extremists who believe that our neglect of religion in the public policy sphere, our belief that faith does not have anything useful or relevant to say about politics, life or modern society – manifested in the political criticism of bishops when they appear to be speaking out of turn – has contributed in part to a fundamentalist rejection of our way of life. In this year’s speech to the Holy See Diplomatic Corps, Pope Francis argued that: ‘Extremism and fundamentalism find fertile soil not only in the exploitation of religion for purposes of power, but also in the vacuum of ideals and the loss of identity – including religious identity – which dramatically marks the so-called West. This vacuum gives rise to the fear, which leads to seeing the other as a threat and an enemy, to closed-mindedness and intransigence in defending preconceived notions.’ (2016). In Pope Francis’s concept of foreign policy, we need to know ‘the other’ better, not demonise or cut ourselves off from it.

What the Pope is implying, I think, is that Western policy-makers, grappling with extremism, need to show not only greater understanding of what they are dealing with, but also a little humility. We, too, can also fall into the ‘them’ and ‘us’ dichotomy in which extremism thrives, and fail to dig deeper into motivation and cause. The Pope must be right when he says that: ‘Only a distorted ideological form of religion can think that justice is done in the name of the Almighty by deliberately slaughtering defenceless persons, as in the brutal terrorist attacks which occurred in recent months in Africa, Europe and the Middle East’ (2016). As policy makers and governments, we need to understand where such deviant forms of religion arise, and why now. We need to be equipped to comprehend the religious drivers that overtly (even if not exclusively, and not in all cases) motivate extremists, and the religious context in which they have been nurtured. We need to be able to know when religion is not a factor in an issue, even if claimed to be so. And, we need to understand why what we believe (or do not believe) is part of the problem. Or, at least, why it is part of their problem. I was pleased to see that one of the key recommendations of the much debated, and if I may say here, rather controversial Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life, is that: ‘Much greater religion and belief literacy is needed in every section of society, and at all levels’ (Commission on Religion and
Belief in Public Life (2015). That includes government, and the Foreign office as part of it.  

In a recent speech, the Holy See Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin, stressed the importance of education in the humanities, within a strong civic education curriculum, as key to the long term battle against extremism. He argued that we needed to rediscover ‘the centrality of the human against an excessively technical approach’. His implication was that modern education systems, focused on providing technical skills for the job seeker, fail to provide the young with the basic philosophical and ethical tools required on the one hand to become good citizens, and on the other to resist the siren attractions of rejectionist and extremist persuasion (on that note, it is interesting that initial research into the educational backgrounds of British recruits to Daesh have shown a marked disproportion of people with scientific or technical training). If peace is more than ‘the absence of war’, he argued, then it needs an ethical and human rights basis to function, ‘which should be taught in the schools, the seminaries, and the madrassas’ (Parolin 2015). As a Cambridge historian, I’m bound to agree with him. He was not saying that our values are incompatible with faith. But, he was stressing, in a rather Burkean way, that government needs to be more than a technocratic manager of an economy. That diplomats need to be more than transactional negotiators, especially when up against a revival of what has been termed ‘identity politics’. We still need our creativity and imagination. We need to work out where to connect, and how.

In his address to the European Parliament in November 2014, Pope Francis used a very striking image to illustrate the point, at least as regards Europe:

One of the most celebrated frescoes of Raphael, he said, is found in the Vatican and depicts the so-called ‘School of Athens’. Plato and Aristotle are in the centre. Plato’s finger is pointed upward, to the world of ideas, to the sky, to heaven as we might say. Aristotle holds his hand out before him, towards the viewer, towards the world, concrete reality. This strikes me as a very apt image of Europe and her history, made up of the constant interplay of heaven and earth, where the sky suggests that openness to the transcendent – to God – which has always distinguished the peoples of Europe, while the earth represents Europe’s practical and concrete ability to confront situations and problems. The future of Europe depends on the recovery of the vital connection between these two elements. (Pope Francis 2014)

The Holy See is laying down a challenge to the West, including the United Kingdom. Education is the Holy See’s favourite long-term instrument for dealing with challenges. Whether the British education system is currently up to the task goes beyond this brief paper, and my competence. Short of that, greater and more systematic interaction between the secular and religious worlds could serve more immediate policy-making needs, including foreign policy. That needs creativity, imagination – so lacking, as we have heard, in our policy analysis of Iran 35 years ago – and for us not to be forgetful of, in the Pope’s words to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, ‘our great cultural and religious heritage’ (Pope Francis, 2016). It also needs a longer term and more strategic approach, beyond crisis management. Diplomats clearly have a role to play here. If, as many in the Muslim world believe, it is a problem for the West that young people no longer go to Church, thus limiting their ability to understand the power and importance of faith as a personal,
cultural and social phenomenon, it is up to the Foreign Office as the repository of British understanding of the world out there to overcome the gap.

The Holy See argues that interaction has to be two way, not just on our terms. When he spoke at Westminster Hall during the 2010 State Visit, Pope Benedict XVI called for ‘a profound and ongoing dialogue, for the good of our civilisation’ (Pope Benedict 2010) between the world of secular rationality and the world of religious faith. He did so, I think deliberately to an audience of British politicians, diplomats, academics, religious and business leaders, because he recognised and esteemed our refusal to accept reductionist or exclusive interpretations of democracy. It is one of our strongest national characteristics, he argued, but his implication was that we might be losing it. Pope Benedict may have had domestic policy-makers, law-makers and politicians in mind. But it is a challenge that many at the Holy See, including his successor, Pope Francis, would apply to the United Kingdom’s approach to foreign policy as well, and one I am not sure we have really yet taken up.

Notes

1. This article is adapted from a presentation given by the author to the Woolf Institute, Cambridge, on 2 February 2016.
2. See for example, Mandaville and Silvestri (2015) and Petito and Thomas (2015). Also, the book by Kissinger (1994) is suggested for reading.
3. Alastair Campbell, former Press Secretary to Prime Minister Tony Blair. Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, formerly Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Minister for Faith at the Department of Communities and Local Government. Alastair Campbell famously said that government should not ‘do God’. Baroness Warsi disagreed, including in her speech to the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, at the Vatican, on 14 February 2012.
4. Prime Minister’s Christmas message, 24 December 2015 (and in other speeches during his period as Prime Minister) (Cameron 2015).
5. Cited variously, including in Rinehart (2006).
6. In this regard, it is particularly significant the Joint Declaration signed by pope Francis and the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Kirill, on 12 and 20 February 2016, in Havana (Cuba), particularly its point 13: ”Interreligious dialogue is indispensable in our disturbing times. Differences in the understanding of religious truths must not impede people of different faiths to live in peace and harmony. In our current context, religious leaders have the particular responsibility to educate their faithful in a spirit which is respectful of the convictions of those belonging to other religious traditions. Attempts to justify criminal acts with religious slogans are altogether unacceptable. No crime may be committed in God’s name, ‘since God is not the God of disorder but of peace’ (1 Cor 14:33).” http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2016/02/12/joint_declaration_of_pope_francis_and_patriarch_kirill/1208117.
7. Author’s notes of meeting.
8. For example, see Wilton Park Conference Report, WP1311, February 2014.
9. Some of these issues are approached, from a religious leadership point of view, in the speeches that Pope Francis and his predecessors, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, have given to worldwide religious leaders in the different meetings at the Basilica of Saint Francis, in Assisi (Italy). Among other aspects, the popes have always stated that religious extremism, its promoters and beliefs, go away from the religious essence and the very dignity of human being.
10. See also the address of Pope Benedict XVI at the Bundestag during his apostolic visit to Germany (22 September 2011).
Notes on contributor

Nigel Baker was British Ambassador to the Holy See from 2011–2016. He presented his Credentials to Pope Benedict XVI on 9 September 2011, after serving 8 years in Latin America, as Deputy Head of Mission in the British Embassy in Havana, Cuba (2003–06) and then as British Ambassador in La Paz, Bolivia (2007–11). In July 2016, Nigel finished his posting, and is currently back in London. As the first British Ambassador to the Holy See ever to have a blog, Baker provided a regular window on what the Embassy and the Ambassador does. The blogs covered a wide range of issues, from Royal and Ministerial visits to Diplomacy and Faith, freedom of religion, human trafficking and climate change.

Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

References

Albright, Madeleine. 2007. The Mighty and the Almighty. New York: Harper Collins.

Bin Sultan, Bandar. 1994. New York Times, 10 July, 20.

Birdsall, Judd, Jane Lindsay, and Emma Tomalin. eds. 2015. “Toward Religion-attentive Foreign Policy: A Report on an Anglo-American Dialogue.” British Council ‘Bridging Voices’ Programme. file:///C:/Users/DA/Downloads/10398_CRPL_Report_WEB.pdf

Cameron, David (Prime Minister). 2015. “Christmas Message.” December 24. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/christmas-2015-prime-ministers-message

Commission on Religion and Belief in Public Life. 2015. Living with Difference, Community, Diversity and the Public Good. Cambridge: Woolf Institute, December 7, p. 9.

Cowper-Coles, Sherard. 2012. Ever the Diplomat. Glasgow: HarperPress.

Kerry, John (US Secretary of State). 2016. “Remarks at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy.” Houston, Texas, April 26. http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/04/256618.htm

Kerry, John. 2014. “Religion and Diplomacy.” America, September 14, 2015 Issue. http://americamagazine.org/issue/religion-and-diplomacy

Kissinger, Henry. 1994. Diplomacy. New York: Simon & Schuster (particularly the last chapter “The New World Order Reconsidered”).

Mandaville, Peter, and Sara Silvestri. 2015. “Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities.” The Brookings Institution Issues in Governance Studies No.67, January 29. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/IssuesInGovStudiesMandavilleSilvestrifinal.pdf

Parolin, Pietro (Cardinal). 2015. “Address to ‘Nostra Aetate’ Conference.” October 30 (in Italian). http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/parolin/2015/documents/rc_seg-st_20151028_parolin-nostra-aetate_it.html

Petito, Fabio, and Scott M. Thomas. 2015. “Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge: Italy as a Special Case of Religious Engagement in Foreign Policy.” The Review of Faith and International Affairs 13 (2): 40–51.

Pope Benedict, XVI. 2010. Address to Civil Society. London: Westminster Hall. https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile.html
Pope Benedict, XVI. 2011. “The Listening Heart. Reflections on the Foundations of Law.” 22 September 2011. https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html

Pope Francis. 2014. Address to the European Parliament, Strasbourg, November 25. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141125_strasburgo-parlamento-europeo.html

Pope Francis. 2015a. “Speech of the Holy Father to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See.” January 12. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150112_corpo-diplomatico.html

Pope Francis. 2015b. “Speech at the General Audience.” October 28. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20151028_udienza-generale.html

Pope Francis. 2016. “Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps.” January 11. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/january/documents/papa-francesco_20160111_corpo-diplomatico.html

Rinehart, James F. 2006. Apocalyptic Faith and Political Violence: Prophets of Terror. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Finlow, Pat, and Gerald, Fitzgerald 2014. “Religion, Foreign Policy and Development: Making Better Policy to Make a Bigger Difference.” 2014. Wilton Park Conference Report, WP1311, February.

Vatican conference. 2015. “Vatican conference on 50 Years since Nostra Aetate.” Pontifical Gregorian University, 28 October.

Wood, Graeme. 2015. “What ISIS really wants.” The Atlantic, March 2015. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/