The Intellectual Sources of Diplomacy’s Religion Deficit

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Since the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, there has been an outpouring of books and articles on religion and international relations (IR). Like the attacks themselves, however, the new focus on religion among IR scholars was so unexpected that one study labeled it religion's ‘return from exile’.

It had been a long exile indeed. Since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, a major premise of IR was that religion had been subordinated to the state. The result, as IR scholar Daniel Philpott puts it, was that most in the field simply ‘assumed the absence of religion among the factors that influence states’.

This essay is concerned with two questions. Given that a global resurgence of religion had been underway for decades, why did it take such a cataclysmic event to turn the attention of scholars to religion? Even more pointedly, why does much of Western diplomacy, to this day, resist engaging with the religious aspects of foreign policy? Even after a decade of post 9/11 discourse within IR and other disciplines, Western diplomatic establishments have continued to avoid incorporating religious ideas and actors into the way they encounter the world. What accounts for this religion-avoidance tendency?

The evidence for religion's rise has not been hidden. Indeed, at least during the last three decades of the 20th century, it has been abundant and easily accessible. Political scientist Timothy Samuel Shah dates the resurgence from the 1967 defeat by Israel of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader of secular Arab nationalism: ‘From that point onward, the legitimacy of Nasserite Arab nationalism suffered a precipitous decline. By the end of the 1970s,…Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini, “born again” U.S. President Jimmy Carter, and Pope John Paul II had dramatically demonstrated the increasing political strength of religious movements and

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1 This essay is adapted from chapter 2 of Thomas F Farr, World of Faith and Freedom: Why International Religious Liberty is Vital to American National Security (OUP 2008) 53–66.


4 Farr (n 1) 31–51.

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their leaders. In the following decades, religious phenomena such as Pentacostalism, Wahhabism, Confucian revivalism, Buddhist radicalism and Hindu puritanism had significant, and sometimes transformative, effects on the nations and regions in which they operated.

In 1994, sociologist Jose Casanova published a widely read book entitled *Public Religions in the Modern World*. The work, now a modern classic, imparted a mighty blow to the ‘secularization theory’—the centuries-old notion that religion was in decline with the advance of modernity. Indeed, Casanova argued that modernization was a means of religion’s flourishing, not the cause of its demise. Today, spurred not only by the events of 9/11 but also by overwhelming evidence, most scholars have joined Casanova in abandoning the idea that religion is disappearing from public affairs, or becoming, as it were, an interior aspect of human psychology with few implications for national or international politics.

But, while IR and other scholarly disciplines have turned their attentions towards religion, neither the decades of mounting evidence nor the events of 9/11 have significantly altered diplomacy’s hesitancy to acknowledge religion’s force in the world, let alone integrate religious ideas into the way it engages the world. In 1994 (the same year Casanova’s book was published), Henry Kissinger’s magisterial *Diplomacy* managed a tour d’horizon of modern Western international relations as if religion were of no relevance to the analysis, including during those critical decades—the 1970s and 1980s—when Kissinger himself was a principal foreign policy actor.

By 1998, the United States appeared to be on the verge of overcoming its aversion to addressing religion in foreign policy. That year, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act, mandating the advancement of religious freedom as a central element of US diplomacy. But in the ensuing years, the US State Department demonstrated a remarkable capacity to bury the new policy within its bureaucracy, allocating it virtually no resources and

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6 ibid.
9 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Simon and Shuster 1994). Kissinger's massive index does not include the word religion or its cognates.
giving it very low status. This remained the case even after the 2001 attacks led to a reassessment of US policies in the Middle East. Religious freedom played almost no role in the George W Bush administration’s ‘forward strategy of freedom’.

Over time, the rationale for religious freedom has garnered some grudging acceptance within the American diplomatic establishment, but overall the policy remains an anaemic and largely ineffective aspect of US diplomacy. Other Western nations have begun to show some interest: in 2011, Canada announced it would establish its own religious freedom office, and the UK and Germany have paid attention to the issue as well. But there has been little acknowledgement among Western states that the advancement of religious liberty might be a fruitful means of engaging a highly religious world.

Why this blind spot in Western diplomacy? In an attempt to provide at least a partial answer to that question, this article takes a brief foray into diplomatic intellectual history by examining some of the views that fed Western, and particularly American, understandings of the role of religion in the world. Much of its analysis focuses on the United States, but, mutatis mutandis, is adaptable to any Western democracy. The article does not contend that diplomacy’s ‘schools of thought’ are the only determinant of foreign policy, or even the most important. Most policies are the result of many factors, including a calculus of interests and the force of public opinion. But the habits of thought among diplomats—the diplomatic climate of opinion, as it were—clearly play a role and this is worth examining.

An additional factor is worth recalling here. Until recently, most Western democracies outside the United States were not thought to be participating in the global resurgence of religion. Western Europe, Canada, New Zealand and Australia were believed to have entered a post-religious phase of their respective histories, thereby avoiding in their internal affairs some of the problems associated with de-secularization. During the 20th century, French diplomacy, always influential in Europe, clearly internalized the French system of laïcité, with its removal of religion to the margins of public life. This system was influential in the Middle East, including in Ataturk’s Turkey and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

Notwithstanding the continuing influence of French secularism, however, Europe’s post-religion era seems, in retrospect, to have been exaggerated on at least two counts. First, what had been understood as religion’s demise appears in some cases (possibly excluding the case of France) to have actually been the replacement of Western institutional religion by a more individualized form of

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religious devotion—what Grace Davie has labelled 'believing without belonging'. Moreover, there are some signs—perhaps still faint—of a revival of more traditional Christian groups in some areas of Western Europe. Second, the unanticipated growth of Islam within Western Europe, including in France, has countered what may otherwise have been a more definitive move towards the removal of religion as a matter of public concern.

In short, it may be the case that inaccurate Western perceptions of religion's decline have fed a lack of diplomatic attentiveness to the non-Western resurgence of both institutional and public forms of religious expression. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that Western European diplomacy has reflected broad public suspicion of religious ideas and actors in political life. Of course, diplomatic establishments do not always reflect popular opinion. That phenomenon—the operation of elites without significant reference to broader cultural preferences or characteristics—has arguably been at work in American diplomacy, as we shall see.

We now turn to the question of how two intellectual tendencies in American foreign policy have treated religion in the international order. The first is realism, which was highly influential under the administrations of George HW Bush (1988–92) and of his son, George W Bush, prior to the 9/11 attacks (2000–01). The second is liberal internationalism, which was dominant under the two Clinton administrations (1992–2000). After September 2001, the Bush administration came under the influence of a third orientation known as neoconservatism. Notwithstanding their very different views of the world and how foreign policy should be pursued, it is striking that they all arrive at a similar conclusion about the religious beliefs and practices of others: except in extremis, those beliefs and practices should not affect in any substantive way how foreign policy is conducted.

Understanding why this premise has dominated foreign policy thinking can help Western diplomats at they ponder how to engage a world highly influenced by public faith.

### 1. Realism, Power and Passion

Realists are most clearly defined by the view that the international order is a Hobbesian system of competition among nations for power. It is, in effect,
a system of anarchy, defined as such by the absence of any common external power. An effective foreign policy manoeuvres within this anarchic power structure to maintain balance and stability. In general, a realist will sanction military force only when vital national interests are threatened. Many realists have isolationist predilections that lead them to worry about overreaching, and are skeptical about excessive involvement in the internal affairs of others. Typically, realists do not view the domestic circumstances of other states and the internal policies of their governments as a major factor in foreign policy decisions. They tended to view the Cold War more as a great power struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union than as an ideological struggle between communism and freedom. Internal developments, realists have traditionally argued, are poor guides to the external behaviour of governments which must occupy our attentions.

The beliefs and actions of religious individuals and communities are, therefore, not typically relevant to the realist’s understanding of international affairs unless they drive the policy decisions of governments or help us to understand the levers of power. This caveat should in theory permit realists to credit some role for religious actors, if not to their ideas. Moreover, many of the realists of the post World War Two period were not so much moral sceptics as they were pragmatists who were sceptical of pursuing idealist goals. Both Reinhold Niebuhr and George Kennan, for example, accepted the existence of objective moral truths but were sceptical that it was possible for some nations to spread democracy or human rights to others.

And yet, realist categories did not prove useful in understanding the rise of Khomeinist Shiite theocracy in Iran. In American foreign policy precincts, neither realists nor other worldviews came anywhere close to predicting the emergence of revolutionary Shiism, much less its impact on IRs. Realists have often misunderstood or overlooked in the early stages other contemporary manifestations of religion, including the Taliban in Afghanistan, the role of Confucianism in East Asia, the varieties of Hinduism in India, the contributions of Roman Catholicism to ending the Cold War, the growth of religious communities in China, the Wahhabist faction in Saudi Arabia or the emergence of transnational Islamist terrorism.

The world order assumed by realists has also contributed to their tendency to set to the side religious ideas and actions. That order was created by the 17th century Peace of Westphalia, which ended the European wars of religion,

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18 E-mail from Professor Daniel Philpott, 25 July 2007.
19 Farr (n 1) 31–32.
institutionalized the relationships between sovereign nation-states and subordinated religion to the power and authority of sovereign governments. Henceforward, governments had no warrant to interfere in the internal affairs of other sovereign states, especially on behalf of or against a particular religious community.20

Realism proved reasonably effective as the intellectual substructure of US containment policy during the Cold War, but there were also fault lines. Most realists failed to predict or even conceive of the collapse of communism and the Soviet empire. Realists tended to assume the permanency of both, as well as the bipolar world of US-Soviet ascendancy within which their theory operated so comfortably. But the internal dynamics of the Soviet Union, and, in particular, the appeal of political freedom and human rights both in Russia and its satellites, proved unexpectedly powerful in the collapse of the empire that took place between 1989 and 1991.

In the early 21st century, some realists have attempted to recalibrate their worldview to account for the threat of Islamist terrorism and the popularity of democracy.21 The spread of democratic movements has, in particular, generated a greater, if still limited, realist focus on developments within societies, including the impact of confessional communities. But religion’s place in the realist analysis remains almost exclusively as a gauge of power-seeking behaviour. Almost nowhere do realists credit the religious impulses of men and women as anything more than a manifestation of political appetite or the drive to power.

The quintessential realist of the Cold War, former Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, has kept up a remarkable level of commentary in the post 9/11 world. In a 2005 essay, he warned the Bush administration against applying Western political models, created over centuries among what he called ‘homogeneous’ Western societies, ‘to ethnically diverse and religiously divided societies in the Middle East, Asia and Africa’. In multiethnic societies, he noted, majorities will naturally subjugate minorities unless the political system prevents it through divided powers, checks and balances. Achieving such systems through negotiations between hostile ethnic groups is ‘an extraordinarily elusive undertaking’.

An example of the problem, wrote Kissinger, is Lebanon, where past foreign interventions by the United States, Syria and Israel have prevented the nation’s collapse into sectarian violence between Christians, Sunnis, Shiites and Druze. What is required today, he argued, is an agreed political framework among these parties brokered by and overseen by the international community

21 See, for example, Robert F Ellsworth and Dimitri K Simes, ‘Realism’s Shining Morality: The Post-Election Trajectory of U.S. Foreign Policy’ (2004–05) 78 The National Interest 5–10.
‘to guarantee that the conflicting passions do not once again erupt into violence...’

This is classical realist analysis applied to contemporary problems. It applies the balance of power model to internal communities as well as to external state policies. It is open to the role of the international community, albeit in a restrained way. It acknowledges the importance of democratic political institutions and the difficulty of sustaining them. But it also reflects realism’s secularist principles by failing to envision, or even imagine, any role for the doctrines of domestic religious communities in bringing about the political framework that can resolve Lebanon’s problems. It, thus, has nothing to say about how diplomacy might influence those communities. They are, in Kissinger’s analysis, little more than repositories of ‘passions’ which necessarily will come into conflict unless managed by outside forces.

Kissinger is surely correct that a long-term political solution to conflict in any multi-ethnic and multi-religious society must involve some system of federalism, separation of powers or other carefully constructed checks and balances. But where religious communities are powerful political players, as they are in every country of the Middle East and much of Asia, it will be important for them to sanction the political framework as consistent with their religious teachings, or at least acquiesce in political institutions as compatible with their beliefs. These teachings and beliefs are not, of course, the only factor in the decisions of political or religious leaders, but recent history should have taught us not to ignore them or assume them away.

Kissinger’s secularist assumptions are also revealed in his comment on the ‘homogeneity’ of Western societies. Here, he simply assumes that American religious communities—products, after all, of the Westphalian system of sovereign states in which religious strife had been defeated—were passively compliant because colonial Americans were ethnically and religiously homogeneous. While it is true that Anglo-Saxon ethnicity dominated the colonies prior to the 19th century, the conflation of religion and ethnicity is a mistake typical of foreign policy elites and is misleading (as it is in Lebanon, where confessional groups are not divided along ethnic lines). It underestimates the fierce doctrinal contentions that beset 17th century Anglo-Saxon Protestant America, and which had to be addressed within and among the various religious groupings in order to create the 18th century United States’ regime of religious freedom.

Why have realists continued to avoid the issue of religion in the international system, even after 9/11, except as a lever of power? In part, the answer is that they are trapped in the intellectual construct they have adopted, and in the assumption that religion is inherently irrational. Religion is ordinarily

23 Kissinger uses the same word, ‘passions’ often in referring to religion. See Kissinger (n 17).
productive of ‘passion’ and little else. As such, religiously motivated behaviour is a unit of analysis only in understanding the drive to power.

A second example of realist thinking illuminates this point in a slightly different, but equally salient, way. In 2005, Rachel Bronson, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, wrote an essay from within a realist perspective entitled ‘Rethinking Religion: the Legacy of the U.S.-Saudi Relationship’. In it, she argues in distinctly unrealist fashion that ‘the role of religion in the U.S.-Saudi relationship has to date garnered far too little attention’. Importantly, she is not referring to American religious influences but those operating in Saudi Arabia. But neither her analysis nor her policy prescriptions stray from the classical realist view of religious communities as a purely negative factor feeding power politics.

Bronson focuses on the rise of Saudi Wahhabism during the last two decades of the 20th century. This brand of Sunni Islam, named for the puritanical and violent 18th century theologian, Muhammed ibn al Wahhab, has exported its extremist interpretations of the Koran and hadith for years, with devastating results for the Muslim and non-Muslim world. The House of Saud had retained power throughout the 20th century in part by manipulating and controlling its indigenous Wahhabis.

After the 1979 Shiite revolution in neighbouring Iran, Bronson writes, Wahhabism was viewed within the kingdom as a corrective to the potential destabilization of Saudi Arabia’s Shiite minority. The Saudi government thereafter permitted ‘the unconstrained radicalization of Saudi Arabia’s elaborate [Wahhabist] religious machinery’. The United States aided this development indirectly by supporting Wahhabis during the Cold War because they were anti-Communist. US aid was extended to the Wahhabi-inspired mujhaideen opposition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which had tragically led to the rise of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

Within Saudi Arabia, Bronson notes, the growth of Wahhabism led to anti-US and anti-Israel fanaticism, and harsh laws against women. Ultimately, it fed religious forces within the kingdom that turned against the Saudi royal house itself. Bronson quotes a Saudi national’s assessment of the problem: after 1979, Saudi ‘society was given an overdose of religion’.

The implicit bargain between the Saudi government and Wahhabism began to change in the early 21st century, she notes, beginning with the Al Qaeda attacks of 11 September 2001. The attacks were carried out by 19 men, 15 of whom were Saudi nationals, most of them with some connection to the Wahhabist understanding of Islam. But the real turning point came with the May 2003 bombings by Al Qaeda within Saudi Arabia itself. This led to a deepening sense of crisis and a conscious decision by the Saudi government to crack down on the radical religious establishment, an attempt to disband Al

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Qaeda, the toning down of mosque sermons and new financial and banking policies to interrupt the flow of Saudi funds to radicals inside and outside the kingdom.

What, then, is Bronson’s prescription for US foreign policy, given this altered landscape in Saudi Arabia? She fully understands its implications for fundamental American interests, and goes beyond the classical realist focus on access to oil and Saudi support for US policies in the Middle East. She subscribes to the view that Saudi Arabia will play a major role in either blocking or continuing to facilitate the spread of radical Islamist terror. Whether the Saudi government will take action ‘to diffuse the spiritual context that nurtures radical and violent groups’ is difficult to assess, she writes, but it must be done in some fashion. Key issues include ‘how the House of Saud resists and coopts its religious opposition’, whether the government can avoid the ‘politicization of religion’ and whether it can ‘help encourage opportunities [for Saudi citizens] outside or alongside religious pursuits’.

Bronson is clearly right about the importance of new opportunities, especially secular education for men and women. She recommends, for example, more US–Saudi educational cooperation and student exchanges. She writes persuasively that ‘broadening human capital will help wean some away from radical religious pursuits…’. But, like other realists and neorealists, she apparently gives no thought to a deeper proposition. There is little suggestion in her writing that religion—especially religion in the birthplace of Islam—is something more than an impulse to be controlled by government action or educated away by modern science and social science. The thing to be avoided at all costs is the ‘politicization of religion’. Nowhere is any consideration given to the central theme that characterizes American history: properly mixed and differentiated in a political framework, religion and liberal government can support one another.

Bronson, like other realists, believes that the only feasible way of addressing the Wahhabi problem is the control of the sect by the Saudi monarchy, as if the former were nothing but a particularly troublesome interest group gone awry. But Wahhabism did not simply emerge after 1979. Its influence on Saudi Islam runs deep and it is unlikely to be extirpated by the actions of a monarchy whose legitimacy is itself increasingly being challenged within the kingdom. If Wahhabism is to be contained as a destructive force in Saudi Arabia and the world, Muslims must reject its theological premises. Western foreign policies must begin to acknowledge this reality in its dealings with the Saudis.

The same point warrants emphasis as Western diplomacy seeks to engage with the nations and dynamics of the ‘Arab Spring’. The performance of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist parties in Egyptian parliamentary elections demonstrates that religion will play a significant part in the democratic saga unfolding in the Middle East. If the United States or Europe wish to have an impact on these developments, in particular on the question of whether
democracy emerges in a liberal and, therefore, stable form, they cannot afford to ignore the questions posed by religious ideas and actors.

Unfortunately, the record suggests that even post 9/11 neorealists have found it difficult to see religion as anything other than a negative, irrational force. They have got the story half right. But in ignoring the possibility of a positive, rational role for religion in liberal governance, and in simply refusing to address the natural desire of men and women to live in accord with the religious truths they believe they have discovered, ‘realism’ remains an utterly unrealistic basis on which to ground foreign policy in a world of faith.

2. Liberal Internationalism

While realism has traditionally exerted influence in American foreign policy, liberal internationalism has played a significant and perennial role as well. Moreover, it is a highly influential school of thought among European foreign policy thinkers. Within the American tradition, liberal internationalism is a descendant of Wilsonian idealism. Its continuing appeal, both in the United States and Europe, is in part due to the heavy emphasis it places on the tools diplomats are trained to use, such as negotiation and persuasion, the crafting of agreements and treaties and working within multilateral organizations to induce cooperation from other states.

Liberal internationalists, like most diplomats, have a natural interest in the domestic policies of states (something that realists typically lack), and believe that foreign policy should attempt to influence those policies through the medium of international organizations and the application of international law and norms. They also tend to see the content and purpose of public diplomacy in ways quite different from realists. The latter may see considerable strategic value in public diplomacy for the advancement of national interests, and may, in consequence, sanction assertive and, on occasion, covert efforts to undermine threatening ideologies. Liberal internationalists, on the other hand, are more likely to emphasize the transparent use of international norms as a means of convincing foreign societies of the wisdom of a particular position.

Liberals internationalists believe that governments should rarely employ military power unilaterally, but should normally seek and gain the imprimatur of international organizations such as the United Nations in order to achieve the kind of legitimacy they believe flows from the international community. For their part, realists rarely reject multilateral organizations as such, but tend to see them as means rather than ends. They are associations in which support might be gathered for a nation’s foreign policies, not normative institutions that impart legal or moral legitimacy to such policies.

But the popularity of liberal internationalism in Western foreign policy establishments derives from more than its emphasis on diplomatic methods and
its idealistic quest for international legitimacy. Senior diplomats have often been educated in elite academic institutions and, partly as a result, tend to have a modern liberal and highly secularized worldview. The policies they seek to encourage in other countries often reflect this orientation. When it came to human rights, the foreign policy of the Clinton administrations, for example, tended to emphasize modern liberal concerns such as population control as a means of addressing the social and political problems of nations and mitigating damage to the world’s environment. The population problem was viewed under the two Clinton Secretaries of State (Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright) as a major human rights issue. At two international conferences focusing on women’s rights during the 1990s, international family planning was eagerly supported by the State Department bureaucracy, both as a means of furthering women’s rights and as a prudent approach to the problem of population growth.

When it comes to religion, liberal internationalists share with realists—albeit for very different reasons—a reluctance to take seriously the spiritual dimensions of other societies in their analyses and policies. Whereas realists see religion as relevant only to understanding the drive to power, liberals tend to see religious communities—especially traditional religious communities—as obstacles to the adoption of liberal policies. Examples of liberal scepticism about the political role of religion abound; they increased exponentially as a result of the rise of Islamist terrorism. And the fears are not limited to the Muslim world. Many have argued that comparably problematic fundamentalism exists in red-state American evangelicalism.25

An example of the intellectual basis for these concerns—typical of both American and other Western elites—appeared in a 2003 article in a respected foreign affairs journal, Foreign Policy. Two liberal scholars, Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, argued that Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington had in his ‘clash of civilizations’ argument fundamentally misunderstood the nature of the conflict between Islam and the West. Huntington had argued that Islam was deficient in its capacity for political democracy, but the World Values Survey (which Inglehart directed) indicated overwhelming support for democracy in the Muslim world.26

What truly separates Islam and the West, according to these scholars, is the West’s commitment to ‘gender equality and sexual liberation’, two factors that prove ‘time and time again to be the most reliable indicators of how strongly [a] society supports principles of tolerance and egalitarianism’.27 Neither of

27 Ibid 65.
these commitments is present, they point out, in countries where Islam exercises a strong influence on society and politics.

To demonstrate their argument, Inglehart and Pippa cite the answers given in Muslim nations to questions on the World Value Survey’s ‘Gender Equality Scale’. Some of the questions clearly have probative value in determining whether a society sees women as inherently inferior to men, and therefore whether such attitudes form obstacles to liberal governance. For example, most Muslim populations in the survey believed education more important for boys than girls, that men should have a greater right to work than women in a situation of high unemployment, and that men make better political leaders than women. While there may be economic factors that mitigate the gender biases revealed in the answers, there can be little doubt that the equality of women is a major stumbling block to political, social and economic development in many Muslim nations, and that Islamic teachings have considerable influence over Muslim views on that issue. For example, the Culture Matters Research Project at the Fletcher School of Tuft’s University has found a correlation between low levels of female literacy and low levels of development in nations formed by Islam.28

But one of the World Value Survey questions—the first in a sequence of five—highlighted the tension between modern liberalism and all traditional religions. ‘If a woman wants to have a child as a single parent but she doesn’t want to have a stable relationship with a man, do you approve or disapprove?’29 Disapproval was seen as a deficiency in progress towards tolerance and egalitarianism. But the question stipulates as normative the modern liberal understanding of human autonomy, namely that all persons are ‘unbound by moral ties antecedent to choice’.30 Protecting women’s rights, in this view, requires the elevation of human will such that other moral obligations involving the family and the child are subordinate. Most religious traditions on the other hand, and not just Islam, embrace a notion of prior human obligation, and the value of the traditional family, that represents a serious threat to the modern liberal project reflected in the World Values Survey.31

It is not difficult to see that diplomats and policy makers who share these assumptions about human freedom and human rights may have difficulty communicating with, let alone influencing, mainstream worldviews in most Islamic societies. Such views are unlikely to appeal to the Muslim women they presume to represent. The negative reception that the modern liberal project is

29 ibid 69.
31 The Culture Matters Research Project found the family to be integral to child rearing and education, a critical component in development and democracy. Harrison (n 28) 207–11.
likely to receive can be seen in the principles being espoused by Islamic feminists. Muslim feminism is a religiously and geographically diverse movement, united by a belief in the inherent dignity of all women. While universally condemning the anti-woman practices often associated with Islam, such as inequality under the law, forced marriages and genital mutilation, many Muslim feminists believe Islam, rightly understood, provides no warrant for the subordination of women. These women seek to establish Islam rightly understood through exegesis of the Koran and hadith; in other words, from the heart of Islam.\(^3\)

But Islamic feminists apparently do not seek the liberation of Muslim women by embracing the values represented as progressive and democratic in the World Values Survey. In her book *In Search of Islamic Feminism*, University of Texas Professor Elizabeth Warnock Fernea encountered throughout the greater Middle East what she labelled ‘family feminism’. Muslim feminists, she discovered, see the family, and the relationships between men and women within the family, as the centerpiece of feminism, not its solvent.\(^3\)

A second striking example of the conflict between traditional religion and the modern liberal project appears in an extraordinary essay published in 2005 by Human Rights Watch (HRW), one of the world’s oldest human rights institutions and widely respected in the liberal internationalist community. HRW has long been associated with the secularist left, but, unlike other human rights organizations, has also actively advocated for religious individuals and groups suffering persecution, even when those groups may be hostile to the HRW view of freedom.\(^4\)

The essay in question examines whether there is a ‘schism between the human rights movement and religious communities’. It engages in an unusually candid analysis of religion’s negative and positive impact on human rights advocacy, and admits that ‘the secular human rights movement sometimes sees conservative religious movements as an artifact of history and itself as contemporary, ahead on the “infinite road of human progress and modernity”’. Some human rights activists, the essay notes, are ‘tempted to dismiss such [traditional] faiths and cultures as obstacles to economic or human rights modernity’.\(^5\)

The authors call for more openness to religion and more cooperation between human rights and religious activists. But they also conclude that there is a deep divide between human rights properly understood and religiously informed moral judgments, a divide that must not be breached. While human rights activists should stand for the rights of believers to be free of persecution,
activists must also ‘directly oppose pressures from religious groups that seek to dilute or eliminate rights protections’. Human rights groups should oppose efforts in the name of religion to impose a moral view on others when there is no harm to third parties and the only “offense” is in the mind of the person who feels that the other is acting immorally. A footnote emphasizes that the principles of ‘no harm to third parties’ and the subjectivity of moral judgments are ‘essential to safeguarding the dignity and humanity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people’. Genuine human rights advocacy requires ‘a distinction between private religious morality and religiously motivated public policy that infringes rights’.36

A failure to maintain that distinction, the essay continues, has not only led to human rights abuses by governments and groups influenced by religious judgmentalism, but also to a disordered emphasis on religious freedom. In the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, the US Congress had capitulated to Christian and other religious groups in making religious freedom ‘a unique yardstick of foreign relations’. This law, the essay argued, was analogous to King Louis XIV’s 1649 declaration of French protection for Lebanon’s Maronites, or ‘19th century European powers’ “humanitarian interventions” against the Ottoman Empire to “protect persecuted Christians”.37

There is a grain of truth in this criticism. To some extent the 1998 religious freedom law was seen by many of its leading supporters as a means of protecting their co-religionists abroad—mainly Christians—from persecution, and this factor evinced scepticism and hostility from some at the State Department. But the deeper liberal objection was not to saving Christians or those of other faiths from torture or abuse. Indeed, that approach to religious freedom was generally adopted at Foggy Bottom as the best way to manage an unwanted, Congressionally imposed mandate.

The real problem among liberals at the State Department was the fear evoked in the HRW essay, namely that public manifestations of religious freedom could frustrate the aims of the liberal internationalist project, including its social objectives of sexual liberation and the determinative value of human autonomy. For that reason among others, liberal internationalists, like their counterparts in the human rights community, are content to view the ‘promotion of religious freedom’ as the protection of religious people from violence and persecution. They are hesitant to promote it as a right to adduce religiously informed moral arguments as one means of shaping public democratic institutions, or of persuading others to adopt a religiously informed understanding of individual flourishing and the common good.

The problem with this approach is that, whether liberal views are right or wrong, liberal internationalism cannot simply fail to respect religious ideas and

36 ibid 3, including fn 4; 22.  
37 ibid 3–4.
actors with which liberals disagree. To the extent that this kind of exclusiveness is the outcome, liberal internationalism is likely to be ineffective in dealing with Islam or any other form of public religious expression that opposes the liberal project.

3. Conclusion

What, then, can be said about the diplomatic climate of opinion represented in the foregoing examples? Two caveats bear repeating. First, intellectual history has its limits. No one intellectual orientation can be said to represent an entire administration, or era of policy action. For example, although the post 9/11 administration of George W Bush is widely and justly associated with neoconservatism, neither the President nor his Secretaries of State or Defense were neoconservatives themselves.

Second, while the examples cited in this essay are typical of the two genres—realism and liberal internationalism—they clearly do not exhaust the thinking of those who might associate themselves with either. For example, President Barak Obama’s Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, exhibits the primary characteristics of liberal internationalism. She has spearheaded a US drive to implement, through the United Nations, a key element of the modern liberal agenda, ie, asserting and codifying the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people. On the other hand, she has manifested elements of realism by, for example, arguing the primacy of economic issues over human rights in the US relationship with China.

With those caveats, however, the central argument of this essay remains: notwithstanding the substantial differences between realism and liberal internationalism in their premises about international affairs, and in the methods they choose to advance their respective views, the two intellectual categories come together in their aversion to engaging religious ideas and actors. It seems to me almost indisputable that this has been the case, and that this blindness to religion has harmed the interests of Western democracies. At the end of the day, both realists and liberal internationalists must strive to improve their willingness and their ability to account for the religious realities of the contemporary international order.