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A. Benzo



**Religione e sicurezza integrata**

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# Final remarks. Promoting FoRB through interfaith dialogue, religious engagement and development cooperation\*

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## ABSTRACT

**Against the backdrop of rising religious discrimination and intolerance at the global level, there is a need to strengthen and expand the tools available to advance freedom of religion or belief and promote mutual understanding among people of different religious or belief backgrounds. Among these tools, interfaith dialogue, secular/religious engagement, and development cooperation are gaining new traction and seem apt to fill the gaps existing in narrower and more traditional approaches to FoRB.**

## CONTEST

1. The potential of partnerships in the advancement of freedom of religion or belief – 2. The nexus between freedom of religion or belief, interfaith dialogue and secular/religious cooperation – 3. Freedom of religion or belief through the lenses of development and growth – 4. Conclusion.

*I am very grateful to the University of Foggia for having me on this important occasion. I would like to congratulate Professors Marco Ventura, Gabriele Fattori, and Pasquale Annicchino, along with their extended teams, on this successful initiative. The discussion we have had these days around religion and comprehensive security reflect a shared commitment among us. First and foremost, I believe that*

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*this is a very positive and encouraging example of cooperation between Government and academia on a key topic such as the advancement of freedom of religion or belief that requires the contribution, the involvement, and the creativity of all potential stakeholders.*

*I am also very glad to be part of this panel along with such distinguished colleagues and friends, from the United Nations, the OSCE, and academia. This proves once again that protecting freedom of religion or belief, promoting interfaith dialogue, and advancing comprehensive security is a collective effort that can succeed only if it is based on solid partnerships. Italy has always advocated for and actively supported multilateralism as the only effective way to tackle global challenges and answer the people's most fundamental needs.*

### **1. The potential of partnerships in the advancement of freedom of religion or belief**

As foreign policy becomes more complicated, new players emerge in the international arena, and polarization is on the rise, policy makers need the help of academia to better assess all the economic, social, legal, scientific, religious, and cultural implications of political phenomena and of possible lines of action. At the same time, the process of policymaking has acquired a participatory nature, at least in liberal democracies, as part of a wider effort to bring politics closer to people and make sure that the citizens' needs and aspirations are always taken into account.

In this spirit, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation cherishes its relations with academia, research centers, and think tanks. Since 2019, our Policy Planning Department has allocated more than 770.000 euros on a yearly basis to fund research projects on foreign policy-related topics. Such scheme aims at fostering broad and deep analyses on international issues that feature high on Italy's agenda. These include freedom of religion or belief, the role of religion in international politics, the *status* of religious minorities worldwide, the fight against terrorism and violent extremism, and the promotion of inter-faith cooperation. By fostering this dialogue between our Ministry and researchers, we strive to make sure that our policy-making activity always relies on a broad range of views and perspectives. This will help us strengthen the effectiveness of our policies, improve our foresight capability, and minimize the risks of shortcomings.

Our cooperation with academic institutions is not confined to promoting



research. We seek a constant, open, and wide-ranging exchange with civil society as a whole on international topics with a view to associating experts, researchers, and practitioners from different fields to the policy-making activity. We do this through a wide array of activities, including regular meetings at the Ministry to discuss ongoing trends in the geopolitical landscape, compare notes, and feed our understanding of world affairs.

I would like to seize this opportunity to spend a few words precisely on the collective nature of freedom of religion or belief, interfaith dialogue, and comprehensive security and on the reasons why partnerships (of different kinds and among different actors) have a vital role in these fields.

The starting point is the worsening situation of freedom of religion or belief worldwide. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Professor Nazila Ghanea, has pointed out to this earlier this year in her first report on the Landscape of freedom of religion or belief. She has warned that: «Whether in terms of discrimination on grounds of religion or belief, violations of freedom of religion or belief, or violations in the name of religion or belief, the challenges remain alarming. [...] the increase in actors does not seem to have equated to a reduction in the challenges for freedom of religion or belief. [...] The question remains whether these greater number of actions have increased effectiveness»<sup>1</sup>.

Non-governmental organizations play a key role in raising awareness and shedding the light on religious discrimination and persecutions worldwide. The 16<sup>th</sup> Report on religious freedom in the world by the Foundation Aid to the Church in Need highlights that over 4.9 billion people – i.e., slightly more than half of the world's total population - live in countries where religious freedom is under attack<sup>2</sup>. If we look more specifically at the situation of Christians, according to the 2023 yearly report by the NGO Open Doors, one Christian out seven suffers from persecution at the global level. This ratio increases to one out of five in Africa and to two out of five in Asia<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL, *Fifty-second session 27 February–31 March 2023, Landscape of freedom of religion or belief Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea*, par. 74. Accessible at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G23/006/31/PDF/G2300631.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>2</sup> A synopsis of the report is available at the following link: <https://acs-italia.org/sites/default/files/202306/sintesi%20rapporto%20liberta%20religiosa%202023.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> The full report is available at the following link: [www.opendoors.org/en-US/theadvocacyreport/](http://www.opendoors.org/en-US/theadvocacyreport/)



Such a bleak picture undoubtedly strengthens the argument that the advancement of freedom of religion or belief cannot be left to small circles - within either governments, international organizations, or civil society - but should become a whole-of-society endeavour involving religious actors themselves. In other words, we cannot afford the luxury of leaving unused any of the available tools to counter discrimination and violence based on religion or belief and, more generally, to tackle the global resurgence of religion in international affairs and the different manifestations – both positive and negative - of this trend<sup>4</sup>.

## **2. The nexus between freedom of religion or belief, interfaith dialogue and secular/religious cooperation**

One of these tools is interfaith dialogue and secular/religious cooperation. As noted by Professor Silvio Ferrari, the initiatives aimed at monitoring the respect of freedom of religion or belief all over the world would probably be much more effective if they were included within the framework provided by initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue and search for common ground among people with a different cultural and religious background<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, interfaith dialogue has drawn some criticism in the last few years by those who tend to consider it merely as a tool in the hands of political leaderships that use the interfaith label to hide their poor records of freedom of religion or belief with the blessings of religious authorities. According to this reading, freedom of religion or belief and interfaith dialogue and cooperation would even be at odds with one another. In light of my personal experience as a diplomat, I believe that, when assessing the potential contribution of interfaith dialogue to the advancement of freedom of religion or belief, we should be more careful not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. In my opinion, freedom of reli-

<sup>4</sup> P. FERRARA, F. PETITO, *An Italian Foreign Policy of Religious Engagement*, in *The International Spectator*, 51-1/2016

<sup>5</sup> S. FERRARI, *Freedom of Religion or Belief in International Law*, in A. BENZO (ed), *From Freedom of Worship to Freedom of Religions or Belief. Fostering the Partnership between States, the International Community and Religious Institutions, Proceedings of the Conference, Italian Cultural Institute, 18 February 2020, Embassy of Italy, Cairo, 2021*, p. 116. Accessible at: [https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/pubblicazioni/2021/03/from\\_fow\\_to\\_forb\\_proceedings\\_of\\_the\\_conference\\_ebook\\_en.pdf](https://www.esteri.it/mae/resource/pubblicazioni/2021/03/from_fow_to_forb_proceedings_of_the_conference_ebook_en.pdf)



gion or belief and interfaith dialogue should actually be seen as two mutually reinforcing goals and pursued simultaneously. Clearly, not any interfaith initiative will bring about more religious freedom per se and there are conditions to be met to ensure effectiveness and consistency.

In my view, there are at least three reasons (on a theoretical, a practical, and a methodological level) that can help us shed light on the nexus between freedom of religion or belief, on the one side, and interfaith dialogue and secular/religious or interreligious cooperation, on the other side, and make it more evident.

a) From a conceptual point of view, there can be no dialogue without freedom as much as there can be no freedom without dialogue. To be meaningful, they must co-exist. More specifically, in the absence of freedom of religion or belief, interfaith dialogue would largely remain an unproductive exercise involving only leaderships with no positive spill over effect on their respective communities. Similarly, in the absence of interfaith dialogue, freedom of religion or belief would not be coupled with the benefits deriving from constant exchange, interaction, and cooperation among people with different religious or belief affiliations. People belonging to different religious or belief communities should not simply co-exist within silos, running “parallel lives” within the same society, but rather enrich one another in a constant process of cross-fertilization of ideas and experience the added value of cooperation across the lines of ethnic and religious affiliation. When this is not the case, society will be more likely to suffer from underlying divisions and tensions along sectarian divides.

b) From a concrete point of view, interfaith dialogue is primarily a means to promote mutual understanding and knowledge among people with different religious or belief affiliations. This is how we should look at interfaith dialogue in the first place, rather than a mere outreach activity. Negative stereotyping, scapegoating, and hate speech are drivers of religious discrimination and even persecution. Therefore, interfaith dialogue can be utilized as a means to promote freedom of religion or belief by countering religious discrimination through the dissemination of mutual knowledge. This reminds us of the centrality of education in promoting equality and non-discrimination, which also widely reflected in the 2019 OSCE Policy Guidance on Freedom of Religion or



Belief<sup>6</sup>. To be effective in this regard and have a real impact on people's lives, interfaith dialogue should involve not only religious leaderships but also the grassroots level and reflect their expectations and aspirations.

c) Last but not least, I believe that freedom of religion or belief should not be advanced only on a purely inter-governmental level but through a multi-stakeholders approach, that involves also religious actors, both leaders and community members. This approach looks more effective for different reasons. To understand the *status* of religious or belief freedom in a certain country or region, governments and international organizations need to consult with religious or belief actors. First and foremost, there is an information need that can only be met if religious or belief leaders are listened to on a regular basis. Seeking the advice of religious actors on the ground is a way not only to get first-hand information but also to make sure that subsequent action is tailored on real needs and devised in a way that does not have any unintended or counterproductive consequence. Secondly, it is important also to recall that, unlike other fundamental human rights, freedom of religion or belief has both an individual and a communal/collective dimension and that both need to be taken into account in any assessment or policymaking activity<sup>7</sup>. An excessive focus on the individual dimension of freedom of religion or belief may lead us to overlook ongoing violations. Indeed, restrictions on the organizational autonomy or on the activity of religious communities may have a direct impact on individual rights of community members - chief among them their right to worship - especially in the case of people belonging to unrecognized religious communities in those countries where the enjoyment of certain rights and prerogatives, despite being integral components of freedom of religion or belief, are made conditional upon State recognition. For the same reason, religious players should equally commit, along with governments and international organizations, to the promotion of this fundamental right, and not just for their own communities (which is quite natural) but for all, in line both with the universal nature of freedom of religion or belief and the fact that it is a "public good"

<sup>6</sup> G. FATTORI (a cura di), *Libertà religiosa e sicurezza*, Pacini, Pisa, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> P. DANCHIN, W.F. SULLIVAN, S. MAHMOOD, E.S. HURD, *Politics of Religious Freedom: Case Studies*, in *Maryland Journal of International Law*, 29-1/2014.



benefiting society as a whole.

There is an additional reason why interfaith dialogue matters and it has to do with the benefits deriving from the interaction among religious actors themselves (which governments and international organizations can encourage, while avoiding any interference). Threats to freedom of religion or belief are manifold and diverse and are driven by a wider and wider array of forces antithetical to the free practice of religion<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, the danger of the misuse and the weaponization of religion is always looming. While it is mainly States that exploit religion for political purposes, sometimes this happens with the proactive cooperation of religious authorities in search for protection and power, mainly within autocratic states. In such cases, interfaith dialogue can pull religious authorities out of self-referentiality and away from unhealthy relations with political leaderships by exposing them to the external pressure and scrutiny of some of their counterparts elsewhere in the world, in particular those based in liberal democracies.

The collective and participatory approach to the protection and the promotion of freedom of religion or belief is also reflected in a number of OSCE documents and initiatives. The notion of comprehensive security developed by the OSCE includes a human dimension that places respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal *status* as issues connected to politico-military and economic-environmental security. This means that comprehensive security is a collective endeavour requiring the full involvement of all potential stakeholders. As an integral part of society, religious actors and communities should also play a role in this regard. When major, crosscutting issues are at stake, religions – or at least some of them – should have a seat at the table<sup>9</sup>.

In order to cooperate with religious actors on issues pertaining to human security and beyond, secular players need to engage with them in a systematic way. Interreligious engagement – as this kind of interaction is known in literature – needs to be a structural component in both domestic and foreign policy and not an occasional activity. Interreligious engagement is a general pattern

<sup>8</sup> K. THAMES, *A Global Response to Religious Freedom Violations*, in *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* (online edition), January 23, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> M. VENTURA, *Nelle mani di Dio. La super-religione del mondo che verrà*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2021, p. 150.





that, in principle, can apply to any field of activity within domestic or foreign policy and «can eventually be an effective tool with which to combat discrimination and persecution, even if the religious factors are not the predominant or exclusive factor driving them»<sup>10</sup>. The rationale behind this approach is based on the fact that when religious actors, as a vital component of society, are involved in a certain initiative, this initiative is more likely to succeed. On the contrary, if religious actors realize that secular institutions call upon them only when they need help, they will never fully trust their secular counterparts.

### **3. Freedom of religion or belief through the lenses of development and growth**

To strengthen our response to violations of freedom of religion or belief and step up our prevention capabilities, we should not adopt a narrow perspective while looking at this fundamental human right but, rather, assess all its ramifications and implications. In this spirit, I would like to briefly comment on the link between freedom of religion or belief, on the one side, and sustainable development and security, on the other side. I believe it is important and helpful to look at violations of freedom of religion or belief also as development issues, i.e., as obstacles to growth and stability. Hardly anyone would make a direct association between religious freedom and economics. Nevertheless, there are studies showing that there is a positive correlation between the respect of freedom of religion or belief and growth<sup>11</sup>. If some people or even entire communities are kept at the margins of society and are unable to fully take part in the social and economic life of their own countries, such exclusion will entail a loss of resources, both human resources as such and ideas, which are also the main drivers of scientific and technological innovation. As far as the political and security levels are concerned, religious discrimination may fuel resentment that, in turn, may lead to instability, which is detrimental to development and growth.

<sup>10</sup> F. PETITO, *From Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) advocacy to interreligious engagement in foreign policy*, in *Global Affairs*, 3/2020.

<sup>11</sup> B.J. GRIM, G. CLARK, R.E. SNYDER, *Is Religious Freedom Good for Business?: A Conceptual and Empirical Analysis*, in *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 10/2014.



The link between freedom of religion or belief and sustainable development does not only have conceptual implications but it also enables us to appreciate freedom of religion or belief in its entirety and to identify the right tools to advance this universal right more effectively. We could say that freedom of religion or belief is made up of two “layers”. The first layer refers to the core of freedom of religion or belief as enshrined in article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human rights, i.e., the freedom to have, not to have, to change, and to manifest a religion or a belief. The second layer refers, more broadly, to the right not to be discriminated on religion or belief grounds. This is a much broader dimension, as it potentially involves all fundamental rights a person is entitled to and that may come under threat because of religious or belief discrimination. This broader dimension is a direct consequence of the universality, interdependence, interrelatedness, and indivisibility of human rights. If one of them is threatened, the other fundamental human rights will equally be at risk. Such view also allows us to grasp all possible forms of religious or belief discrimination, both visible and hidden ones, and to choose the most appropriate tools to counter them, including development cooperation interventions.

With this in mind, in 2018 the Italian Parliament established a fund to support Christian communities in crisis areas. Through this fund, which has a yearly budget of 4,4 million euros, we finance projects run by NGOs in several countries, mostly in the broader Mediterranean region and Africa, with a view to improving the economic condition of the beneficiaries, foster social inclusion, and reduce inequalities. In other words, we target the nexus between freedom of religion or belief and equality to directly address those forms of economic exclusion and social marginalization that stem from religious or belief discrimination. Such interventions are equally meant to support interfaith cooperation (as a means to foster mutual knowledge and understanding), to raise development levels across sectarian lines, and to improve the protection of religious freedom by empowering individuals and enabling them to enjoy their rights in full.

Development cooperation is one of those fields where secular-religious collaboration can be more successful. The involvement of religious communities in initiatives focusing on crosscutting issues (such as environment pro-



tection, poverty eradication, or women and youth empowerment) along with governments is a way to empower them and their members and, ultimately, to make discrimination on religious grounds less likely. At the same time, the promotion of an open dialogue between Governments and religious communities, on an equal footing and based on mutual respect and autonomy, is an essential step in the pursuit of stability and prosperity.

#### **4. Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with a reference to the broader Mediterranean region, our common region and the cradle of the three monotheistic religions. While interfaith dialogue and freedom of religion or belief are essential prerequisites for peaceful coexistence and sustainable development on a global scale, they bear a special significance in this part of the world. The broader Mediterranean region is not only Italy's strategic neighbourhood but also one of the world's most religiously diverse areas. Despite this rich legacy, the region is beset by growing tensions that require the utmost commitment of all religious players, together with political and economic ones, to avoid escalation and provide the population with the foundations for a more prosperous future. The region's historic religious pluralism has also been under notable pressure in the last decades. The rise of Daesh, the shrinking of Christian communities, and the spreading of hate speech all point out to the need to increase our efforts to advance inclusive citizenship and equality as political, social, and cultural priorities for the future of our common region.

Both the broader Mediterranean region and other world regions are currently witnessing increasing challenges to the universality of freedom of religion or belief. I believe that this is, by far, the most serious threat to the advancement of freedom of religion or belief globally. Affirming that freedom of religion or belief is a by-product of the Western culture is tantamount to legitimizing discrimination on religious or belief grounds. We cannot deflect such dangerous misinterpretations and instrumentalizations unless we gain the full support of religious authorities in defending the universality of freedom of religion or belief as a secular and religious imperative dictating that nobody should be forced to either convert or flee, or to either educate their



children according to their own religious convictions or lose them<sup>12</sup>.

We are living at a time when religion is increasingly instrumentalized and even weaponized. The narrative around Russia's aggression against Ukraine is a painful reminder of this. Religions should remain a force for peace. States, international organizations, and religious or belief actors should cooperate in good faith to preserve and advance human dignity as a common principle inspiring all religions and beliefs, for the sake of present and future generations.

<sup>12</sup> S. FERRARI, *La libertà di religione nell'epoca della diversità*, in *Quaderni di diritto e politica ecclesiastica*, 1/2018, p. 292.