

# BRIDGING VOICES: SECOND ITERATION

2017-2020 Projects and Partners





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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>BV</b>	Bridging Voices
<b>CVE</b>	Countering Violent Extremism
<b>EEAS</b>	European External Action Service
<b>EOC</b>	Eastern Orthodox Church
<b>FoRB</b>	Freedom of Religion or Belief
<b>GMU</b>	George Mason University
<b>KCL</b>	King's College London
<b>TPNRD</b>	Transatlantic Policy Network for Religion and Diplomacy
<b>OTSA</b>	Orthodox Theological Society of America
<b>UCL</b>	University College London

# INTRODUCTION TO BRIDGING VOICES

In 2017, the Henry R. Luce Foundation generously awarded a grant of \$500,000 to the Friends of the British Council to support a second 3-year iteration of Bridging Voices, a more research-oriented variant of the original program. In December 2017, three 3-year research grants were awarded to partnerships of universities, policy institutions, and civil society organizations in the US, the UK and Europe, to conduct research on critical topics at the intersection of religion and international affairs, organize transatlantic academic and policy workshops, and engage the stakeholders and the general public on both sides of the Atlantic with research results and policy recommendations. Each grant was worth up to \$38,200 and grant partners were able to leverage the grant to secure additional funding from their institution or from other partners to conduct their research and run workshops.

The project built on the model of Bridging Voices to create cohorts of expertise to continue to develop the field of religion and international relations, triggering new conversations, deepening policy insight, building stronger cross-sector engagement and bringing new ideas from these workshops to the media and the general public.

The objective of the Bridging Voices program was to provide a transatlantic space for policymakers and academics in the field of religion and international affairs to discuss best practice, research needs, policy solutions, and areas for collaboration. Since the project was launched, we supported 12 closed and public dialogues and our partners produced 44 articles, videos, podcasts, and blog posts for public consumption. Each of the three Bridging Voices grant partners produced three research reports and three policy/next steps reports.

This e-book presents a detailed description of each of these three research grants: their workshops and conferences, research activities and findings, latest developments, and the range of topics examined. Outputs such as research and policy reports, blogs, journal articles, videos, and podcasts are also listed.

All views and results depicted in this e-book belong to the partner grantees of each Bridging Voices grant. We would like to thank each partner for contributing. This e-book highlights the British Council's role in bringing together new transatlantic partnerships to generate innovative or renewed discussions on various topics concerning religion and international affairs. The program supported transatlantic partners to produce new knowledge, build understanding between policy and academic spheres and encouraged future collaboration amongst experts in the field. We would like to thank the Henry R. Luce Foundation, and especially Dr. Toby Volkman, Director of Policy Initiatives, for supporting the Bridging Voices project.

Ger FitzGerald  
Project Manager, Bridging Voices

Sheridan Ruiz  
Project Coordinator, Bridging Voices



# REFLECTIONS ON BRIDGING VOICES

## THE FORUM FOR RELIGION AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: REFLECTIONS ON BRIDGING VOICES

A quick glance at any newspaper is enough to see the range of global challenges confronting societies around the world. For the Bridging Voices (BV) programme, which seeks to deepen and advance nascent conversations about the role and place of religion in public affairs, what is remarkable is the range of sometimes divergent voices, interests and perspectives that are present in research, knowledge exchange and public dialogue at the intersection of policy-making and religious identity. Yet more interesting, is the growing range of individuals and institutions invited into conversations enabled by BV and increasingly capable of shaping responses to social challenges that it seeks to address. No longer restricted to the fields of policy or academia (if indeed that was ever wholly true), the programme now explicitly includes cultural producers, activists, and front line practitioners working around issues of policy relevance, even where their voices arguably might not immediately be received as actionable within policy making settings.

Back in 2015 we were part of the inaugural round of grantees. Our intention then, as it remains today, was to leverage the collaborative power of engaging policymakers, academics and practitioners into participatory facilitations that explore the ways 'religion'

presents itself in international relations. In short, our hope - simple conceptually though messy and often intangible in practice - has been to engage a range of actors in evidence-based dialogical processes that might break down silos and enable conversations across groups. What has been remarkable to observe, both as a grantee and now as a partner of the programme, is not only how the programme has evolved as the conversation around religion in international affairs has, but also how the need to create cross-sector spaces for these conversations has become more pressing in the context of political polarisation and social unrest.

A significant shift in the latest iteration of BV has been the way in which it has come to be known and gained traction within academic and policy-making circles. That this has occurred while simultaneously beginning to transcend some of the narrow and limited understandings of what might be thought to constitute 'religion' and 'religious identity' within the international affairs space, is especially impressive, even where it has at times complicated the nature of the discussion and expanded the range of divergently interested parties and stakeholders. The benefits of these shifts are, of course, a greater diversity of stakeholders in the programme and grantee projects, and concomitantly, an



expansion beyond more narrow foci on ‘institutional religion’, ‘religious literacy’ or mainstream anti-radicalisation agendas. This has meant an intentionally more-expansive approach to programming in which grantees have been afforded the space to take deep and critical dives into highly particular and often counter-normative issues which have arguably been under resourced in the past - BV’s recent focus on (black) Muslim identities and strategies of political organising across the Atlantic in the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, or indeed the focus on faith-based responses to the growing refugee crisis and pluralism, and even pluralism and sexual diversity within contemporary Eastern Orthodoxy are illustrative.

This has allowed the programme to continue to advance cross-sector conversations from which new insights and outputs can emerge, while breaking new ground and pushing the boundaries of conversations established in earlier phases of the programme. These outcomes are both necessary and appropriate in the current context and arguably remains the area in which, should it wish, BV could afford to take bolder steps in terms of who is drawn into the conversation and what kind of output is deemed as having impact. As grantees of the programme and fellow travelers on the road to greater ‘religious literacy’ (for what the term is worth and signifies to the community), but also as advocates of more expansive dialogue spaces, we would encourage colleagues within the British Council to be ambitious on this final point.

## **EMERGING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

In spite of the positive overall trajectory of the programme, we do observe a tension in some of its core aims: chiefly, that the aspiration of academic processes typically emphasises the need for in-depth understanding of frequently highly context specific issues, whereas the policy process tends towards recommendations which can be quickly and practically applied across a range of contexts.

While there is a tradition of these two groups being in conversation with one another, BV aspires to bring in a third group of actors - the ‘practitioners’, whom we identify as frontline workers, cultural producers and activists, each of which have their own distinct priorities that tend towards action-oriented outcomes, coupled with processes framed in understanding specific contexts. This group has tended to be marginalised in conversations between academics and policy professionals. Therefore, there is the potential that when the three groups are brought together to engage in

conversation, a dynamic can emerge which excludes, marginalises, or inferiorises them.

While one of the successes of BV has been to establish a group of academics and policy professionals literate and aware of the core and emerging issues within the religion in international affairs space, there is a risk of this becoming a closed-group discussion. A consequence is further exclusion: those academics/ researchers and policy professionals who are new to these conversations can feel alienated, and this is perhaps likely to become especially apparent should BV expand and incorporate voices from practitioners and other geographical regions including ‘the Global South’.

An interesting innovation in this iteration of BV has been the intentional inclusion of voices from outside of academia and policy circles - in particular, the inclusion of artists. The advantage of this has been the possibility for new forms of knowledge creation to be introduced into the process. Furthermore, this process has the potential to be more disruptive than traditional forms of output associated with research projects. That is not to diminish the research process, but it has afforded opportunities for new conversations, and, critically, new modes of conversations to emerge, with the potential to draw in new and more diverse voices and audiences.

In doing so, in drawing those new actors into this space, the need to mediate that space has become all the more important. It is not enough to say that we want these different actors and voices present in this conversation if the conversation is taking place in a format which privileges certain voices and experiences (ie, if it is skewed too heavily towards policy and academia), there is a need for someone to work with all parties to ensure that there is equal engagement, that all can engage and that there is an exchange of ideas resulting in knowledge creation.

## CONCLUSION

Having been part of this journey for nearly five years, the following are some reflections which we have observed and to us indicate a path ahead:

There is a thematic breadth and confidence to the question of religion and international affairs which feels different to the picture that existed five years ago and that in some respects that change has been driven by the two iterations of BV.

At the same time, the conversation about religion beyond the international affairs space has continued to evolve; most recently questions of racial justice and the impact and fallout of climate change is being seen to have an intersection with questions of religion.

This trend is creating pressure to draw in those voices and actors working on or speaking into spaces in which religion is intersecting with global challenges. Furthermore, those voices and actors are typically outside of academia or policy.

For the conversation about religion and global affairs to continue to be relevant, there needs to be thought given to how those voices are included in those conversations, and how the modes of discourse which those actors make use of are mediated into conversations with

academics and policy professionals. Furthermore, by increasing the diversity of backgrounds of participants in such conversations, there is an opportunity to reflect creatively on the kinds of outputs they generate. It is of note that participants have suggested that papers might not be the most effective form of output for shifting the broader conversation about religion and global affairs. Perhaps a more intentional engagement with creative producers might result in more transformative outputs. Consideration must be given to how individual relationships can be deepened and strengthened so as to have frequently challenging discussions of relevance to this field.

Finally, it is increasingly evident that the transatlantic, Anglo-centric nexus for the conversation unnaturally limits the conversation in a particular direction. Across Continental Europe, North Africa and the Middle East in particular, there are active networks (within academia, policy and practitioner spaces) generating original and impactful thinking on questions relating to religion and global affairs. For conversations relating to religion and global affairs to maintain relevance, consideration needs to be given to how to include these voices too.

## PETER MANDAVILLE: REFLECTING ON TRANSATLANTIC APPROACHES TO RELIGION & DIPLOMACY

Thanks to my participation in both phases of the [Bridging Voices](#) initiative—as well as a variety of related activities—I have been fortunate to spend a great deal of time in recent years observing, being part of, and reflecting on the state of transatlantic discussions regarding the role of religion in international affairs.

The governmental and intergovernmental dimensions of this work have been of particular interest to me, dating back to my time as a member of the U.S. State Department's Policy Planning Staff from 2010-12 where I saw and to some extent participated in the initial discussions about building more robust American diplomatic capacity with respect to religion and religious engagement. Leaving government to return to academic life, I soon discovered that the foreign ministries of numerous European countries were also taking an interest in religion (indeed, had been for some time by then) but also noticed that some of them were thinking about the issue in very different ways from their U.S. counterparts. For example, some European foreign ministries seemed to hear “religion” and immediately

think Middle East, whereas others some connected religious engagement primarily to notions of intercultural or even (gulp!) “inter-civilizational” dialogue! And of course there is the well-known and to this day crucially important distinction between the American paradigm of International Religious Freedom and Europe's emphasis on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB).

In 2013, the Obama Administration created a new [Office of Religion and Global Affairs](#) in the State Department, signaling new priorities around religious engagement even as European diplomats continued to convene their own low-profile meetings on the topic. This flurry of transatlantic religion and international affairs activity coincided very serendipitously (and likely not at all coincidentally) with the initiation of Bridging Voices, and [Sara Silvestri](#) and I were fortunate to receive support for a project focused on exploring and analyzing differential approaches to religion in diplomacy on both sides of the Atlantic. But this whole religious engagement thing was still relatively new at that point and we quickly realized



that far from examining and assessing a well-defined and developed domain of policy, the work of our Bridging Voices project—which involved convening events and workshops with North American and European diplomats—seemed to be playing a role in shaping the thing it purported to study. This is of course an inevitable albeit often unacknowledged aspect of any social research—but in this case the effect appeared to be particularly pronounced.

Through Bridging Voices symposia and conferences—and in adjacent spaces sponsored by research centers and universities with similar interests—the contours of a network of fellow travelers (diplomats, experts, civil society practitioners) and a nascent epistemic community around religion and international affairs soon began to emerge. Some of this work ended up having very direct diplomatic impact. For example, the very first conversations about forming the [Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion & Diplomacy](#) (TPNRD)—which over the past half decade has consolidated its role as the premiere space for multilateral cooperation on religion in the Euro-Atlantic region—took place on the sidelines of a Bridging Voices conference at Wilton Park in the UK. While Sara and I published some conventional analytic products out of our Bridging Voices initiative (such as a Brookings Institution report on [Integrating Religious Engagement into Diplomacy](#)), some of the most impactful aspects of our work—contributing to the formation of TPNRD, for example—were never anticipated in our initial formulation and planning for the project. Shortly thereafter an opportunity arose for me to return to government service at the State Department and, more specifically, to play a role in helping to build out and institutionalize the new Office of Religion and Global Affairs.

I left government along with the Obama Administration and tried to [piece together some lessons learned](#) about what does and does not work well with respect to integrating religious engagement into diplomacy. In the years that followed, much of my publicly-engaged scholarship came to be devoted to studying and [advancing the religion and diplomacy agenda](#)—even as I watched the new U.S. administration’s rather unconventional entanglements with religion begin to reshape perceptions of this work in significant ways. For example, sensing a growing divide between advocates of religious engagement and those who placed more emphasis on promoting international religious freedom, some of us sought to [find common ground](#)—often drawing from and relying on experience and trust that had accrued through the Bridging Voices network.

So where are we today, and what are the issues and challenges likely to face the transatlantic intersection of religion and foreign policy going forward? Based on my

experiences both inside and outside government—and drawing also on the learning I and others have accrued through Bridging Voices and various other spaces of engagement it has inspired—I would highlight three points:

First, the relationship between religious engagement and religious freedom continues to be a source of confusion, tension, and—somewhat ironically—sectarianism of a sort. Religious freedom promotion possesses an inherent structural advantage in the U.S. context insofar as its mandate and access to resources are enshrined in law. Put another way, no U.S. administration—regardless of political stripe or ideological orientation—can choose to cease or dismantle the international religious freedom function. Under the current administration, religious freedom work has also enjoyed unprecedented levels of political support, including two ministerial level global summits devoted to the topic. This recent dynamic is present in Europe as well, with numerous right-leaning governments establishing new envoys dedicated to the FoRB agenda (but recognizing also importance nuances which see certain European governments and multilateral bodies embracing FoRB while simultaneously pushing back on aspects of the current U.S. approach).

Meanwhile, the State Department’s Office of Religion and Global Affairs has been drastically downsized and placed under the Office of International Religious Freedom as a unit devoted to “Strategic Religious Engagement”—the name change (more accurate, more...strategic) being perhaps the only clear dividend—along with access to programming resources—to arise from the new arrangement. Part of the problem here is not just the statutory and financial heft enjoyed by international religious freedom, but also the fact that the religious engagement function remains difficult to define and explain. Promoting international religious freedom—regardless of what one thinks of it—involves clear normative commitments and an instantly recognizable advocacy agenda. Going forward, advocates of religious engagement would do well to downplay temptations to portray their work as some kind of “magic sauce” and offer it as a more prosaic tool capable of adding significant value to existing diplomatic priorities, including those of local embassies, posts, and delegations around the world.

That said, it would be unfair to declare that religious engagement is just something diplomats should “do” without recognizing that there are some unique complexities and sensitivities involved in this work—which brings me to my second point. If there is one thing that almost everyone involved in the religion and foreign policy parade of recent years can agree on, it is the importance of training diplomats to do this work—a

mission framed more often than not in terms of inculcating religious literacy. While this term never fails to get heads nodding around the tables where we meet, there is still considerable work to be done in determining just what—in practical terms—it means for a diplomat to be religiously literate. Are we talking about knowledge regarding the history and beliefs of world religions? Are we talking about an understanding of how and where religion intersects with diplomatic and foreign policy priorities? Are we talking about specific skills—in terms of protocol and etiquette—associated with engaging religious actors? All of the above? Arguably, if we get this piece right then there would be no need to have offices, units, or ministry structures dedicated to religious engagement because diplomatic training—combined with the right incentives—would instill the necessary cross-cutting awareness. But as Elizabeth Shakman Hurd pointed out in 2013 when the U.S. State Department’s religious office was first set up, any governmental engagement with religious involves governments having to make [choices and determinations about what counts as religion](#) and who speaks on behalf of said religion. This is inherently fraught terrain, replete with risk for everyone involved.

Finally, I think it is important to recognize that the entire scope of religion’s intersection with diplomacy—religious

engagement and religious freedom alike—runs the risk of falling off the agenda in the near future due to the current trend of political polarization surrounding religion—particularly in the United States. And while the State Department’s Office of Religion and Global Affairs—particularly at its staffing zenith in 2015-16—might once have seemed to confirm U.S. leadership in the religious engagement space, it is worthwhile remembering that many of Washington’s European partners were thinking about these issues well before us and, in many respects, continue to develop new approaches and pave the way in the face of diminishing U.S. capacity and stature. On the American home front, I worry that efforts to find a new centrist synthesis around these issues may founder in the face of a beleaguered diplomatic service skeptical of religion’s association with the advancement of certain political agendas rather than universal conceptions of human rights or specific, broadly shared policy goals. I worry that the agenda around this work may have been set back a decade or more and, in certain respects, have to start over. But I also have confidence that what we know about the salience of religion as a social force around the world means that we cannot afford to stop this work. Two steps forward and one step backward still move us in the right direction over time.

## MERETE BILDE: RELIGION AND DIPLOMACY: REFLECTIONS ON DYNAMICS AND TRENDS IN TRANSATLANTIC APPROACHES

*The views expressed are the authors’ own and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European External Action Service.*

It has always been a pleasure to be involved in many of British Council’s excellent initiatives, not least Bridging Voices. I welcome this opportunity to stop and reflect on where I think we are heading in the field of Religion and Diplomacy and how this trajectory has been shaped in part by the very logic of Bridging Voices and its thought leaders.

I was last offered a similar opportunity to ‘stop and think’ as it were, as a Bosch Public Policy Fellow at the Transatlantic Academy in 2014. At that time, I set out to explain in a [short paper](#) the European way to discovering the saliency of religion’s role in society, politics and diplomacy. Having been privileged to work in this field for an extended period of time, I have witnessed and contributed to some of its networking - and if you like bridge-building - moments.

In this article, I will discuss three of those moments and some challenges faced in this field and then offer some concluding reflections. This first of such moments was

the so called ‘Likeminded Group’ in the mid 2000’s. In recognition that the religion/diplomacy nexus was moving up on the policy agenda in a multitude of ways, we set up this group of ‘diplomats only’ to allow for a safe space to discuss some of these issues which defied acronyms, working groups and other pigeonholes.

The group was overwhelmingly European and made up of a dozen EU Member States, Norway, Switzerland, but also Canada took an active part. Our agendas were set by various topical issues that we all had to deal with in our respective capitals. Some had organisational set-ups with focus on Islam in the World, others around cross-cultural issues. Only France and Switzerland had explicit ‘religion units’ at their disposal.

Our activities were very hands-on comparisons of notes on concrete events/initiatives being fielded at the time (not least by the Alliance of Civilisations and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation). But the group was also a hub for exchanging concrete ideas on policy areas in the process of being developed and implemented (notably in the field of radicalisation as well as freedom of religion or belief).



Geographically, the Middle East and North Africa (its domestic politics and actors) figured prominently on our agenda - without for that matter fully acknowledging what was brewing in the region. Some of us became part of another discreet network led by the Swiss, where we engaged first-hand with some of these faith-inspired political actors that later during the Arab uprising were to become prominent. Understanding – or rather avoiding misunderstanding – their motivations and aspirations turned out to be an invaluable diplomatic advantage that helped steer our subsequent engagement not least from 2010 and onwards.

In other words, the European scene for networking in the field of Religion and Diplomacy was already active by the time conversations started – often in the context of Bridging Voices-hosted meetings – on whether and how we needed to branch out and think in a more transatlantic way – while bearing in mind that we had been involving our Canadian colleagues already.

Reading Madeleine Albright's reflections on power, god and world affairs in her book 'The Mighty and the Almighty' and admiring the US State Department's creation of a well-placed and strong Office of Religion and Global Affairs, time was ripe to step up and give more systematic attention to how and where religion intersects with diplomacy and how we make sure that we have the right mind-set and skillset as modern day diplomats to engage in this field.

On the European side, the institutional landscape was much less developed but the reflex of collective thinking and acting was there. The experience within the Likeminded Group reflected that there was not one approach, one concern but many very different approaches – and that provided a richness to, not an impediment for our work.

The Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy (TPNRD) grew out of this context and was shaped by rich exchanges on both sides of the Atlantic involving amazingly knowledgeable and inspirational people straddling academia and policy, not least with Peter Mandaville as one of the main and visionary architects.

The network was founded in 2015 by the EEAS and US State department with the hope and ambition that a greater and more systematic exchange of experiences and lessons learnt would benefit from targeted input from academia and this in turn would help upgrade the overall literacy and capacity among diplomats to navigate the field.

Five years later, what have we achieved and what remain key challenges? I will try to respond to that question - underscoring that I will do so in my own capacity and not on behalf of anyone but myself.

First, TPNRD has grown into a solid resource hub and well-known entity. Thanks to the Luce Foundation, we have had the resources to staff a secretariat and to set up a small circle of academic advisors to help government officials develop a more informed and strategic approach to the challenges of religion and diplomacy. Thanks to our collective efforts and the excellent work of Judd Birdsall, who has diligently served as network coordinator, the network has grown not only in size but also in brand recognition (despite its unpronounceable acronym!). Again, compared to the Likeminded Group, we had no such resource and the secretariat function fell upon High Representative Solana's Policy Unit.

Second, TPNRD has become a valuable network of colleagues and contacts who have in different ways used the network to inspire and shape various initiatives and actions, not least in the field of training, awareness raising and capacity building. It has had a high level of activity and collegiality among its members. However, the smaller size and less-developed support system of the Likeminded Group meant that it had a stronger sense of ownership by its members who took it forward themselves. One of the challenges as we go forward will be to remain a hub for relevant and interactive exchanges on policy and practice in this field – and not just a club of open-minded individuals who gather around interesting topics for their personal enlightenment.

Third, TPNRD has allowed for more cross-Atlantic exchanges on policy and practice, yet its strong US dimension has been both a strength and a weakness over the last five years. Europe is often accused (outside of the TPNRD) of being too reluctant to look at the world and ourselves through a 'faith lens' – owing to what some see as secular blind-spots, a trend to generally underestimate the role of religion with the exception of solely looking at it through the lens of violence and security.

However, the cultivation of the religious engagement as an approach and stand-alone discipline (central to the US approach but also to some European members) has raised an opposite concern: namely the challenge and pitfalls of operating from a very 'pro-religious' approach. Some accuse religious engagement of having become a mantra more than a critical method. With the keenness of showing its intrinsic value, has it gone soft on

applying a critical approach to where, how and when a faith lens is indeed useful, relevant – and indeed not harmful? Has it become a hindrance for establishing a more right-sized and holistic diagnosis? If the default (even if only unconsciously) has become to ‘religionise’, have we not simply replaced a secular blind spot with a ‘pro-religious’ one – both of them not allowing us as diplomats to do our work to the best of our ability?

As with the Likeminded Group, the goal for TPNRD - or any transatlantic approach in this field - is not to ‘think the same’. But we learn from each other, challenge each other and where possible and meaningful strive for collaboration. We have come a long way but there are bumps on the road.

We are in this field because we know and recognise religion as a social force that cannot and should not be ignored, if you want to understand the world and what motivates people. We know that religion is more than places of worship and more than religious leaders. But are we sufficiently sighted on how religion also intersects and shapes political and economic life? How it shapes societies and worldviews – including our own?

Instead of privileging just one group of actors (i.e. the religious and faith based), how do we make sure the dynamics with the whole of civil society are understood and factored into our analysis of partnerships/course of action? Instead of putting religion on a pedestal or ignoring it all together, how do we unpack its complex role and interplay with other driving forces of change in today’s world?

Precisely looking at this interaction is often overlooked when analysing and understanding how civil society practitioners at large (believers as well as non-believers and all the others in between) contribute to the global challenge of how to live together in a globalised world of highly diverse societies.

Yet, this is a cornerstone behind our thinking and it is the very focus of the EU global exchange platform on [‘Religion in Society’](#). This approach builds on where our strength lies: a bottom-up approach, steered by policy challenges and allowing for self-inspection – rather than a top-down approach steered by design and a portion of ideology and civilizational aspiration. The ‘religion in society’ way of thinking may be more modest than other grand schemes, but it may also be a far safer step forward than many of the other initiatives on offer in this field.

Finally, we all need to navigate as we go forward the increasingly overt and deliberate politicisation and use of religion as both a domestic and a diplomatic tool. We will need to tackle this challenge eyes wide open and with sufficient self-scrutiny. It is making our work more, not less relevant - but it will ask of us to allow for some honest questioning as we go forward.

Future transatlantic approaches may need to revisit the format and some of its assumptions. Transatlantic is and has always been more than US-UK with ‘Europe’ as junior partner. The time may have come to take yet again a fresh look at how and in which format, we best address emerging challenges/opportunities in the religion and international affairs space. My hope is that we will continue to build on our respective strengths and our networks, including the TPNRD, but that we also be open and inclusive of new and different approaches from beyond the transatlantic family.





# THE UNIVERSITY OF EXETER (UK) AND FORDHAM UNIVERSITY (US)

## CONTEMPORARY EASTERN ORTHODOX IDENTITY AND THE CHALLENGES OF PLURALISM AND SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN A SECULAR AGE

### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:

Aristotle Papanikolaou, Fordham University  
Brandon Gallaher, University of Exeter  
Gregory Tucker, University of Regensburg

### ADDITIONAL PARTNERS:

George Demacopoulos, Fordham University  
Edward Skidelsky, University of Exeter

This consortium examined how policymakers in the UK, Europe, and the USA can respond to Orthodox communities (at home and abroad) and a religion which seems to reject the very idea of pluralism/diversity and, in particular, equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals. The project explored this issue, drawing on expertise in religion, law, and public policy in Europe and North America.

### FINDINGS

Its final report mapped the diversity of current thought within Eastern Orthodoxy on matters of gender, sex, and sexual diversity. It also provided a valuable model for how to structure and conduct dialogues on issues that are considered similarly controversial for other religions, denominations, and faith communities.

- The Eastern Orthodox Church (EOC) remains committed to models of gender and sexuality and related disciplines which were formulated in pre-modernity but pastoral responses vary, especially according to country and culture.
- Many of the same Orthodox (in Eastern Europe, but also some Western converts) regard the Church's opposition to sexual diversity not only as a *de facto* reality but as a matter of dogmatic truth, which must be defended in the contemporary world against the decadent secularism of "the West" and its rejection of "traditional values."

- A minority of Orthodox adherents are publicly challenging the Church's teachings and disciplines concerning sexual diversity, and more hold contrary opinions in private. The status quo is often questioned, in the first instance, as a result of pressing pastoral realities on the ground. Some accommodation of sexual diversity already occurs in the shadows and without open acknowledgment, particularly outside Eastern Europe. There is a noteworthy difference of opinion on many topics between post-Soviet and non-Soviet countries.
- Among Orthodox theologians, there is a wide range of opinion on the received teachings and a growing recognition that these realities need to be grappled with openly. A small but increasing number advocates for the open inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in Church life and same-sex marriage.
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## LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

- This project’s video outputs are currently being subtitled in Russian, Greek, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, and French (still a *lingua franca* among Orthodox) in order to provide reach to key Eastern Orthodox majority countries.
- Some of this project’s published outputs are being combined into an academic volume along with outputs produced by dialogues supported by the The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief (OC)
- The University of Exeter has developed two research proposals that have drawn directly on the work of its Bridging Voices project - a European Research Council Consolidator Grant (2 million Euro) and a British Academy post-doctoral fellowship application by Ionut Moise of Oxford.

- This project’s activities provoked a heated debate among the offices of the Orthodox Theological Society of America (OTSA) and the Exeter-Fordham project over the issue of academic freedom and the involvement of academics in defamatory petitions. One outcome of this is that OTSA is now running a special blog series on “[The Church and the Academy](#),” examining the issue of academic freedom in more detail. There will also be a special panel at this year’s (digital) OTSA conference on the Exeter-Fordham project and the issue of intellectual freedom.







Image credit: Fatima Jamadar and Hurst Publishers

# KING'S COLLEGE LONDON (UK) AND GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY (US)

## THE MUSLIM ATLANTIC: EXPLORING TRANSNATIONAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN AMERICAN AND BRITISH MUSLIMS

### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:

Daniel Nilsson DeHanas, King's College London  
Peter Mandaville, George Mason University

### ADDITIONAL PARTNERS:

Dilwar Hussain, New Horizons

The King's College London (KCL) and George Mason University (GMU) consortium explored the extent to which British and American Muslims have engaged in networks of transatlantic relationship that amount to the building of an 'Atlantic Islam.' In addition, it investigated two subsidiary research questions: (1) what shared concerns and ethical sensibilities, if any, are emerging in transatlantic Muslim networks; and (2) what are the relevant 'vectors' of transatlantic Muslim influence and exchange in terms of direction and intensity?

### FINDINGS

In its final report, partners at KCL and GMU offered the following five suggestions for the consideration of groups in civil society, philanthropic organizations, and (to a more limited degree) policymakers:

- An ongoing transatlantic forum for discussing strategies to address in a more systematic manner the complex nature of Muslim women's roles and positionality in the UK and the US.
- Intercommunal interface mechanisms that would permit Muslims in the UK and the US to engage and coordinate with other (non-Muslim) communities facing similar challenges around exclusion, social injustice, and discrimination.
- New funding streams for creative cultural producers working at intersectionalities including race, gender, and religion, with an explicit de-linking from any association with counterextremism or counterterrorism.
- Increased research and data collection with respect to the various issues raised by the workshops and the Muslim Atlantic project more broadly.
- The problems with Prevent/CVE may run deeper than policymakers realize. Perceived continuity with earlier regimes of race and securitization reinforce the negative reception of current counter-radicalization efforts.

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## LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

- Consortium PIs are working with filmmaker, social change entrepreneur and influencer London-based Nadir Nahdi to develop a YouTube film that will explore the experiences of a racially diverse, multicultural and multilingual group of cultural producers on both sides of the Atlantic navigating politics, faith and identity.
- The KCL-GMU consortium intends to convene a unique sonic exploration of the music of the Muslim Atlantic in a special edition of “Listening While Muslim” (LWM) in collaboration with

project advisor Abdul-Rehman Malik and former Curator of Programs at the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art’s Shangri-La Museum and current Executive Director of the South Asia Institute in Chicago, Asad Ali Jafri. LWM was conceived as a creative space by Malik and Jafri in 2018 to explore the way Muslimness is present in and helps give meaning to the sounds and music that Muslims hear and listen to.







photo credit: Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

# YALE UNIVERSITY (US) AND UNIVERSITY COLLEGE LONDON (UK)

## RELIGION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR REFUGEES: SUPPORTING LOCAL FAITH-BASED RESPONSES TO DISPLACEMENT

### PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS:

Zareena Grewal, Yale University  
Unni Karunakara, Yale University  
Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, University College London

### ADDITIONAL PARTNERS:

Catherine Panter-Brick, Yale University  
Alastair Ager, Queen Margaret University  
Louisa Lombard, Yale University  
Anna Rowlands, Durham University  
Lyndsey Stonebridge, University of Birmingham

### FINDINGS

In its final report, this consortium recommended that:

- Practitioners and policymakers recognise that faith is a powerful driver of solidarity and social justice, so that faith narratives and religious practices are factored into humanitarian interventions.
- While remaining vigilant to coercive religious

practices, donor and international partners make explicit efforts not to marginalise non-technical language and local community action.

- Practitioners and policymakers recognise where faith teachings are compatible with secular approaches and draw upon them to more effectively coordinate local response.
- Humanitarian practitioners engage with religious values to broaden the scope of humanitarian assistance and ensure dignity in life and death.

### RESEARCH REPORT

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