



Religion and Conflict Training Module Project Research Phase Report

February 15, 2013

“Our country cannot be without the strongest possible Foreign Service.” – Una Chapman Cox

Background

The Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group, which is part of the Secretary’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society initiative, recently recommended that the State Department and other USG officers, including Foreign Service Officers, increase their “literacy” regarding the role that engagement with religious communities might play in promoting America’s values and interests.¹ As one result of the recommendation, the International Peace & Security Institute (IPSI) has been contracted by the Una Chapman Cox Foundation to collaborate with the DOS’ Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations and the Foreign Service Institute to develop flexible, interactive, multimedia training material on this topic. Such a tool would help to deepen government officials’ understanding of the role of religion in conflict, equip them with tools for engagement in religious contexts, and strengthen diplomatic responses when religion is a critical issue.

During the initial research phase of the project, we at IPSI have conducted over 400 hours of desk research in order to uncover the most relevant themes in the field of religion and conflict. Furthermore, we have drawn on a broad network of practitioners and experts in the field of religion and conflict to identify the knowledge and skills government officials need in order to be effective in recognizing and responding to issues related to religion and conflict, as well as explore current successful training models. Since the start of the contract on December 15, 2012, we have held individual or small-group meetings and conversations with more than 25 religion experts and practitioners. The research phase culminated in a day-long facilitated workshop that brought together over 30 academics, practitioners, government officials and others. The workshop participants discussed the current state of US government engagement with religious issues, as well as identified ways that the latest trends in simulation training can help officials to approach religion-related issues in conflict prevention and mitigation.

As a result of the desk research, meetings and workshop, we have identified a number of themes from which modules can be created. These themes are introduced and expanded upon in the following section.

¹ The Secretary’s Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society: Religion & Foreign Policy Working Group. *Combined Memo-for-the-Record Regarding the Meeting of its Three Sub-Working Groups*. 18-19 January 2012.

Part I: Themes

Through our research, we have identified six key themes around which training modules could be built. These themes are *biases and assumptions*, *tools for mapping and analyzing religion*, *the Establishment Clause*, *religious peacebuilding*, *religion-related violence and conflict*, and *government and social repression of religious freedom*. Our research, however, has demonstrated that these themes are cross-cutting. It would be difficult to create a module around one theme without including elements related to at least one other theme. Thus, we recommend choosing three to four themes that would each serve as the “core theme” for a module, and incorporating the remaining themes into these modules as supplementary themes.

Throughout our research, it was emphasized to us repeatedly that we must make it clear in the training modules why religious engagement is important for government officials working abroad. As the research has shown, a normalization of religious engagement among government agencies “would go some way in ensuring that the United States is properly equipped to understand the factors that shape and drive behavior in foreign societies in the coming decades.”² Therefore, **we recommend creating a short module on the importance of religious engagement** that could accompany any/all of the other modules. Such a module would emphasize that by not engaging with religious actors, officials are missing out on significant opportunities to achieve US diplomatic efforts. Because fear of the unknown often causes people not to act at all, this module would reinforce the idea that knowledge of what is meant by religious engagement can give guidance on what is possible in engaging with religion and religious actors. Stressing the importance of religious engagement for US diplomacy and international work, these trainings represent a push toward normalization of religious engagement in the US government. As such, they must equip government officials with the skills to build and maintain relationships with a variety of religious partners, and an understanding of how to utilize these relationships.

Biases and Assumptions

One area in which many government officials working abroad would benefit from further training is in learning to recognize *biases and assumptions*. This theme is three-pronged. First, officials must recognize their own personal biases or assumptions about religions that they bring into a situation, such as misperceptions about Hindu culture or the assumption that all Middle Easterners are extremely religious. Another important assumption that an official might

² Chicago Council on Global Affairs. *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy*. 2010, pg. 61.

hold is that the role religion plays in conflict is always negative; thus, the positive aspects of religion in peacebuilding should be emphasized. Second, they also need to understand how the American culture of secularism may bias them against religious engagement or inhibit them from seeing its importance in conflict situations. Because of the American separation of church and state, some officials working abroad may assume that this separation is the case elsewhere. Third, it is important to address how US officials – as well as US culture as a whole – are perceived by those with whom they are working in other countries. Important here too is training officials on how to discuss the religious make-up of the US and the US government’s relationship with religion. A module on this theme may include an exploration of how one can diplomatically answer the questions “What is your religion?” or “How can you explain the way religion is viewed in the US?” It is important to note that in a module on recognizing one’s own biases, it is not expected that one should overcome his/her biases, but rather recognize how these define one’s expectations and learn how to work with them.



An example module on biases and assumptions would have short animated vignettes of religion-related situations that defy typical expectations of the situation, followed by a facilitated discussion of how one’s assumptions shape the way they view the situation.

Mapping and Analyzing Religion

Another area that has been identified as crucial for US government officials is gaining *tools for mapping and analyzing religion*. In order to best engage with religious actors and communities abroad, government officials must be familiar with the religious landscape in the country and region where they are posted, including structures, actors, hierarchies and internal and external group dynamics and tensions. Religious actors are often long-term players on specific issues and involved intimately in the communities; in order to work within the communities, it would be beneficial for foreign officials to know who is involved with various issues and learn how to best work with these religious actors.

One of the first tasks to undertake in mapping the religious landscape is identifying the correct questions to ask in order to get the answers one seeks from a religious institution or actor. A module about mapping religion would thus likely include exercises on framing questions. Furthermore, it is crucial to identify the right gatekeepers and partnerships in order to gain access to religious communities; officials would learn to look for existing networks that may aid

them in gaining access. It is also important to stress in this module that religious engagement involves more than working with religious leaders and elites; a more complete religious map would include traditionally under-recognized individuals, such as women and youth. Furthermore, the officials should become aware that some religious actors have strategic invisibility; they may begin to grapple with the question of how to gain access to and engage with groups who are intentionally working off the radar – and if they *should* do so.

An example exercise in this module would be a participatory mapping exercise with either a real or fictionalized conflict setting, in which officials would be asked to identify religious actors and how they are linked to one another.

The Establishment Clause

It is also recommended that government officials receive training on legal parameters and guidelines concerning religious engagement. A module on the *Establishment Clause* (EC) would provide officials with legal boundaries, answer questions about how to apply it, and enable them to feel more comfortable with the concept of religious engagement. It could help officials understand how to speak with people of other faiths, know to what degree they can participate in religious rituals, and identify what kinds of religion-related projects they can carry out, as a few examples. One area to explore within this module is how the EC is interpreted by officials working in various US agencies, as the EC is often interpreted in a variety of ways among officials working in the same country or post. Furthermore, it would be useful to direct officials to examine the laws pertaining to religion (such as blasphemy and apostasy) in the countries where they will be working.

As an example of a possible exercise for this module, a series of fictionalized case studies would be presented. Officials would then decide whether or not the actions undertaken in the case studies fit within the EC parameters. A facilitated discussion would then be held around the question of how the actions could be changed to fit within the EC parameters. It would be of great use to present a number of positive examples in order to demonstrate that there is significant room within the EC parameters to undertake religious engagement.

Religious Peacebuilding

A common misperception when speaking about the relationship between religion and conflict is that religion is only a force for violence. The role of *religious peacebuilding* is often overlooked, or simply unknown. Here, religious peacebuilding describes “the range of activities performed by religious actors and institutions for the purpose of resolving and transforming deadly conflict, with the goal of building social relations and political institutions characterized by an

ethos of tolerance and nonviolence.”³ A module that emphasizes the positive role religion can play in conflict mitigation and stabilization would help dispel the misconceptions and demonstrate how the work being done by religious actors can complement US diplomacy and objectives. This module would examine how US government officials can work with religious groups for conflict mitigation and prevention. It would also be a chance to explore the different avenues through which religious actors conduct peacebuilding activities, including in healthcare, education, and reconstruction, to name a few areas.

Government officials can collaborate with religious groups on a local, national or international level. An example module might include several case studies that demonstrate where religious groups have played positive roles in preventing or mitigating conflict and building peace, followed by facilitated discussion.

Religion-related violence and conflict

In order for religious engagement to be effective, it is important for officials to understand the ways in which religion and religious issues interact with conflict; thus, a module around *religion-related violence and conflict* is recommended. Religion introduces an extra element into conflict that may blur the lines between religious and other identities. In this module, it is important to stress that religion is not the *cause* of conflict, as there is a tendency to oversimplify the religion-conflict relation. Rather, religion can be a factor in conflict, “marking identity differences, motivating conflict, and justifying violence, [but it] is not usually the sole or primary cause of conflict.”⁴ There still remains a somewhat outdated understanding of the relationship between conflict and religion that places an overemphasis on extremism and the ways that religion is hijacked by certain groups to achieve political or social objectives or to legitimate violence.

This module would benefit from an exploration of practical ways to conceptualize and work with religious-related conflict and how stabilization and resolving these conflicts can fit within US diplomatic objectives. It is important to note that religious problems do not always have to have a religious solution; this idea may help government officials feel more comfortable about religious engagement.

An example exercise may be to present a fictionalized conflict situation and have participants identify elements of the conflict that relate to religion in contrast to the primary drivers of conflict (i.e. access to resources, lack of rule of law, poor health infrastructure, etc.).

³ David Little and Scott Appleby. “A Moment of Opportunity?” In *Religion and Peacebuilding*, ed. Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith. 2004, pg. 5.

⁴ David Smock. “Religion in World Affairs.” United States Institute of Peace. February 2008, pg. 3.

Government and social repression of religious freedom

The final suggested module is *government and social repression of religious freedom*. This module would explore definitions of religious freedom and the universality of the concept. Research has shown that states with higher government restrictions on religion have stronger association with social hostilities and conflict.⁵ The US government made this issue a priority in its foreign policy through the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998, yet education around the topic is still lacking among those who represent the US abroad. Government officials would benefit from training on where they can go to find information on religious restrictions, both in general and in specific countries. Furthermore, a module on this topic would include examinations of how human rights are viewed in other cultures, with an emphasis on freedom of religion. Moreover, participants in such a module would learn about the role of the US government with regards to repression of religious freedom and what kinds of actions they should take, within the legal frameworks and US diplomatic objectives.

An example element of this module would be an interactive mapping element, created using open-source data from the Pew Research Center, where participants could explore restrictions on religious freedom in specific countries and do a side-by-side comparative analysis.

Other Themes

The six themes above are the ones that we have identified through our research as being the most crucial areas around which to train government officials working abroad. However, we recognize that there are other themes (or subthemes of those mentioned above) that should be woven into the modules as well. Other important topics include a broader definition of a religious actor as to include people traditionally marginalized, such as women and youth; basic narratives of peace and war from different religions; and an emphasis on the normalization of religious engagement and the impact that lasting relationships and partnerships with religious actors can have on the ability of officials to be effective in their missions.

⁵ Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life. *Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion*. September 2012, pg. 19-20

Part II: Recommendations for Module Design

We recommend creating a series of interactive flexible training modules that better prepare government officials in foreign environments to increase their literacy of and comfort levels with the themes described in Part I of this report.

First, we recommend creating a brief introductory module that would answer the question:

➤ **INTRODUCTORY MODULE: “Why is religious engagement important?”**

We would answer this question with regards both to US foreign policy objectives, and to the careers of the individual government officials. An example of how this module might look is a whiteboard animation with a high-level official speaking about the importance of religious engagement, followed by optional discussion questions. We anticipate this module could be used to preface any or all of the thematic modules below.

Next, we recommend building training modules on what our research has shown to be the top three themes most relevant and important for government officials:

- **MODULE ONE: *The Establishment Clause***
- **MODULE TWO: *Biases and assumptions***
- **MODULE THREE: *Tools for mapping and analyzing religion***

Into these stand-alone, yet coordinated modules, we would mainstream and incorporate the most important elements of the other themes listed in Part I of this report, with an emphasis on the fact that religion can play both negative and positive roles in conflict. Each module would start with a multi-media presentation on the basic facts and nuances of the theme (i.e. animation, graphic novel, video, etc.). The presentation would then be followed by two to four real and/or fictionalized case studies - also presented in a multimedia format - illustrating different aspects of the theme. Trainees will engage with the case studies and be asked to grapple with the nuance and difficult choices facing government officials, as well as dialogue about how religious actors can be engaged in each specific situation. A trainer may choose to facilitate all case studies for each module or just select those that best suit the interests of the group. IPSI will endeavor to design case studies that illustrate religious engagement at different phases of the conflict cycle (i.e. low level, escalating, hot conflict, post-conflict).

Finally, we recommend building a:

➤ **MULTILATERAL SIMULATION MODULE**

This large-scale simulation (in the model of “Shrouded Horizons”) would encompass all themes from this report in a fictionalized and complex conflict scenario. The simulation could be used either as a stand-alone exercise or after one or more of the thematic modules.

The structure of the complete recommended training package is depicted in the graphic on page 9. The entire training package is specifically designed to be malleable and utilized in succession or in piecemeal fashion depending on the audience and time frame. Each module will also include elements for facilitated dialogue and self-paced learning. Detailed facilitator instructions (including scripts differentiated for cones and career levels) will also be delivered with the final product.

Thank You!

We at the International Peace & Security Institute are deeply honored that we were selected to design experiential education training modules on a topic that we consider vitally important to the interests of the United States. Primarily, we would like to thank the Board of Directors of the Una Chapman Cox Foundation for their generous support of this project. Additionally, the research phase of the “Religion and Conflict” contract would not have been possible without the extraordinary contributions of the committed individuals at the Conflict Stabilizations and Operations Bureau of the US Department of State and the forward-thinking leaders at the Foreign Service Institute.

We look forward to your feedback and suggestions on this report and the subsequent launching of Phase II, where we will develop the substance of the training modules.

