RELIGION IN US DIPLOMACY

Interview with Dr. Elizabeth PRODROMOU
Visiting Associate Professor of Conflict Resolution
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University (Boston, MA)

by Nicolas KAZARIAN
Chercheur associé et directeur de l'Observatoire géopolitique du religieux de l'IRIS

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NICOLAS KAZARIAN: How did you become Vice Chair and Commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (2004-2012)?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: I was appointed for eight years as a Commissioner, and served four consecutive two-year terms. There are nine Commissioners, who are private citizens. Three of them are always selected by the President, two are selected by the President's party and Congress, and four are selected by Congressional leaders of the party not in the White House. I was appointed in 2004, during the Bush Administration, by Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, who was the House Minority Leader at the time; when President Obama was elected, I was reappointed for two more terms, by Nancy Pelosi, who had become the Speaker of the House. I was very honored to be appointed by her, because she has a long and distinguished record of public service she has been a staunch advocator of universal human rights, and she has been a trailblazer, an example, for active engagement by women in public service. My scholarship has long been focused on policy questions, especially those at the intersection of religion and security and human rights and security. So, the fact that I had a record of scholar-policy research, especially in regional contexts where religion-security linkages were crucial for US foreign policy, was probably an important factor in my appointment.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: What did you learn during those 8 years?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: I have learned some very specific things. First of all, the US government's commitment to supporting international religious freedom is very remarkable. Although the International Religious Freedom Act and the US government agencies created by that legislation are considered controversial by some countries, I learned how important it is, for both symbolic reasons and for making policy changes on the ground, for the United States to take a principled stand on behalf of the protection of the freedom of conscience, belief and religion; and more generally for the US to take a principled stand in support of the protection of Human Rights as part of US foreign policy. I also came to have a deep appreciation for America's willingness to engage in the kind of self-criticism implicit in the promotion of international religious freedom worldwide. Simply put, if the US is going to advocate for and commit to pushing other countries to meet their international commitments to religious freedom, the US has to have its own house in order as well. The important takeaway for me is that if you are going to talk the talk, you have to walk the walk. No country is perfect, but the willingness to step up and make that kind of commitment makes it possible to lead by example. The other thing I have learned was that policy making is very hard work, requiring vision, patience, humility, and an ability to synthesize massive amounts of information and to build collaborative relationships that can make stakeholders committed to common objectives. It is not about what you want to do, it is about what you can do and understanding how to accomplish it through an incrementalist approach focused on medium and long-term objectives. One of my fellow commissioners often said: "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good!" That was something I had to remind

myself of all the time, because the global scope of systematic violations of religious freedom is shocking. One wants to make policies that can have an immediate impact on the ground; instead, through all my travels, I came to appreciate the fact that there are no quick fixes and that improvements in religious freedom laws and policies are a step-by-step process that produce change over time.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: What is the work of a Commissioner like?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: The Commission was created in 1998, as part of the International Religious Freedom Act. It is an independent US government agency, made up of nine Commissioners, a full-time staff and an executive director. The 1998 Act also created the State Department International Religious Freedom (IRF) Office headed by an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, which is part of the State Department's operations, as well as a position for a religious freedom expert on the National Security Council. The way the Commission works, according to the legislative requirements, is that Commissioners, survey the whole world. The Commission is tasked with investigating and making recommendations regarding violations of conscience and belief around the world. This meant dealing with cases where there was clear evidence of violations of religious freedom; identifying cases where religious freedom violations may not have been immediately obvious, but were nonetheless measurable and having corrosive effects on human rights; and assessing the optimal policy recommendations, that is, analyzing the feasibility and efficacy of policy recommendations. As Commissioners, we made overseas fact-finding trips to investigate religious freedom violations, so that we could be sure of the facts on the ground and so that we could meet with the broadest possible cross-section of actors with expertise and knowledge of religious freedom conditions in-country. Commissioners are required by law to inform Congress of findings and to designate countries of particular concern (CPCs), which are countries that perpetrate systematic and egregious violations of religious freedom. The Commission is also required by law to make foreign policy recommendations about how to ameliorate or alleviate these violations. The designations and the recommendations go to the Secretary of State and Congress, then ultimately to the White House. The way we worked was through a kind of multifaceted effort: constant information gathering and analysis by staff and Commissioners, constant engagement through outreach and networking with people on the ground in countries from all the sources that we can muster, engagement with the international human rights community and multilateral forums and in bilateral diplomacy, as well as fact-finding missions on the ground. The goal was always to have the most complete, nuanced picture possible when it came to religious freedom conditions in specific countries, so that our policy recommendations would be informed by comprehensive knowledge and, therefore, would stand the chance of having a meaningful impact on the ground.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: What was the reaction of the countries you visited?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: Commissioners are senior diplomatic appointments, so we traveled as US government officials. Although the Commission is an independent US government agency, the State Department seeks approval from the authorities of the country visited. This is a standard diplomatic procedure. In some cases, like Saudi Arabia or China, we repeatedly sought to visit countries, but permission was denied. Eventually, during my service, the Commission went to Saudi Arabia twice and to China once. Part of the work of the Commission, like anyone who works in Human Rights, is persistence. When we were denied, we continued to make the request until we ultimately received approval.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: How would you define US diplomacy regarding religion?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: The Commission is part of an overall US foreign policy approach that recognizes that religion is critical to geopolitics and to the US's own strategic interests in the world today, but likewise also places a priority on upholding international religious freedom as part of a commitment to the protection of human rights. Over time, I think that that the work of the Commission has made it clear to US foreign policy makers that human rights and security are inextricably linked: it is impossible to have a stable security environment without respect for religious freedom and human rights. Furthermore, although the Commission and the State Department IRF Office deal with international religious freedom, there is also an Office of Religion and Global Affairs at the State Department, which does not deal with religion freedom *per se*, but which deals with this broader issue areas in which there is an intersection between religion and foreign policy. For example, religious ideas and actions are crucial for responding to environmental degradation and formulating robust climate change policy, for clarifying and addressing grave issues of human security, including hunger and famine and public health needs, for responding to the state causes and humanitarian consequences of mixed migration, and for working to end the scourge of modern forms of slavery. The US foreign policy establishment has come to understand the salience of religion for resolving many of these issues, so that the focus on international religious freedom is merely one dimension—a crucial dimension—of a broader recognition that religion matters in processes of peace and conflict around the world.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: What would you respond to those who consider that the International Religious Freedom Act, and the Commission as its extension, are a means to expand US influence by allowing proselytism and missions overseas?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: I would say that this is a misconception, that it is not true. If you look at the history of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), you see that there was a broad range of religious advocacy groups involved in the various stages of the legislation. Without a doubt Evangelical Protestant Christians were very active in this process, but what was most remarkable about the IRFA was the broad-based, multi-religious support from religious advocacy

groups and faith communities, including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Reformed and Conservative Jews, and Muslims, amongst others. All these faith communities, as well as civil society NGOs recognized that the protection of freedom of conscience, belief, and religion is essential to human dignity, but also essential to peace in the world today. The initial suspicion, both in the US and abroad, that the legislation would allow certain groups to proselytize does not stand up to scrutiny, neither in the origins of the legislation nor in the ways in which the work of the Commission, the State Department IRF Office, and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom have carried out the mandate of the legislation. A careful review of the recommendations of the USCIRF leaves no room for the misconception that commitments to protect international religious freedom are a smokescreen for enabling proselytism, and the Commission's broad body of work, in the form of Congressional hearings, reports on asylum and expedited removal, studies on religious education, and international visits, all adhere to international standards, and also, have addressed the violations perpetrated against a significant range of religious communities—including Baha'is Jewish communities, Yazidis, Ahmadiyya and Shia Muslim communities, Orthodox Christians, Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians, to name only a few. The Commission's work aims to encourage countries to abide by the international legal commitments to protect religious freedom, which means the right to believe, to change one's belief, or to have no religious belief.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: Religion has become an increasingly important geopolitical factor in conflicts over the course of the last 25 years. Does this mean that Samuel Huntington was right when he theorized his "clash of civilizations"?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: Where Huntington was "right," if we want to use that term, was in his argument that religion matters in international relations and in the modern, even post-modern, world. But in terms of the argument about the clash of civilizations driven by irreconcilable religious essentialisms, I would say that Huntington got more wrong than he got right. First and foremost, he suggested that, suddenly, in the post-Cold War period, religion was becoming important in geopolitical terms. His truncated timeframe reflects the blind spot of many social scientists and policymakers, who failed to take religion seriously as a factor in social and political change, because of their ideological commitment to a type of secularism that was anti-religious and, therefore, which meant that religion was not a subject of interest for serious scholarship. I would argue that religion has always been important and relevant in international relations, as rigorous scholarship and clear empirical evidence demonstrate. There are so many fascinating examples that speak to the fact that religion has been consistently important in the global scope. The founding of the United States and the emergence of ideas about American Exceptionalism cannot be understood apart from religion and, especially, without recognizing the centrality of religious freedom to the founding experiences and documents of the United States of America. —Similarly, seminal events in US foreign policy, from President McKinley's decision to take American military action in the Philippines (1898), to US foreign_policy_makers' vision of the stakes of the Cold War, cannot be

understood apart from the religious ideas and actors that played a role in these decisions. The transformations from authoritarian to democratic regimes in Latin America from the mid-20th-century onward cannot be accurately understood without recognizing the importance of Roman Catholic and Protestant liberation theologians and activists committed to social justice and the preferential option for the poor. The millions of tons of Allied humanitarian food aid delivered to famine-stricken, Axis-occupied Greece could not have been organized and delivered without the Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America. These are all examples of the impact of religion in world affairs well before Huntingon's argument about religion in the post-Cold War international order. So, his timeframe was truncated. And, his arguments are based on essentialisms that reduce religious communities to monoliths which fail to recognize the remarkable pluralism within global faith communities and which, therefore, create the opportunities for extremists and maximalists to use such "clash" arguments to justify control within their own traditions and violence across traditions. Huntington's argument is useful only if it pushes us to analyze the changing expression, intensity, and impacts of religion in world affairs, and especially, only if it forces us to dissect the nature and implications of pluralism, within and across faith traditions. Unfortunately, those were not the claims that Huntington laid out, but from my perspective as a scholar-policymaker, those are the claims that are actually important for thinking about how best to protect international religious freedom and to develop foreign policies that engage constructively with religions.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: Religion should not be reduced to an ideology, but in some cases it appears to be used not only to solidify socio-political body, but also to guarantee a more authoritarian view in politics, like in Turkey or Russia. Do you see a pattern in the use of religion in (inter-) national politics today?

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: I think that the empirical evidence suggests, unfortunately, an intensification in the instrumentalization of religion for the purposes of exclusivist nationalism around the world today. Russia and Turkey are two quintessential examples of the way that membership in a religious community is used to justify who belongs to the national community. Who is a real Russian? Who is a real Turk? Not only do these governments use religion for purposes of exclusivist nationalism, but also are deploying religious arguments to justify their foreign policy objectives and actions. In both of these cases, the instrumentalization of religion for purposes of nationalism has contributed to the consolidation of hyper-authoritarian regimes which violate the religious freedom of their citizens, whether in terms of majority or minority communities. At the same time, it would be a mistake to see religion as the key feature in the Russia-Turkey strategic rapprochement, as the summer "reset" in Turkey-Russia relations was largely driven by pragmatic interests. Turkey relies on Russia for over 65% of its combined oil and natural gas needs, and trade with Russia is also crucial to economic growth in Turkey. Likewise, Turkey is aiming to get Russian backing to ensure that Syrian Kurds do not succeed in creating an autonomous region or canton on the Syria-Turkey border. In a word, Turkey has economic

and military objectives that are driving Ankara's rapprochement with Moscow, especially because Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan needs to use these "successes" as leverage for his push to revise the country's constitution in a manner that will make him, effectively, into a presidential autocrat. From Russia's perspective, engagement with Turkey brings the aforementioned economic benefits in energy and commercial markets, and likewise, gives Moscow leverage vis-à-vis NATO (the Moscow-Ankara relationship generates tensions within NATO, insofar as it raises additional questions about Turkey's reliability as a NATO member) in consolidating Russia's diplomatic and naval presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. So, the rapprochement has little to do with religion, but does shed important light on the way that religious nationalism enables political authoritarianism. There are some indicators that both Moscow and Ankara are using their relationship to try to position themselves as the hegemonic voices for Sunni Islam and Orthodox Christianity, and here again, the consequences are anti-democratic and are especially detrimental both for the vitality and security of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and for the vitality of non-exclusivist interpretations of Sunni Islam.

These are only two examples of instrumentalization of religion for purposes of nationalism, but there are other emblematic cases of a reflexive relationship between religious nationalism and authoritarian/totalitarian regimes, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Yet, we also see disturbing signs of the instrumentalization of religion for nationalist purposes, with corrosive impacts for democracy, in post-industrial democracies, as in many EU member States and, arguably, in some quarters in the US. This instrumentalization is not new in terms of international developments, but what is concerning about the present moment is that the trend cuts across both non-democratic and democratic regime types. It's also important to recognize the reciprocal blowback caused by these trends, since governments frequently justify their religious repression and religious nationalisms as a response to real and perceived measures taken in other countries.

NICOLAS KAZARIAN: After the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA, should we expect a shift in US diplomacy regarding religion? Religious freedom doesn't seem to be very high on his list of priorities.

DR. ELIZABETH PRODROMOU: During the campaign, Donald Trump said almost nothing about international religious freedom, and its promotion and protection, so it's very hard to say where the new Administration may go. At the same time, there is no reason to expect that it would not support the current institutional structures and agencies that exist to promote religious freedom as part of the promotion of Human Rights. Where the Administration has said a lot, with very mixed content, has been about religion and religious freedom domestically. If the US wants to position itself as a global example, to continue to try to lead by example when it comes to the protection of freedom of conscience, belief and religion around the world, the Administration will have to aim to be irreproachable on those same protections at home. This is where the discourse

of President-Elect Trump and those surrounding him has raised cause for concerns. It would be very difficult for other countries to take the US seriously when the USCIRF or the State Department's IRF Office, or even the Secretary of State, push for improvement of religious freedom policy abroad, if domestically, our legal and judicial structures and practices, as well as the public discourse and tone of the Administration, stand at odds with the standards to which we are signatories and which we encourage other countries to comply. ■

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Observatoire dirigé par Nicolas Kazarian, chercheur associé à l'IRIS
kazarian@iris-france.org

INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES
2 bis rue Mercœur
75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60
contact@iris-france.org
@InstitutIRIS

www.iris-france.org