



Religion and Crisis Management

Amb. Kurt Volker

Senior Fellow and Managing Director
Center for Transatlantic Relations

Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University

Senior Advisor, Atlantic Council of the United States

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Thank you. It is great to see so many friends and colleagues here, so I want to thank Rabbi Schneier and Ruth Whiteside for inviting me.

As the third speaker on this panel, and as a former Ambassador to NATO, I thought I would take a different tack, and speak about religion in the context of conflict, crisis management, and seeking solutions to conflict. This is, after all, what we spend so much of our effort on these days in our foreign policy.

In his opening remarks, Rabbi Schneier said that one of the great exports from America is the idea of coexistence and mutual respect among religions – that we have mastered the art of “live and let live.”

I very much agree with that. It is a great gift. At the same time, as diplomats and foreign policy practitioners, we should think about how that shapes us.

As Americans, we are brought up with a deep understanding of a separation between church and state. We tend to think of foreign policy as a function of the state. And therefore tend to see religion as some external factor.

It is only natural to think this way, given who we are as Americans. **But if that is indeed the way we think about religion in foreign policy, we are getting it 100 percent wrong.**

I am not an expert on religion. Others could do a better job. I am only here because Rabbi Schneier asked me to come. And if you get to know Rabbi Schneier, you'll understand that it is very hard to say "no" to this man.

And so, as a non-expert, and speaking to a distinguished audience, I may end up stating a bit of the obvious. But then again, perhaps it is at least helpful to state it all in one place.

You can't do the work of foreign policy without thinking about religion.

- When we launch a military intervention, or conduct peacekeeping, or respond to a crisis, or provide development aid, we must be aware: Religion is usually one of the most important factors to the local population.

Religion is one of the most important components of defining identity.

- Perceived differences in identity are an essential ingredient in conflict, and in overcoming conflict.
- Indeed, especially in poor and tribal societies, perhaps more so than modern, urban ones, religion is the most important component in defining society and identity.

Other societies and cultures think about the relationships between political and religious authorities differently than we do in the United States.

- In the United States, we have the separation of church and state. In France, they have a different slice on this. And in other societies and cultures, even more so.

Religion is not uniform.

- We often speak about "Muslims" or a "Muslim society," or a "Catholic country." But we need to get past the labels and see people. There are tremendous differences among people in their thoughts on religion even within a single town or community, let alone a country or a society.
- So we should be careful about broad labels, and see the real people we are dealing with as we try to end conflicts, manage crises, and find solutions.

Sometimes religion will follow the lines of ethnic identity, and they can reinforce each other. Sometimes not.

Often, religion – or extremists using religion as a front – are at the root of conflict.

- Think about recent history, and what we have been involved with. The Taliban. Shia-Sunni violence in Iraq. Kosovo, where Orthodox ethnic Serbs perpetrated ethnic cleansing against ethnic Albanian Muslims. Bosnia. Lebanon. India-Pakistan. Darfur.

Clearly, other factors also apply – usually money and power, and who has it. But the “who” is defined by perceptions of identity, and identity is shaped in large measure by religion.

- Rabbi Schneier already spoke eloquently about the period of World War II, so I don't want to say much more about it. I would only note that while many factors led to the war, and many interests were engaged in waging it, one of the defining characteristics of the war in Europe was the fascist demonization and genocide against Jews on the basis of religious identity.

Seeing religion as a critical aspect in conflict, and solutions to conflict, is therefore nothing new.

But something new *has* happened in the last 15 years. And that is globalization.

- Today, we have to combine everything I have just said about religion, conflict and crisis management with the phenomenon of globalization of communication, transportation, economics, migration, and so forth.
- We now have religious identity – and conflict based on identity – washing over us in ways that were not true 15 years ago.
- We find ourselves in the midst of trying to stop conflicts, stabilize societies, combat extremism, build governance, and overcome radicalization in ways that we had no role in 15 years ago, and in which we are not terribly well-suited or comfortable. We are wading into deep waters – but we must do it.

This has consequences for how we understand conflicts, and in how we address them.

It does *not* mean that we should try to make ourselves just like the local society.

- We aren't, and can never be. And indeed, as Rabbi Schneier said, one of the positive things we can export is the notion of mutual respect and coexistence among religions. We should not shy away from this.

Nor does it mean that the local population is all quiet and peace-loving and pious, and that we are some kind of violent, heathen imposition – although extremists would have you believe that.

- Many of the people we are dealing with in crises and conflicts are extraordinarily violent, and are themselves a small number of men seeking to impose their radical views on a weak local population.

It does mean, however, that we must think through the impact of religion as we shape :

- Our analysis of what is really going on;
- Our strategies for stabilizing conflict;
- Our engagement with local leaders and governance, both civilian and military; and
- Our conduct, concerning both civilian and military personnel.

Getting these things wrong is disastrous – and it is not hard to think of examples where we have indeed gotten them wrong and suffered serious consequences. Getting them right is critical to success.

- Just one illustration about NATO, since I spent so much time on NATO issues. Until 1995, NATO had never conducted a military operation. When it first did, it was to protect Muslims in Bosnia.
- And indeed, one of the defining characteristics of nearly all NATO military operations to date (and now there have been many) has been to protect Muslim populations against aggression: look at Bosnia, Kosovo, or NATO's role in Afghanistan today.
- Yet if you were to take a poll among Muslims in the Middle East or South and Central Asia, they would have an opposite view of NATO. So that alone should tell us that we are getting something wrong in our messaging, in our engagement, and in our conduct.
- Granted – it also has a lot to do with the messaging of the extremists, who deliberately portray conflicts as a war against Islam, thereby concealing their own despotic effort to impose their radical views and the power of their guns on weak societies. But we also need to look at our own messaging.

In sum, it is critical to get these things right. And the only way to get them right is to think of religion as an integral part of foreign policy, rather than some external factor.

Thank you, and I would be pleased to address your questions and comments.