# The Role of Interreligious and Interfaith Dialogue in the Post-Secular World

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## Abstract

Today, western liberal democratic societies are secular, or in other words, religion is set apart from the state. However, the beginning of the 21st century has seen a re-politicizing of the religion. This paper argues that religion plays an important role in current global politics and events. Moreover, it has been used as tool to recruit masses for a wrong cause. Hence, Interreligious and interfaith dialog can play a role of catalysts and a future trend in cultural diplomacy. The paper provides definitions of a secular and post secular society. Then, it discusses the general concept of dialogue and explores it from an interreligious and interfaith point of view as a way to mitigate the role religion has undertaken.  Finally, it provides examples of what European Union has been doing in that respect.

**Keywords**: politics; religious communities; religion; nation; secular; post secular; interreligious; interfaith; dialogue.

## Introduction

Until the mid 17th century and beginning of the formation of the modern (secular) international system of states, religion was the key ideology that often provoked political conflict between social groups within countries and between countries. But after the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 and the development of the modern nation-state, first in Western Europe and then in the European colonies and the rest of the world, at both the intrastate and international level, the political importance of religion declined significantly.[1]

However, at the beginning of the 21st century, religion is once again politicized. Moreover, many other parts of the world witnessed the emergence of states where

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[1] See more: Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), London and New York, 2009.

religion played an increasingly important role. Europe was partly an exception to this trend, because most of its countries emphasize their secularity having displaced religion from the public into the private sphere.

The end of the last century was marked by the increased political involvement of religious actors, not just within specific countries, but also on the international scene. However, when discussing the politicization of religion we mostly have in mind the so-called "Islamic radicalism" of the Middle East and the polarization of relations between Jews and Muslims. But it is not just "Islamists" whose activities have a political agenda. We should not overlook the impact that the Roman Catholic Church has in several European and Latin American countries. Hence there are numerous examples of the involvement of religion in politics in different parts of the world, both in the domestic and the international context.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, blog reads *"One of the most interesting challenges we face in global diplomacy today is the need to fully understand and engage the great impact that a wide range of religious traditions have on foreign affairs. I often say that if I headed back to college today, I would major in comparative religions rather than political science. That is because religious actors and institutions are playing an influential role in every region of the world and on nearly every issue central to U.S. foreign policy"[2].*

Also, Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual state address of the union includes some of his most charged rhetoric for Turkey by saying "*And I guess Allah decided to punish the ruling clique in Turkey by stripping it of its sanity*" alleging that a creeping Islamization has set in under Erdogan's watch[3].

Obviously, the religion is playing an important role in today's world. Hence, for the purpose of this paper and to set the grounds for the undertaken task as to pinpoint the role of the interreligious and interfaith dialogue to mitigate the role religion has undertaken into the contemporary world we first define the concepts of secular and post-secular society, and then by defining the concepts of both interreligious and interfaith dialogues scrutinize their role as a catalyst and a future trend in cultural diplomacy.

## Secular Vs Post Secular Society

Jürgen Habermas, German philosopher, sociologist and an important initiator of the concept called post-secularism emphasizes that to understand post-secularism we first must define secularism since a post-secular state must have been a secular state before. Secularism is basically the principle of religious institutions and dignitaries

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[2] http://blogs.state.gov/stories/2015/09/05/toward-better-understanding-religion-and-global-affairs#sthash.YxlLRPwJ.dpuf

[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/12/03/russias-putin-says-allah-is-punishing-turkeys-rulers/

from persons mandated to represent the state and government institutions, that is to say, the transfer of ecclesiastical property to state or civil ownership. A first transfer has been recorded right after the thirty Years War that torn Europe until 1648. This war mainly being about religious matters, the exhaustion caused by it going along with proliferation of sects helped bringing about religious toleration by governments and many religious or irreligious beliefs obtained recognition. A better dialogue and mutual understanding between religions occurred. *"Secular culture and language implicitly form the background to dialogue between religions."*[4]

Other factors leading to secularism would have been a growing middle class and an increase in urban living that happened faster than anywhere else in Europe. That's the way state secularism elements rose. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: *"The rise of modernism led to the rise of secularism. The two go hand in hand. Secularism is defined as a system of ideas or practices that rejects the primacy of religion in our corporate life. In its hard form, secularism is atheistic. It denies the reality of god. But in its softer, more widespread form, it accepts God's reality but rejects the church and church as controlling force in the life of the national community. It believes that the church and state should be separate entities in modern life. This doesn't mean that individual faith cannot inform our politics; it simply means that the state should not sponsor a particular religion and give it preferential treatment and power. In this sense, the founding fathers of the United States were secularists."*[5]

An example of a strong point for secularism is France after its revolution, and later, the appearance of communism, socialism and fascism that were irreligious. The evolving science and technology in Europe came along with more rationality, materialism, pragmatism and maybe even cynicism. And surely the first and second world war brought their contribution to the movement. During WWII, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: *"We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as 'religious' do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something by 'religious'...*[6]*" And if therefore man becomes radically religionless – and I think that is already more or less the case (else, how is it, for example, that this war, in contrast to all previous ones, is not calling forth any 'religious' reaction?) –what does that mean for 'Christianity'?"*[7] There comes a secular period where freedom of religion without religion interfering with states matters.

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[0] Isaac Nahon-Serfaty and Rukhsana Ahmed, "*New Media and Communication Across Religions and Cultures*" (page 10)

[5] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The postmodern world* (article)

[6] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Religionless Christianity* (article)

[7] Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Religionless Christianity* (article)

In this context Tony Blair argues: *"We need religion-friendly democracy and democracy-friendly religion."*[8] Considering the variety of religions and their geo-historical contexts, it must be understood that secularism may have slightly nuanced meanings across the world. *"Secularism always appears as a reaction to a specific religious and political tradition and therefore does not have the same meaning or content everywhere.[9] "India, Turkey, France and the United States do 'secularism' in different ways".[10]*

According to Professor Kristina Stoeckl of the Central European University, in her research *Defining the post-secular* February 2011, post-secularism doesn't mean a return of religion or a return to bygone days. It acknowledges that secularism is a changing form and suggests compatibility between religion and the modernity associated with secularism. Tony Blair also argues *"The past decade has seen many convenient myths which disguised the importance of religion, stripped away."*[11]

To illustrate the word with an example we can take the case of Turkey. By the times of its founding, the Republic of Turkey inspired itself by Western ideologies; the "Kemalist Laicism" was a major change to the Ottoman Empire. Today, the position of religion in Turkey has been brought back to the forth since the country is led by a religious party. Another example is Russia which during Soviet times as much as Mao Zedong's China tried to erase religion for good since it is opposed to communism. Mao once told the Dalai-Lama: "religion is poison". Nevertheless, the fall of the Soviet Union and its ideology enabled religion to come back, namely Russian orthodoxy.

Habermas argues "Disappointment over nationalistic authoritarian regimes may have contributed to the fact that today religion offers a new and subjectively more convincing language for old political orientations."  Cesare Merlini of the "Center of the United States and Europe" and chairman of the "Board of Trustees of the Italian Institute for International Affairs" in Rome also argues that religion has met a revival since two decades and as examples, he amongst others mentions Muslim women taking up the headscarf to mark their identity inside their countries. He also claims Israel to become, in an increasing way, a Jewish state. An interesting reflection he makes is the link between the idea that post-secularism is thriving in a post-Western becoming world and another what can be inferred that post-secularism is following going along with the shifting of power from the West to the East. Merlini said: "*Several authors link the growing activism and visibility of private religious or ecclesiastic organisations with the rise of religious fundamentalism and*

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[8] Tony Blair, "*Protection of religious freedom should be a priority for all democracies*" (article), Saturday, 12 Nov., 2011

[9] Isaac Nahon-Serfaty and Rukhsana Ahmed, "*New Media and Communication Across Religions and Cultures*" (page 10)

[10] Isaac Nahon-Serfaty and Rukhsana Ahmed, "*New Media and Communication Across Religions and Cultures*" (page 10)

[11] Tony Blair, "*Protection of religious freedom should be a priority for all democracies*" (article), Saturday, 12 Nov., 2011

*the related attempt to impose a chosen reading of basic scriptures on the conduct of public affairs."*

Consequently, in this post secular world there is an obvious need for a catalyst to mitigate the role religion has undertaken. Thus, the interreligious and interfaith dialogues come into play as a future trend in cultural diplomacy. To elaborate this, the paper further on provides definitions of both interreligious and interfaith dialogue. In addition it also spells out the distinction between the two. However, to understand what interreligious and interfaith dialogues are, the concept of dialogue should first be defined.

**Interreligious and interfaith dialogue**

Jacques Dupuis, Doctor in theology defines dialogue: "As a specific, integral element of evangelization; dialogue means all positive and constructive Interreligious relations and connections with individuals and communities of other faiths, which are directed at mutual understanding and enrichment, in obedience to truth and respect for freedom. It includes both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions."

In addition, due to the relevance of our topic, it's also important to completely understand the lexical meaning of the word 'dialogue'. Thus, some of the most exact definitions have been provided. According to the Oxford Dictionary, dialogue is a discussion between two or more people or groups, especially one directed towards exploration of a particular subject or resolution of a problem *(the USA would enter into a direct dialogue with Vietnam).* Based on information, found in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language dialogue is: a conversation between two people; a discussion of positions or beliefs, especially between groups to resolve a disagreement; a conversation between characters in a drama or narrative; a literary work written in the form of a conversation *(the dialogue of Plato).*

Collins English Dictionary defines dialogue as a conversation between two or more people; an exchange of opinions on a particular subject, discussion; a political discussion between representatives of two nations or groups. However, it should be noted that all definitions, despite some distinctions, convey the same meaning.

In his book *"A resource for Christian Muslim dialogue"*, Gerard Forde explains that dialogue seeks to improve good relations and mutual understanding between people and that it identifies causes of tensions in Christian Muslim relations that are often social, political or economic rather than religious. Tony Blair said: *"And do we seriously think the issue of Jerusalem can be resolved without at least some discussion of its religious significance to all three Abrahamic faiths?"[12].* Dialogue seeks to build

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[12] Tony Blair, "*Protection of religious freedom should be a priority for all democracies*" (article), Saturday, 12 Nov., 2011

understanding and confidence to overcome or prevent tensions, and to break the barriers and stereotypes down since they can lead to distrust, suspicion and bigotry.

*"Religious and cultural dialogue in the public square takes place, consciously or unconsciously…"* [13]When talking about interreligious and interfaith dialogue, one can claim this is about people of different faiths that come to a mutual respect and understanding that allows them to cooperate and live with each other despite their differences. The terms are referring to positive and cooperative interaction on an institutional level. Tony Blair: *"There will be no peace in our world without an understanding of the place of religion within it."[14]* While respecting the right of the other to practice their religion in peace, each party stays true to their own beliefs. It is a mode of relating to other faiths and has a transforming potential. Indeed, all involved people may be transformed through dialogue. In that way, interreligious dialogue makes people closer to each other but does not aim to create uniformity between religious groups; it maintains affirming the integrity of faiths at the same time without omitting to preserve what they hold dear. Trust being a key word in that field, addresses asymmetric relationships of power with honesty. Asymmetric power relationships may be caused by language, poverty and wealth, gender or minorities opposed to majorities.

It has been observed that actors of an interfaith and interreligious dialogue are not only international organizations and countries. They also include relationships and human interactions as they take place between communities and individuals on many levels. In present times, many countries and their cities are inhabited with people of various religious groups - Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, etc. All type of relations between these groups, whether formal or informal, can be linked to these kinds of dialogues for example relations between neighbors, in schools or places at work. Under this subject, we understand that dialogue is not only taking place on an official or academic level but is also part of daily life during which various religious and cultural groups  directly merge with each other, and where tensions between them are the most tangible.

Another significant thing to understand is that the term interreligious dialogue is not the same as interfaith dialogue, though many people don't see distinctions in these concepts. The World Council of Churches distinguishes between 'interfaith' and 'interreligious'. To the World Council of Churches 'interreligious' refers to action between Christian denominations. So, 'interfaith' refers to an interaction between different faith groups such as Muslim, Christian or Hindu and Jew for example. In addition, and for a better understanding of interfaith dialogue, it may be useful to understand what it is not. Interfaith dialogue is not about brushing aside or talking

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[13] Isaac Nahon-Serfaty and Rukhsana Ahmed, "*New Media and Communication Across Religions and Cultures*" (page 10)

[14] Tony Blair, "*Protection of religious freedom should be a priority for all democracies*" (article), Saturday, 12 Nov., 2011

away differences and does not aim at coming to a common belief, creating a shared religion. Neither it is a means of converting the other because following the ideology of dialogue, each part stays true to its own faith. Interfaith dialogue is also not a space for disproving, arguing or attacking the beliefs of others. It aims to increase trust and understanding in a mutual way. Interreligious and inter faith dialogue is no negotiation because while discussing faith or identity issues, we are not seeking agreement. Neither, it is a debate, because it doesn't aim at winning over someone. It is also not a discussion because rational arguments are contributed as well as emotive and personal stories together with experiences, thus engaging existentially with one another.

## Brief history and evolution of interreligious dialogues

In the Early Middle Ages, examples of a rich and great interreligious dialogue existed. In Jerusalem for example, Jews, Christians and Muslims were all living together in peace and were exchanging. In the Late Middles Ages which are not called dark ages for no reason, mostly massacres occurred between religious groups. The European religion wars opposing Protestants to Catholics can be counted in dozens all over the continent. Also, Christians were on several occasions repelling the Muslim assaults. The Jewish people have been persecuted almost everywhere in Europe. These conflicts together with the added Pope's crusades generated the antonym of interreligious dialogue. Indeed, there was no interreligious or interfaith dialogue in such times. As a consequence and logical following, people got war-weary which led to the treaty of Westphalia. This combined with the arrival of the enlightenment era led to the birth of secularism. After a brief period of secularism on a religion history scale, due to a loss of values, identities and the collapsing of political regimes that were banning religion in some parts of the world, the desire and feel of need of religion came back. This is post-secularism. With the end of WWII came the beginning of globalization as well as Human Rights that is to say freedom of religion, people from all over the world have been increasingly mixing up, make interreligious dialogue inevitable.

Conclusively as Mr Tajani (EPP, IT) has addressed the religious community leaders in his opening remarks "*Dialogue between religions has a key role in advancing the project of peace that European integration is". "Who shoots in the name of God, shoots against God*", he stressed the need to curb all violence,[15] and at the same time emphasized the role interreligious and interfaith dialogue should play. Moreover, it is not only words. Globally and at E.U. level there are many incentives that fall within this context. The paper further provides such examples.

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[15] http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/news-room/20150324IPR37224/Inter-religious-dialogue-the-way-to-defeat-extremism

## Global incentives

Regional, local, national and international interfaith incentives are to be found over the world; whether informally or formally linked, they may form larger federations or networks. Religions for Peace- International –ECOSOC accredited to the United Nations –is the world's largest and most representative multi-religious coalition advancing common action among the world's religious communities for peace. The coalition brings together religious leaders as well as grassroots representatives, academics and activists from more than 100 countries.

The European Council of Religious Leaders (later in the text: ECRL) is part of this worldwide network alongside the African Council of Religious Leaders, the Latin American Council of Religious Leaders, the Asian Conference of Religions for Peace and the Middle East and North Africa Council of Religious Leaders. The network represents a unique resource for monitoring developments and reaching out to affected communities and decision makers.

Finally, as Dr Hans Küng, a Professor of Ecumenical Theology and President of the Global Ethic Foundation formulated "*There will be no peace among the nations without peace among the religions. There will be no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions*"[16].

However, the focus of this paper is the E.U. and its incentives will be discussed further in the text.

## E.U. incentives

Based on the motto: "Different faiths- common action", ECRL goes beyond words to actions, seeking to promote inter-religious initiatives to prevent and transform communal or inter-religious tensions, reduce threats of weapons, and promote human development and protection of the earth.

Europe's multi-culturality and multi-religiosity is increasing and calls for action to promote fruitful coexistence and peace for peoples in and out of its borders. The idea is to make people of goodwill joining hands. Despite religions were hijacked and misused by sectarian agendas, they have assets that should be and are mobilized for human flourishing: Spiritual assets at the core of each religious tradition, moral assets calling for respect and appreciation of fellow human beings, and social assets in form of institutions, networks and infrastructure.

In a nutshell ECRL brings together around 45 European senior religious leaders from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, together with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and

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16 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Interfaith_dialogue

Zoroastrians.  One Council Member from each of the faith traditions (co-moderator) makes up the six members Executive Committee of ECRL. ECRL has participatory status with the Council of Europe[17].

ECRL is multi-religious in nature and is therefore a broad platform for common action. As a pan-European council it is part of the global Religions for Peace network with global, regional and national expressions and can through them operate simultaneously on these levels. In addition, it attempts to be representative, making important links between its individual members and their communities and institutions while respecting their differences. It provides religious leaders and their communities to explore deeply held and widely shared values and concerns in their efforts to promote sustainable peace through dialogue and joint action. Vehicles used for its operation include: annual meetings of the full council – addressing important ethical and social issues in addition to organizational business; consultations and conferences for a wider range of participants to address specific concerns –responding to critical situations or on-going challenges; statements, publications – so far including declarations on culture of peace, tolerance, human dignity through human rights and traditional values, and living together in equal citizenship; representative delegations and visits - to communities in conflict tor with particular challenges, on specific occasions and to important stakeholders.

Moreover, ECRL recognizes that religious leaders are often highly respected and can influence situations when operating together across religious lines. Hence, it is a representative and credible engagement with EU, Council of Europe and OSCE and at the same time a multi-religious European agent of human dignity, peaceful coexistence and reconciliation

It is noteworthy to mention that from 3 to 5 March 2008 the European Council of Religious Leaders – Religions for Peace met in Berlin, a city which symbolizes a history of division in Europe as well as reconciliation and new beginnings. In order to promote bold, responsible and well-informed interreligious dialogue on all levels of European society, the Berlin Declaration on Interreligious Dialogue as a foundation for further action has been adopted. According to the declaration, interreligious dialogue leads to common action. In addition it stipulates that a full understanding of interreligious dialogue includes common action – diapraxis. The dignity of human life, to which all religions are committed, is challenged for example through poverty, violence, abuse of women and children, discrimination of migrants and dramatic changes in the natural environment. Different religions can address these issues together, although the ethics may draw on different resources. Interreligious dialogue should aim at mustering the resources of varying religious traditions to take up the challenges which Europe faces

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[17] http://www.rfp-europe.eu/index.cfm?id=401184

today. Ultimately, through common action we learn to understand better ourselves, each other, and the world in which we live[18].

**Themes**

The nature of work of ECRL / RfP Europe makes it necessary to research and develop specific themes related to religions and peace. Much effort is put into studies and development of concepts and areas of concerns. In this line ECRL / RfP Europe has a project portfolio that presently comprises the following ones such as: Building New Inter-Religious Councils; Cluster Munitions; End the production, transfer, stockpiling, and use of cluster bombs! European Inter-Religious Encounter 2008; Iraq; OLDEuropean Interreligious Directory; HIV and AIDS;Universal Code on Holy Sites and others.

Furthermore and in recognition that holy sites are at the core of many conflicts world-wide a Universal Code on Holy Sites has been developed. Its overall goal is to provide a mechanism to monitor and protect holy sites, especially during and after conflict, and to promote peace and reconciliation between people from diverse ethnic and religious communities and nationalities. Its implementation is also likely to prevent conflicts from erupting or escalating.

Also, the European Parliament conference of MEPs and religious community leaders on the rise of religious radicalism and fundamentalism held in March 2015 sent important messages thus confirming its determination to pinpoint the role interreligious and interfaith dialogue should play in today's world. *"We will defeat radicalism only if we stay united"; "We have to have the courage to take people on board and encourage dialogue between religions"; "Dialogue between religions has a key role in advancing the project of peace that European integration is"; "Who shoots in the name of God, shoots against God''; "The founding principle of Europe is solidarity"; "Europe will not leave Arab countries alone in the fight against radicalism and fundamentalism";* read some of the messages from the conference.

**Conclusion**

*"Time has come to put away the delusions: that faith is diminishing; that religion is not really what it's about; that a debate about politics can be seriously conducted in the 21st Century without debating religion[19]".* Since faith enriches our lives and guides them, however sinful we are we should open up the potential of Faith to many who are currently in a pursuit for spiritual meaning but have come to regard the practice of Faith as the preserve of the irrational, the superstitious and the prejudiced. Thus we

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Blair, Tony, Protecting religious freedom should be a priority for all democracies (article)

should allow the true and rational belief in God to direct the path of the 21st Century, where Faith actually belongs. That is what the world needs. Therefore we should get along and learn from each other to determine the world peace[20].

In sum up of the above said and to conclude we claim that religious groups, in essence, are calling for peace, tolerance and respect for the "other", which can contribute to building a multicultural society. On the other hand, disrespect and manipulation of religious particularity can adversely affect the building of the sense of a single nation. In a modern society inter-religious cooperation is very important. Only this concept carries any promise for the future of the contemporary EU and modern world in general.

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