

Transcript Seeing Clearly: Contextualizing Religion in Global Policy – The Lived Religion Approach

Webinar Series

Nurturing Seeds:

Religious Literacy as a Skill for Peaceful Engagement

EPISODE 1:
Seeing Clearly: Contextualizing Religion in Global Policy - The Lived Religion Approach

SPEAKER
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Chair of Politics and Religion in the Faculty of Religion, Culture, and Society at the University of Groningen

MODERATOR
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Co-founder and Executive Director of the Religion and Education Collaborative (REC)

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The banner features a central illustration of a white dove holding an olive branch, with a hand holding a small plant growing from soil. The background is a light blue-green gradient.

This fireside conversation explored how lived religious literacy - religion as encountered in everyday life - can inform more inclusive and effective policymaking, diplomacy, and humanitarian engagement.

Professor Erin K. Wilson offered grounded insights and case studies from her work with diplomats, defence personnel, and civil society, illustrating the risks of ignoring religious dynamics.

The webinar series "Nurturing Seeds: Religious Literacy as a Skill for Peaceful Engagement" is a collaboration between the International Dialogue Centre and the Tanenbaum Centre for Interreligious Understanding.

Setting the Scene: From Assumptions to Insight: Religion's Real-World Role

Kate Soules, Co-founder and Executive Director of the Religion and Education Collaborative (REC), Moderator:

Today, I'm talking with Erin Wilson, chair of politics and religion and the faculty of religion, culture, and society at the University of Groningen, about how policymakers and diplomats can better understand religion in today's global affairs.

Erin, thank you so much for being here today.

Can you say a little bit more about your work and give an example or two of the significance of religious literacy when it's become really apparent on the ground, not just theoretically.

Professor Erin K Wilson, Chair of Politics and Religion in the Faculty of Religion, Culture, and Society at the University of Groningen:

Thanks so much for having me. So, yes, as you mentioned, I'm a Professor of Politics and religion here at Groningen, and a lot of my work is focused on how people understand religion and the assumptions that people make about religion when they enter into policy or dialogue in the public sphere: I work with diplomats and with defence force personnel.

You and I spoke last week, Kate, about sharing some examples, and I was sitting here today just jotting a few down. And honestly, there's so many examples. But one immediate example that springs to mind in relation to diplomats is that for decades we've been trying to get them to see that religion is actually relevant to politics.

And there's been so many cases where they've been trying to introduce an aid program or so.

One example that is related to the Indonesian tsunami and trying to provide aid to victims there, but not, and Elena Fiddian-Qasbiyeh talks about this, not recognising that women in Indonesia, in certain parts of Indonesia needed headscarves in order to be able to go out and to actually access the aid.

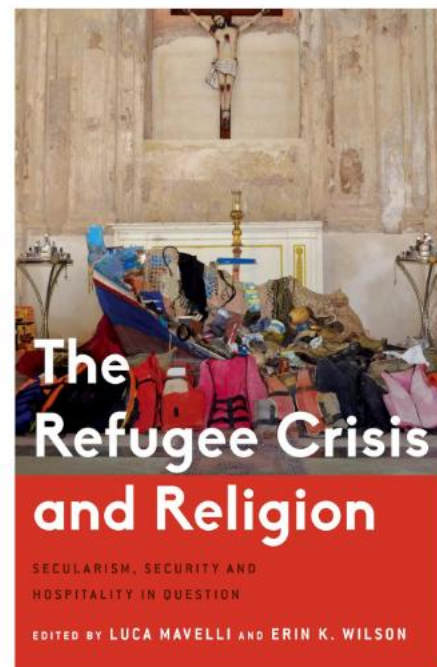
So not providing the headscarves was a fundamental barrier to them, being able to access aid.

Another example is (Stacey Gutkowski¹ writes about this in her book, *Secular War*) is UK Defence Force personnel entering into Afghanistan, assuming that religious leaders in Afghanistan operated in a similar way to religious leaders in the UK. They were relevant for people in small communities, for their personal private lives, and beyond that it was not relevant to how society operated and Gutowski documents just how this led to fundamental mistakes in military strategizing and engagement in the field in Afghanistan.

¹ Gutkowski, Stacey. [*Secular War: Myths of Religion, Politics and Violence*](#), I.B. Tauris, 2013.

There's lots of others that I could talk about as well from climate change, adaptation projects in the Pacific.

I also wanted to mention this book, *The Refugee Crisis and Religion*, to people. It's a book that I co-edited a few years ago. There are a number of different cases in here where policymakers make assumptions about the religious and spiritual needs of asylum seekers and migrants and refugees, particularly coming from Syria, that had detrimental impacts on their ability to settle and to integrate. And just these assumptions that people have certain religious needs when actually, that's not the case. And there are all these stereotypes that get made about people coming from certain parts of the world. So, so many ways in which a lack of religious literacy has a real, concrete impact on people's dignity and people's well-being and fundamental realities on the ground.



In Conversation: Understanding Religion Where It's Lived - Exploring frameworks, field realities, and shifting global trends through dialogue.

Avenues for engaging with local actors - thinking at different scales

KATE SOULES: It strikes me that working with diplomats and others, you're working from trying to get them to be aware of these most micro local things like providing headscarves to also thinking about providing global aid diplomacy all of these things. How do you help these different leaders that you work with move between thinking about religion at those different scales? It's one thing to think about at the very local scale, but then to think about it also at the global scale simultaneously is a big challenge.

ERIN K WILSON: Yes, absolutely. So, one of the things we've tried to do, is get them to say first of all, "okay, religion matters" - that was in the late nineties, early 2000s when you'd see that conversation happening. Then the challenge became to get them to see, to recognize that yes, okay, religion matters but it's not always the reason for everything that became a big problem, particularly in the PCVE countering violent extremism. And now what we're trying to do is to get them to see it in context. It depends on where you look, we're still trying to convince certain elements within foreign policy establishments that religion matters, and it's not dangerous or problematic to engage with. There's this question around whether secular governments engaging with religious actors or sharing with religious actors in terms of service provision is a violation of the principles of Secularism. That's something we can get into a bit more in Q&A if you like. So what we try and get them to see is to understand religion as a category that looks different,

depending on what level you're looking at it from, but also where you're looking at it. So it's about thinking about how we engage with religious actors.

At an international level, there's religious institutions and religious actors that you can engage with in the international sphere the same thing at the national level. But if you then break it down into the local level - particularly when you're thinking about things like aid or international security, or humanitarianism or climate change - you've got to try and hold all of these different levels together because they all impact each other. So it's challenging, but you get them to think about it in these three different levels.

And then when you get to this local level, what you try and get them to understand is that religion means different things to different people, that it looks different, depending on where you are, but that it exists in most of the world. It is absolutely fundamental to bring this element into the analysis. Because if you don't, you're missing avenues for engaging with local actors, you're missing avenues for influence with local actors, you're missing opportunities for building peace, you're missing potential for diplomacy. This is also true at an international level with international actors.

And then the other thing that we try and get them to do is to think more reflexively around their own assumptions. What are their own assumptions and their own experiences of religion that they're bringing into these kinds of conversations?

I do a lecture on religion and international security for NATO Defence College. And when I give this lecture, one of the things that I do right at the beginning of the session is to pose a series of questions to the defence force personnel in the course around what exactly is religion? Revealing that, for the most part, none of us actually agree on what religion is, and then that triggers their curiosity and their reflexivity, and then they start to think about it more in their own contexts. Many of them do. They don't all do so, but many of them do.

Does that answer your question?

KATE SOULES: Yes, and it reveals the complexity of this topic of religious literacy. It's fascinating that you're asking that question: "What is religion?" at a defence college. I taught an adult Ed class this spring on religious literacy, and we started with the very same question. And also figured out that there wasn't a good answer.

A Three-Step Way to Approach Religion – Erin's Framework

KATE SOULES: It's kind of revealing that some of these things are universal across trying to understand religious literacy is like "what is religion?", "What does it look like in different places?" and then you have to get into the specifics of "what is your role?", "How are you interacting with religion?".

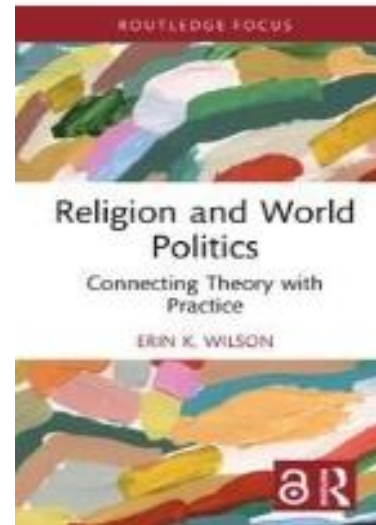
Students in my adult Ed class are not coordinating international aid projects - but for them to also recognize that religion is complex and its context specific and people interact with it in different ways: that is also religious literacy.

ERIN K WILSON: Absolutely, and it's one of the things that I've tried to develop. So with my last book, I was trying to give people a framework to make sense of the complexity, that incorporates a series of questions to ask². And it's basically three steps:

The first: Where are you looking? So context.

The second is right-sizing religion: how important is religion in this context? How does it interact with other elements? How does it interact with education, with politics, with culture, with history (including especially colonial history), gender etc.

And then the third one is: what is it we actually mean by religion? Who are we talking about? Which religion are we talking about? Which religions are we talking about? Which sects, denominations, or themes or strands within that religion are we talking about? And then, are we talking about religious actors? Are we talking about religious identities or are we talking about religious narratives?



All of those things can play a role but being able to actually name them and articulate them and separate them out from one another can be really helpful in trying to make sense of a conflict situation, for example. Or figuring out what it is a community of migrants or refugees actually needs when they come into a new place, a country of resettlement, for example. Or how to communicate climate science effectively to a community in the Pacific region, is another example of that.

Working with the trend in religious identity shifts

KATE SOULES: Trying to find ways to make this a more manageable thing to understand, and that complexity of religious identities, and one of the things we talked about last week - these shifting ways in which people are engaging with religion and spirituality.

The Pew Research Center has put out a lot of great data in the last few months and looking at shifts in religious affiliation and identities.³ And I'm wondering how you're bringing that into your work, when even some of the more solid assumptions that we might have been able to make in

² [Wilson, E.K. 2022. *Religion and World Politics: Connecting Theory with Practice*. London: Routledge](#)

³ See Pew Research Center's 2020 report on the global religious landscape: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/...>

the past - even those are being upended. And we're trying to understand how people affiliate or identify with religion in very different ways.

ERIN K WILSON: Yes, exactly. That's one thing that is really interesting for us to be paying attention to.

The other trend that people have been noticing is that, in – quote/unquote - “Western secular contexts”, there is an increased engagement with religion and spirituality, particularly with Christianity amongst Gen. Z.

So at the end of last year (2024) - there's an organization in Sweden that releases a youth barometer report in the autumn of every year predicting what the next big trends are going to be amongst young people - and last year (2024) their big prediction was Jesus, essentially building on the monk mode trend from 2023. The prediction was that Jesus was going to be the next big thing for Swedish Gen Z in 2025.

The other things that people have noticed is that in the UK Bible sales have doubled in the space of 5 years, and also in the US they've gone up. I can't remember the exact numbers now, but between 2023, and 2024 Bible sales had gone up. There's also a 3% increase in sales of books about religion and that is bucking the trend in nonfiction. So in nonfiction, sales are going down, sales of fiction are going up, but books on religion are bucking that trend within nonfiction.

So there's a big trend, a big interest in religion within Western societies that we typically think of as secular, non-religious, not really interested in religion. And that's something that policymakers and governments haven't quite yet cottoned on to. And we really need to be paying attention to that.

KATE SOULES: I feel like even scholars of religion are just starting to understand this and being able to look at this brand-new data. So how to then translate that to policymakers, diplomats in a way that's relevant to their work must be really challenging.

ERIN K WILSON: Absolutely, also, because we don't yet quite know exactly why this is happening.

So there's two theories that I've seen out there:

One is that people - in a context of climate crisis, increasing uncertainty and instability in the world – people are turning to religion for a sense of security, or something to provide them with a bit of grounding.

But the other is that, particularly amongst young men, we're seeing a turn towards conservative, quite patriarchal forms of different religious traditions. And there is a definite link between forms of patriarchal racist embedded Christian white Nationalist traditions across a lot of Europe and also, we see this in the North American context as well. so that is another concern or another explanation that's put out there.

But we really need more research on this, we need more people to be doing research with young people just asking the question. So it's one thing to get these statistics that Pew Research puts out - which is great - but what we need is also the stories that go with that, that help explain the numbers.

KATE SOULES: I totally agree, and that piece with the stories is so interesting: I ended up in a conversation with two other women at an event recently, people that I didn't previously know, and I revealed that I worked on religion, which I don't always do in public. And it turned out that all three of us had very unique backgrounds growing up in Christianity that had significant impacts on us, but didn't necessarily know what we might check off on that Pew survey if we were asked today what our affiliation was. And even if we checked unaffiliated, all of that background would still be playing a role in how we're engaging in the world and interpreting things.

ERIN K WILSON: Exactly. And this is an issue for governments. Because if you just take “oh, people are religiously unaffiliated - Religion's not important anymore” then you start to close down churches, for example. But religiously unaffiliated does not necessarily mean people are not interested in religion or spirituality anymore. What we see is that in times of crisis in European and North American contexts, people turn to religious organizations. They often are looking for some kind of ritual that they can participate in as a form of mourning or grieving as part of disasters. There is this sense of people wanting, and then also for governments who are thinking about how to deal with national crises. So in a lot of European contexts, including here in the Netherlands where I'm based, there is a national Evening of Remembrance every May 4 to remember the victims of World War II. And much of this borrows elements from Christian traditions. There is no kind of engagement with religion as such, explicitly, but it borrows from these traditions. So if you start to get rid of some of these things, or you switch them around, or if you don't connect with where these traditions, these rituals, have come from in the first place, then it starts to get a bit blurred and a bit muddled, and you might be unintentionally excluding people from participation in these rituals in the way that you present them.

So this is why it's really important for governments to also understand the nuances and the complexities here.

KATE SOULES: Coming from a place where we, - in the US - have this sort of separation of Church and state, and the recognition of the role of religion in some of these civic rituals isn't as obvious sometimes, even though it's definitely there.

See Religion, See People: What Every Diplomat Should Remember

KATE SOULES: When you work with policymakers and diplomats, you're trying to get them to understand this very complex thing and take away lots of knowledge. But if there's just one thing that you're trying to get them to leave with - like you've got one session with them - what is the most important thing that you would want them to walk away with and remember, months later?

ERIN K WILSON: I want them to remember that religion means different things to different people. Because people don't always realize that. Religion means different things to different people, and it can play a central role in how people make decisions, how they understand the world and how they value things, and that if they can remember those two things, what I hope is that, that then also prompts them to ask questions about "okay, what does religion mean for the people that I'm working with here?" "How does it shape the way that they understand the world?" And "how does that shape the way that they approach the particular issue that we're trying to develop a partnership on or we're trying to develop a project on?"

That would be the fundamental things I'd hope that they walk away from it with.

From the Ground to Global Politics: Bringing Lived Religion into Policy and Practice - Audience questions deepen the conversation on gender, power, global policy, and intersectionality.

Intersecting Lenses: Religion, Gender & Post-Colonial Insight - Exploring how lived religion can align with other critical frameworks for deeper understanding.

ERIN K WILSON: The Lived Religion Framework tries to also indicate particularly in that second step of right-sizing religion that I was talking about earlier in terms of like, what is the relationship of religion with other aspects of society. So that is the point at which you would look at how religion intersects with things like gender, and also with a post-colonial environment. So it would be at that point in the framework where you bring the analysis together. Although, also within the context. To understand a context fully, you need to understand its history - so looking at how that context has developed over a particular time period, the role of colonialism in that, and also the way that religion has connected with that.

The Lived Religion Framework, as I presented in the book, is very much part of the critical theory tradition. And so I there's a lot of opportunities for those different theories to intersect within foreign policy frameworks.

Religion in Global Policy: Seen and Unseen Forces - Understanding how religion consciously and subconsciously shapes international engagement.

ERIN K WILSON: THE role of religion in shaping global policies - that's an enormous question. And I would say, it depends on what you mean by "religion" and whose global policies you're looking at.

As a short response, I would say it plays both an implicit and an explicit role, or a conscious and a subconscious role. So I would argue that religion is part of our subconscious. When it comes to international politics, there are subconscious connections between how we think about national identity with religion. There are subconscious connections with how we think about race and

religion. All of these things are entangled in a global subconscious, and that does affect our policies and how we engage with particular parts of the world. It affects the barriers or obstacles to engagement, or to the additional visa requirements, for example, that we put on some people coming from some countries as opposed to others. Assumptions about religion are entangled with those things.

Then at a more basic level, there are ways in which assumptions about religion's relationship with violence shapes particular policies on violent extremism or global security or on religion's relationship with gender and conservative prejudices towards women and LGBTQI people that are associated with religion.

I think that the other role that religion plays in all of this is in post-colonial dynamics. And you see Putin - but also some leaders within African countries - mobilizing or operationalizing religion as a way to oppose the imposition of human rights requirements related to women and LGBTQI people. And it's a particular version of religion, but they pull out this religious freedom argument to say, well, this is a violation of our religious freedom, ignoring that states don't necessarily have the right to freedom of religion or belief. That's a right that applies to individuals and to communities.

Women of Faith: Genuine Inclusion or Symbolic Presence? - A critical look at representation, barriers, and what meaningful participation really takes.

ERIN K WILSON: How are women of faith involved in policymaking?

I think it's a very selective kind of involvement and often there has been more effort to involve women in thinking through issues like countering violent extremism.

And look, I'm sure there's also people who have joined today who know a lot more about some of this stuff than I do, and who are much more expert in this than I am. So if there are people who are in the chat who have experiences with this, I would invite you to share things in the chat about your observations on some of these issues as well.

But I think women, and Women of Faith in particular, tend to be brought in on issues about women and religion. And there's often not consultation of them on other issues, because we have this idea that there are "women's issues", and they're the only things that women have any interest in. And of course women are human beings as well. So we have interest in a wide variety of topics, so a lot more could be done there. Part of it is related to religion, but part of it is also related to gender stereotyping, and there are still barriers to women's involvement in policymaking and decision making that come from a variety of different sources.

Change the Environment, Change the Outcome - Final reflections on why religious literacy and gender work must engage whole communities—and why your efforts matter.

ERIN K WILSON: I'll add one short thought in relation to the question on women.

The other observation that I've made there is that a lot of efforts to improve the rights of women and girls have tended to focus on women and girls, and that's great. But if you don't change the environment that they are in, not much changes for them in reality. So projects focused on gender have to be focused on the whole community, not just on women and girls or not just on LGBTQI people.

In terms of a more general feedback or final closing point:

This kind of work can be very frustrating for people who are passionate about this, because you have to first of all convince people that religion matters, and then you have to get them to understand that religion isn't this singular thing, and that maybe they don't actually know what religion is. And that can take time.

And what I want to do is just encourage people to keep doing this because it's really important. And sometimes people don't recognise how important this is. But religion is at the core of human rights abuses that are happening today. It's at the core of prejudice. It's at the core of racial intolerance. It's entangled with all of these things. So it's really important to keep doing the work. And I just want to encourage everybody to keep doing it.

Acknowledgements

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We also express our gratitude for the valuable cooperation with the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding "Seeing Clearly: Contextualizing Religion in Global Policy – The Lived Religion Approach" was Episode 1 of 3 in the webinar series "Nurturing Seeds: Religious Literacy as Skill for Peaceful Engagement".

Webinar Series

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3 EPISODES
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