

# What do Faith-based Organisations Seek at the United Nations?

Written by Jeffrey Haynes

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JEFFREY HAYNES, NOV 15 2013

What do faith-based organisations (FBOs) at the United Nations (UN) seek to achieve? This brief article[1] seeks to answer this question, and focuses on the activities of selected FBOs at the UN, the most significant inter-governmental organisation (IGO) with a global public policy role. For the UN, a feature of recent years has been increasing regularity and institutionalisation of interactions with selected FBOs. This is partly because the UN now regularly engages with civil society organisations, both faith-based and secular, and partly because the UN is aware that the 'values' that FBOs bring to global governance are something it needs to factor in to its own concerns. For their part, many religious believers from many religious traditions see such FBOs as significant actors in trying to influence public policy in relation to various public issues at the UN.

### FBOs at the UN: From Marginalisation to Significance

As a secular organization, the UN has no common religion. But, like all the major faiths, we too work on behalf of the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. ... I have long believed that when Governments and civil society work toward a common goal, transformational change is possible. Faiths and religions are a central part of that equation (Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary General, 3 November 2009) (Secretary-General SG/SM/12585, 2009).

In what follows, I examine selected FBOs'[2] attempts to influence public policy formation and execution at the UN. I make two main arguments. First, I contend that the UN has over time consolidated policy making structures and processes, with strongly secular preferences. Led by publicly accountable officials, the UN makes decisions based on its long-term and institutional secular preferences, which traditionally exclude religious concerns – or at best regard them as marginal to the organisations' policies. Recently, however, publicly accountable officials at the UN have begun to engage with increasing regularity with selected FBOs in the context of a more general increase in relations with civil society organisations. The outcome has been that at the UN, selected FBOs' have seen their significance increase, an arrangement conducive to improved ability to engage with public officials in the IGOs, with the goal to encourage them to make policy according to FBO preferences (McGinnis, 2010). Second, FBOs are in competition with each other at the UN. This is manifested in two ways. First, it can imply an inter- or intra-religious competitiveness. In addition, competitiveness can also relate to ideological issues, including schisms between 'conservative' and 'liberal' (or 'progressive') FBOs (Bob, 2012). As a consequence, Berger (2003) notes, FBOs may compete with each other, pushing 'for change from both liberal and conservative platforms'. In addition, in order to pursue their ideological goals, Petersen (2010) notes, many FBOs regularly engage in alliances with various secular actors – including, states and other sources of power and authority, such as, secular non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Increasingly, the UN accepts that FBOs may have something useful to contribute to various issues which have recently arisen in importance especially in the context of deepening globalisation and its impact upon people's lives, welfare and employment. Regularised or institutionalised involvement of FBOs in the activities of the UN is quite recent, although not *de novo*. Nevertheless, Hurd (2011: 1) recounts a recent conversation at the UN between Father Bryan Hehir, Secretary for Health Care and Social Services in the Archdiocese of Boston and John Ruggie, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Business and Human Rights, whose job it is to propose measures to

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strengthen the human rights performance of the business sector around the world.[3] According to Hurd, Hehir said to Ruggie: 'Where is religion at the UN?' Ruggie replied: 'There is none.' In the quotation above, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, claimed in 2009 that the UN is 'a secular organization, the United Nations has no common religion'.

The comments of Ruggie and Ban seem inherently problematic, even contrary, in highlighting the secular orientation of the UN when, as we shall see below, the UN is a focal point for hundreds of transnational FBOs. Their statements do however suggest that traditionally the UN has had problematic relationships with 'religion'. As the quotations also indicate, the UN has a *raison d'être* traditionally involving pursuit of 'liberal' or 'progressive' 'secular' goals, including inter-state cooperation, democracy, peace and the rule of law, while religion was traditionally pejoratively characterised as both conservative and prone to conflict (Haynes, 2013b).

How then to explain an additional thrust of the quotation from Ban: religion can be part of the solution, not necessarily an integral aspect of the problem? Ban points to common ground between the UN and 'major faiths', which 'work on behalf of the disadvantaged and the vulnerable', implying that 'religion' has something to contribute in this regard. Ban's comment also highlights public policy concerns at the UN which are today significantly informed by both moral and ethical issues, often with an identifiable religious component. More generally, today's changed international environment provides FBOs with a new or enhanced role in global public policy which centres on 'values' and, more generally, encourages a shift from an exclusively secular approach to dealing with problems to one which is informed by ideas deriving from religious values which, it is now widely if not universally accepted, can actually be quite beneficial for inter-group and inter-community relations. As a result, selected FBOs – that is, those that publicly adhere to the fundamental values of the UN, including, human rights, democracy and the rule of law – are now increasingly seen as credible interlocutors in relation to various moral and ethical issues, which can validly inform global public policy via debates, discussions and 'fact-finding' initiatives.

Before briefly looking at current involvement of FBOs at the UN, it is useful to trace their involvement at the organisation over time. As is well known, the UN was founded just as World War II ended and the organisation's worldview was strongly moulded by the events of 1939-45. The UN was established with the primary goal of building international peace, security and cooperation. Today, the UN is the only near-universal IGO, with 192 member states.

In the context of its work, the UN has long engaged with selected non-state actors, including (secular) NGOs.[4] In recent years, as previously noted, the UN has considerably developed its dealings with selected FBOs, that is, those that share the organisation's core values. This also reflects the fact that, first, many FBOs active at the UN are transnational in orientation, with expanded activities in recent years. Focusing on national, regional and global contexts, many seek to influence public policy in relation to various issues, typically centring on an array of human rights concerns (McCrea, 2013). Second, it also suggests that the UN is keen to be seen to be interacting with FBOs, in the context of what is often claimed to be a widespread – or even universal – religious resurgence, a generalised search for improved 'values' to inform global public policy and a comprehensive desire to engage more closely and consistently with 'civil society' organisations, including, in some cases, those with a strong faith perspective (Böllman, 2013).

Third, today's post-secular international environment is characterised by expansion of many FBOs' concerns from primarily theological issues to concerns traditionally understood as 'secular'. These include: human, including women's, rights, conflict resolution and problems of international development (Haynes, 2013b). In relation to the latter, for example, many FBOs now express interest in how poor and undeveloped countries can develop both economically and in terms of their human capital, an issue whose focal point is currently the UN-derived Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015). Increasingly, the issue of international development and how to achieve it is regarded as not simply improving economic output and hoping that this will somehow 'trickle down' to the poor to improve their living standards; it has also become a burning moral concern. And, as Lynch (2012) notes, when FBOs ponder 'international development', they may well shift from a perusal of the moral dimensions of the issue to focus on 'neoliberal competition of the "market" [in] international development.' From there it is an easy jump to think about how post-Cold War globalisation encourages an unjust and polarised world, with the rich appearing to benefit

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disproportionately compared to the poor. It is also often noted that increasing globalisation has coincided with what is judged to be a global religious revival, with religious ideas assuming increased significance and relevance in national and international ethical and moral debates, suggesting to some the existence of a post-secular international environment. In short, today 'religious' views and opinions expressed by FBOs often reflect and draw on and feed into 'secular' controversies, including not only international development but also 'climate change, global finance, disarmament, inequality, pan-epidemics and human rights' (Carrette and Miall 2012: 3). The result is that questions about the focus, values and content of global public policy are increasingly influenced 'by the moral resources that "religions" offer and agencies of global governance need an awareness of what religious actors are doing and sensitivity to religious difference.' (*ibid.*).

## Liberal and Conservative FBO Tensions

Conservative religious groups have for years engaged in clashes over family policy. Much of their activism aims to preserve traditional families against what they decry as an *onslaught of feminism, abortion and gender politics* (emphasis added; Bob, 2012: 14-15).

While health policy is usually framed as a part of the secular political domain, it touches upon combustible religious values and engages powerful alliances across religious divides. *Catholics and Mormons; Christians and Muslims; Russian Orthodox and American fundamentalists find common ground on traditional values and against SRHR issues at the UN* (emphasis added; NORAD, 2013: 1).

Since its inception in 1945, the UN has had an institutionalised relationship with numerous NGOs, while in recent years hundreds of selected FBOs have also established access and in some cases achieved institutionalised status with the UN's central agencies, including the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). More generally, UN engagement with selected NGOs is rooted in Article 71 of the UN Charter, established in 1945. Article 71 states that the UN will 'consult' with NGOs in order to carry out its work, especially via ECOSOC. In addition, the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1948) recognises that religious belief is a fundamental aspect of human rights and human freedom (<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>). Three decades after the promulgation of the UN Charter, the UN agreed to the establishment of a 'Committee of Religious NGOs' in 1972, followed in 2004 by formation of the 'NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values, and Global Concerns' (CSVGC-NY; <http://www.csvgc-ny.org/>). In addition, recent years have seen both increased numbers of FBOs and greater day-to-day FBO involvement at the UN, with regular contributions to UN committees in both New York and Geneva. In this context, many FBO representatives are very active, enjoying institutionalised involvement with many UN Committees and UN Commissions, including, for example, the UN Commission for Social Development (Carrette and Miall, 2012; Haynes, 2013a).

Today, there are around 320 FBOs at the UN registered by ECOSOC, with regularised access and involvement in the UN system, including the General Assembly and in relation to specialised agencies, including the United Nations Population Fund and World Bank (Haynes, 2013a; 2013b). A few years ago, Petersen (2010) identified 58 per cent of FBOs at the UN as Christian, while Carrette and Miall's recent (2012) survey identifies fully three-quarters of UN FBOs as *both* Christian and northern-based. Muslim FBOs at the UN are greatly in the minority, with only one-sixth of 'officially' registered FBOs at the UN. On the basis of these numbers, Christians (30.8 per cent of people in the world) are 'over-represented' at the UN: Christian FBOs are between 58 and 75 per cent of total ECOSOC-registered FBOs at the UN, while less than 31 per cent of the world's population are Christians. On the other hand, Muslims (23.3 per cent of global population) are significantly 'under-represented', with just 16 per cent of ECOSOC-registered FBOs. In addition, at the end of 2012 there were an estimated 13.76 million Jews in the world, less than two per cent of the global population, whereas Jewish FBOs accounted for 7 per cent of the total number of ECOSOC-registered FBOs at the UN; thus, Jews too are over-represented at the UN compared to their global numbers, while, not only Muslims, but also Hindus (14 per cent of global population/2 per cent of ECOSOC-registered FBOs) and Buddhists (7 per cent/4 per cent), are significantly under-represented.

In this section, I briefly examine a particular issue involving FBOs at the UN. I am selective in this regard both because of the large number of FBOs active at the UN and because of the wide range of topic and issues with which they are concerned (for an overview of these issues, see Haynes, 2013a). Here, I focus on the issue of women's

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'sexual and reproductive health rights' (SRHR), one of the most controversial of the issues regularly engaging the attention of FBOs at the UN, which pits 'conservative' FBOs against 'liberal' FBOs. Both kinds of FBO seek to enlist allies – both religious and secular – to try to advance their goals. The key point is that a shared 'conservative' outlook brings activists together and it does not seem important in this respect what their religious outlook is. For example, campaigns at the UN in pursuit of 'family values' brings together 'conservative' Christian actors from a variety of Christian faiths – Mormons, Catholics, Protestants, and the Russian Orthodox Church – as well as traditionalist Muslims. This inter-faith conservative bloc constitutes an influential grouping at the UN, projecting a distinctly traditionalist social agenda (Bob, 2012). Secular and religious 'liberals' regard the conservatives as motivated by 'pre-modern' ideas about gender issues, family politics and women's health, and believe that they work in pursuit of the denial of the advance of women's sexual and reproductive health rights. For the liberals, the conservatives work 'ceaselessly to contest, obstruct and delay the development of relevant UN agendas. Their influence does not reflect their number but is largely due to a striking ability to build alliances across religious boundaries as well as elicit the support of religious communities around the world.' (NORAD, 2013: 1)

Why should it be that FBOs rely on non-religious arguments to make their case at the UN in relation to issues related to women's sexual and reproductive health rights? As a secular forum, debates at the UN necessarily 'take place in the context of a secular global public policy sphere'. This produces norms, values and expressions which strongly influence potential 'non-liberal' ideas by 'causing' them to 'align [their] frame to match the dominant [liberal] discourse' (Kayaoğlu, 2011: 17). Thus, conservative FBOs seeking to oppose what they regard as liberal SRHR policies at the UN do not believe it appropriate or feasible if they want to make progress to express their arguments in terms of their religious values (based on community, personal responsibility, and traditional patriarchal understandings of the family and women's place within it). Instead, they couch their concerns in religiously-neutral concerns with an ambiguous notion – that is, 'family values' – enabling them to overcome what openly expressed conservative religious values would produce: 'limited access to discursive and institutional opportunities at the UN.' (Samuel, 2007, cited in Kayaoğlu, 2011: 17). Consequently, if anti-SRHR groups wish to be successful they find it necessary to 'concentrate on countering the pro-abortion' – that is, liberal – groups' agendas and declarations through blocking or weakening the pro-choice language in UN documents. They also adjust the frame of their discussions by arguing for concepts like the "natural family" and referring to God as the "creator" in order to bypass theological differences and find non-Christian language (*ibid.*).

Conservative groups' strategy in relation to SRHR has developed over two decades. The starting point for their campaign was two UN conferences in 1994 and 1995: Cairo ('population growth') and Beijing ('women and gender'). At the 1995 Beijing conference, 'conservatives claimed that lesbians had launched a "direct attack on the values, cultures, traditions and religious beliefs of the vast majority of the world's peoples"' (Bob, 2010: 2, quoting Human Rights Watch 2005, 84-85). These conferences marked the beginning of a concerted anti-liberal campaign in relation to SRHR, initially led by the pope, the Holy See (Vatican) and, more generally, the Catholic Church. As Chao (1997: 48) notes, at this time, 'the Catholic Church became a leading actor on the conservative wing'. This propelled then-Pope John Paul II to overall leadership of the global conservative faith-based struggle. This was directed against 'what the secular world would call progressive: the notion, for example that humans share with God the right to decide who will and who will not be born' (*ibid.*). This is not to imply however that to be Catholic is *necessarily* to be conservative. Instead, we can note a polarisation between 'conservative' and 'liberal' Catholics, a competition played out at the UN. 'Catholic NGOs with ECOSOC accreditation range from the liberal "pro-choice" activist group Catholics for choice (sic) to the most fervent "pro-life" campaigners in American Life League.' (NORAD, 2013: 11)

Conservative Catholic campaign leadership was added to by supportive involvement of mainly US-based Protestant evangelicals and conservative Muslims from various countries. Bob (2012: 36) refers to this alliance as the 'Baptist-burqa' link.[5] The augmentation of the conservative Catholic campaign from additional conservative religious sources highlights the entities' shared conservative ideological orientation and their dispersed geographical locations: conservative Catholics from Italy were joined by traditionalist Muslims, from, *inter alia*, Egypt and Pakistan, while right-wing evangelical Protestants joined the campaign from their bases in the United States of America. These people were united not by shared religious worldview but by ideological agreement of the necessity of weakening or, better, blocking pro-women's choice language in UN documents.

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## Conclusion

Several overall conclusions emerge from this brief examination of FBOs at the UN. First, the UN has a strongly 'liberal' secular agenda, whose concerns, exemplified by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), focuses on a range of justice and human rights concerns. As a result, the UN's liberal-secular focus compels all actors at the UN, including FBOs which wish to influence debates and discussions, to adopt 'appropriate' UN-sanctioned language in their engagements with UN bodies.

We have also seen that FBOs compete with each other primarily on ideological – not theological – grounds. This implies that, for example, socially conservative FBOs may well work not only with theologically conservative FBOs but also socially conservative secular state and non-state actors at the UN. On the other hand, 'liberal' FBOs are likely to work not only with other liberal FBOs but also with 'liberal' NGOs and governments, in pursuit of shared goals. In addition, FBOs wishing to maximise their influence at the UN typically seek to link up with allies – including, other FBOs, secular NGOs, and friendly governments – which share their ideological – not necessarily theological – norms, values and beliefs. Some FBOs active at the UN manage to achieve persistent influence, via regularised and/or institutionalised access to opinion formers and decision makers located in friendly governments and IGOs. Finally, some FBOs are less favoured, without consistent capacity to enjoy such access and associated potential of building influence with significant players at the UN.

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[1] This study derives from a much longer one, entitled: 'Faith-based organisations at the United Nations', RSCAS 2013/70, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies/RELIGIOWEST, Florence: European University Institute, September 2013. Available at: <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/28119>

[2] At a minimum, a FBO must be connected with an organised faith community. According to Scott (2003), these connections occur when an FBO 'is based on a particular ideology and draws staff, volunteers, or leadership from a particular religious group.' Other characteristics that qualify an organisation as 'faith-based' include: religiously-orientated mission statements, support from a religious organisation, or being founded by a religious institution (Haynes, 2013a).

[3] Hehir is also Parker Gilbert Montgomery Professor of the Practice of Religion and Public Life at Harvard University, while Ruggie is Berthold Beitz Professor in Human Rights and International Affairs at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and Affiliated Professor in International Legal Studies at Harvard Law School. Ruggie served as United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Strategic Planning from 1997 to 2001 (<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/m-rcbg/johnruggie/index.html>).

[4] Defined here as private, not-for-profit, non-governmental groups, with specific delimited concerns and interests.

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[5] Seeing mutual benefit in working together via a shared concern with 'pro-family values', the 'Baptist-burqa' coalition has endured such setbacks as 9/11, whose impact otherwise was to divide the Christian and Muslim worlds from each other.

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