

RELIGIOUS NGOS AND THE UNITED NATIONS IN NEW YORK AND GENEVA



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



University of
Kent



Religious NGOs and the United Nations



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1.

THE RESEARCH



Researching Religious NGOs at the United Nations



The research reflected in this booklet was part of a three-year project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Economic and Social Research Council in the UK, carried out between November 2009 and November 2012 with a team of researchers at the University of Kent, UK. The work consisted of three aspects:

- ♦ **Survey research:**

Questionnaires were sent to all registered NGOs with consultative status at the United Nations.

- ♦ **Fieldwork:**

Fieldwork was carried out at the central United Nations offices in New York and Geneva, consisting of interviews with NGO workers and diplomats, case studies of NGOs and focus-groups with UN diplomats.

- ♦ **Theoretical research:**

The project examined inter-disciplinary literature across history, politics and international relations, sociology, anthropology, religion and philosophy in relation to NGOs and the United Nations.

The Context: The United Nations and NGOs

- The United Nations was founded in 1945 to maintain peace after World War II and today has 193 member states.
- The United Nations is the main universal membership organization for the states of the world. It is a meeting place for diplomats, officials and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs); a place where the business of the world is conducted, and a beacon of hope for ‘we, the peoples.’
- It is a diplomatic forum, a complex bureaucracy, and a set of agencies working throughout the world. Through the Security Council, the UN is a meeting place for great powers to obtain international peace and security.
- Through the General Assembly, the UN is a place where all states, great and small, can debate global issues, each equally represented with one vote.
- Through the Human Rights Council in Geneva, the UN is an instrument for advancing human rights and holding states to account.
- Article 71 of the UN Charter states the UN would “consult” with NGOs to carry out its work through one of its central bodies, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).
- NGOs register with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to obtain a “consultative status”. There are three types of status: “General” (for large international NGOs), “Special” (for smaller groups, with limited areas of concern), “Roster” (for those with a technical focus).
- There are different aspirations behind ‘religious’ NGO engagement with the UN. Their activities cover concerns with peace building, environment, human rights, gender, economic issues, international cooperation, development and health.

The Importance of Religion at the UN



“Religious” actors shape global governance. Awareness of their involvement, value and contribution is vital for understanding how the UN pursues justice, peace and reconciliation on a wide range of policy issues.

Religious values and concerns inform and shape decision-making at the UN and there is much need for more public awareness of the work and significance of religious actors at the UN in achieving (or sometimes subverting) the goals of justice and human rights.

2. THE UNITED NATIONS AND RELIGION



The Complexity of Religion and the Secular



[Photo: Wikimedia Commons File:Ban Ki-moon - World Economic Forum Annual Meeting Davos 2008 numb2.jpg](#)

The UN recognised the right to “religious belief” as a human right and human freedom within its founding Charter in 1945, but the place of ‘religion’ is complex in the UN system and little is known about the role religious NGOs play.

“As a secular organization, the United Nations has no common religion. But, like all the major faiths, we too work on behalf of the disadvantaged and the vulnerable.”

Ban Ki-moon Speech to Summit of Religious and Secular Leaders on Climate Change, London, 3rd November 2009.

Religion and the United Nations



- The United Nations has a paradoxical relationship with religion. The UN is a formally secular institution, but religious organizations and individuals make vital contributions to its functioning
- Diplomats prefer to work according to the secular ideals of the UN system and include religion in those terms, yet they are well aware of the significance of religion within social relations and between states.
- The UN is a secular organization, reflecting the Peace of Westphalia (1648) idea that religion should not be a matter for the public sphere, but in reality such divisions are not clear.
- Historically, the UN was inspired by the Judaeo-Christian heritage of the West, which underpins the system of states, sovereignty and individual human rights.
- In principle the UN is a meeting ground for peoples, NGOs and diverse groups, including religious groups, from across the world. In practice its representation of world religions is highly complex.

Religious Actors in the United Nations

There are five areas where “religion” becomes visible in the UN:

- In the constitutions of **Nation States** and their electorates (in-country influences).
- Within the consultative process of the UN, such as through the **UN Alliance of Civilization**.
- In the work of **The Holy See (Vatican)**, which has a special observer status at the UN.
- In groups of nation states, such as **The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation**.
- Within the **NGO network**



3. TYPES AND NUMBERS OF 'RELIGIOUS' NGOS



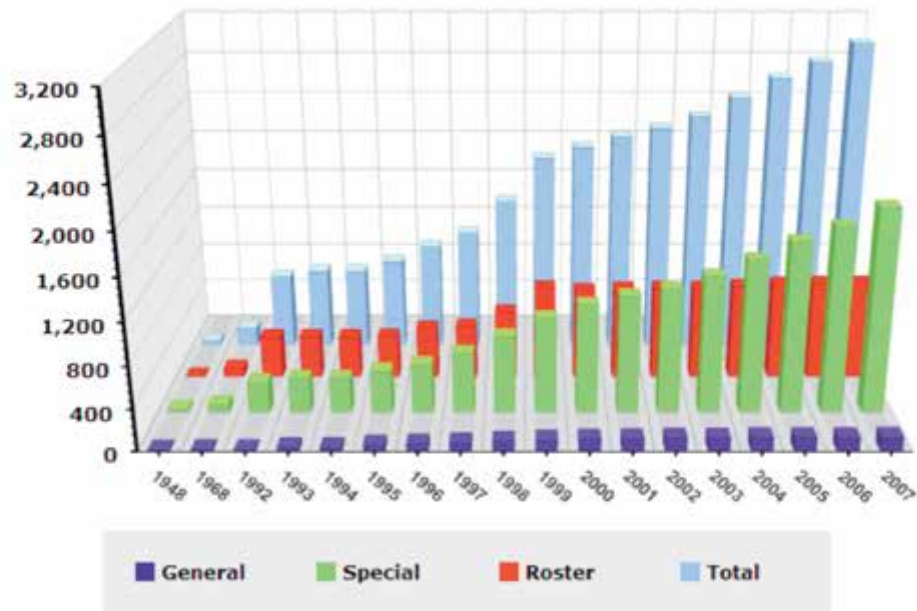
NEW YORK



GENEVA

There has been a significant increase in the number of NGOs in consultation with the UN since the 1990s, but little is known about the place of 'religion' in this network

Number of NGOs in Consultative Status with the council



The Numbers: Research on Numbers of 'Religious' NGOs at the UN

'Religion' is not a category used by ECOSOC to identify NGOs at the United Nations and the term 'religion' is very ambiguous and difficult to define easily. Some think the term obscures issues of culture, race, and identity and that the very distinction religious and secular reflects a liberal or Christian bias. This creates a problem for researchers, and previous studies have used a variety of methods and definitions to identify NGOs as 'religious.' But the general finding is that such groups constitute a small, but influential network of NGOs.

Previous Research Data on Numbers:

- **Religion Counts (2002)** 'Religion and Public Policy at the UN' report:
180 NGOs out of 2000 were identified as 'religious' (9%)
- **Julia Berger (2003)** 'Religious Nongovernmental Organisations' in *Voluntas*:
263 out of 3,000 NGOs linked to the ECOSOC and DPI were "identified as religious NGOs" (8.77%).
- **Marie Juul Petersen (2010)** 'International Religious NGOs at the United Nations: A Study of a Group of Religious Organizations' in *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*: 320 out of 3,183 NGOs were seen as 'religious' (10.1%)

New Classification of ‘religious’ NGOs:

To address the classification problem, our survey offered respondents several non-exclusive options for describing how religion was related to their NGOs. In addition to the classifications offered, ‘inter-faith’ was suggested by some NGOs.

Section 3 - The Role of Religion

10. Which of the following best characterises your NGO?
(select all that apply)

- ☐ secular
- ☐ secular with religious roots
- ☐ religious
- ☐ faith-based
- ☐ ethnic-cultural
- ☐ spiritual
- ☐ Other (*please specify*):

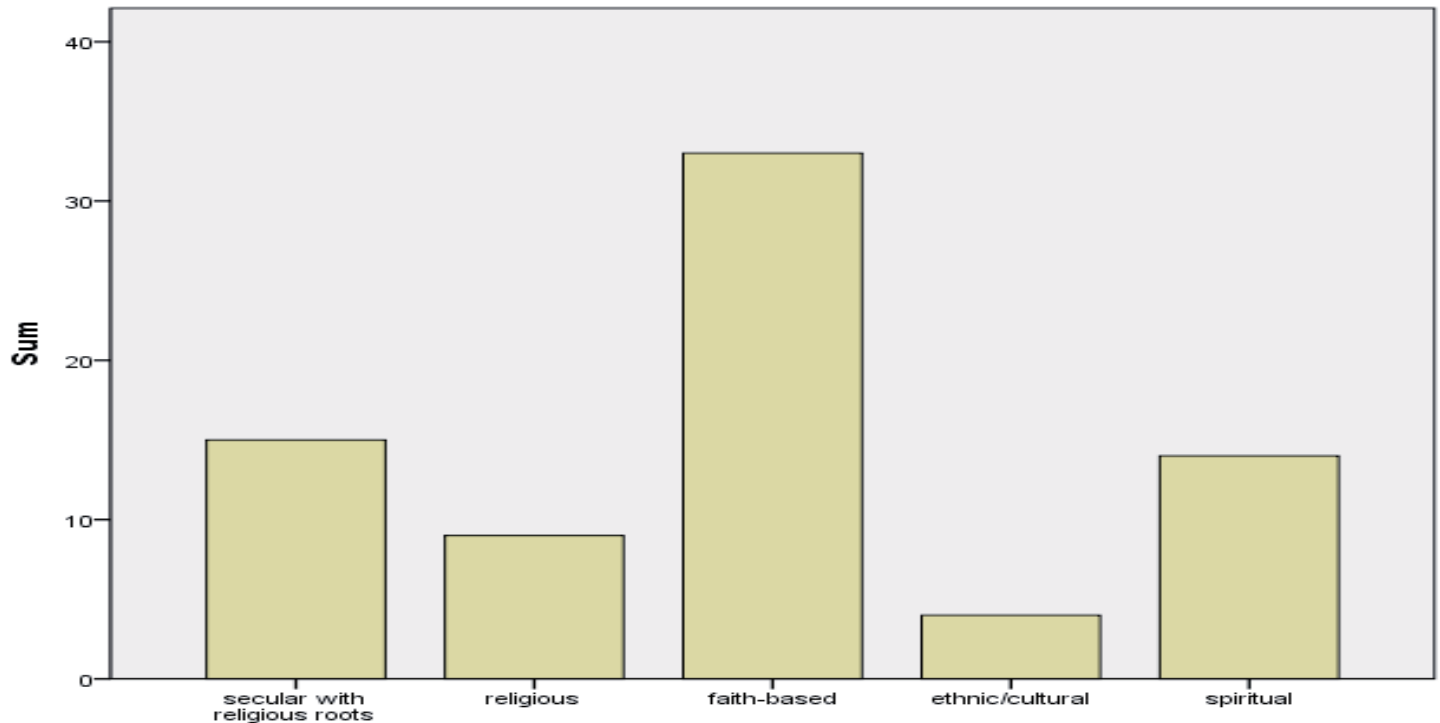
2012 Religion and Society: Questionnaire Responses



Key data from the 2012 Religion and Society questionnaire.

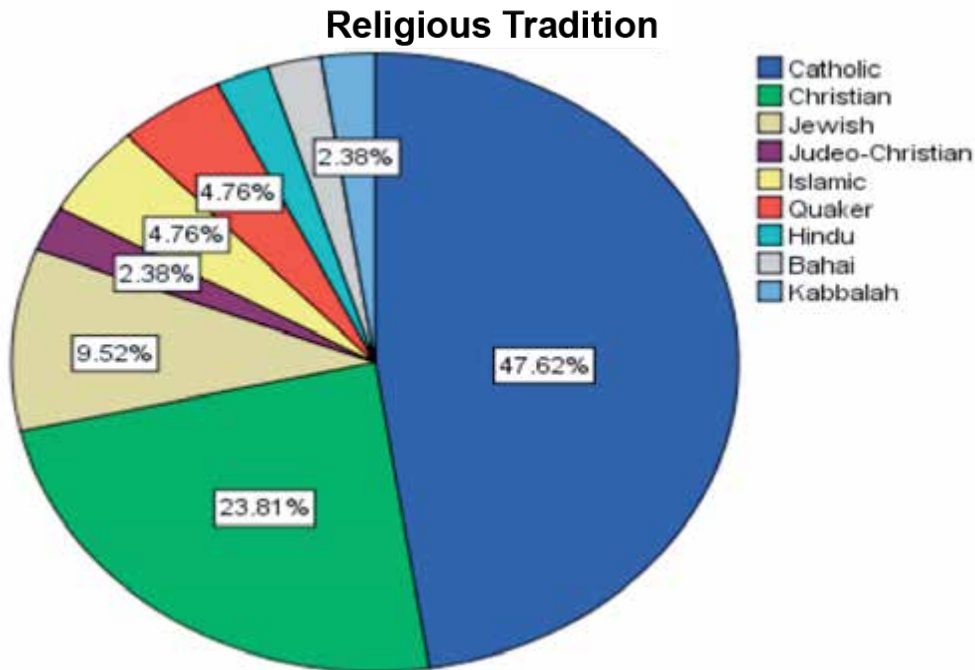
- 239 NGOs out of 3275 NGOs registered with consultative status at the UN were identified as using 'religious' language on their websites and mission statements in 2012 (7.29%).
- 192 NGOs in consultative status with the UN responded to our survey in 2012.
- 58 out of the 192 responses classified themselves as 'religious' (across the spectrum of responses from faith-based to spiritual to inter-faith).
- The 58 questionnaire responses classifying themselves as 'religious' account for an estimated 24% of 'religious' NGOs (RNGOs) in Consultative Status with the UN.

More NGOs class themselves as 'faith-based'. Interestingly, even though respondents could answer yes to more than one category, less than 10 chose to self-identify specifically as "religious" NGOs



NGO self-description (categories are not mutually exclusive, from 58 NGOs)

More than 70% of 'religious' NGOs identified themselves as Christian (inclusive of Catholic NGOs)



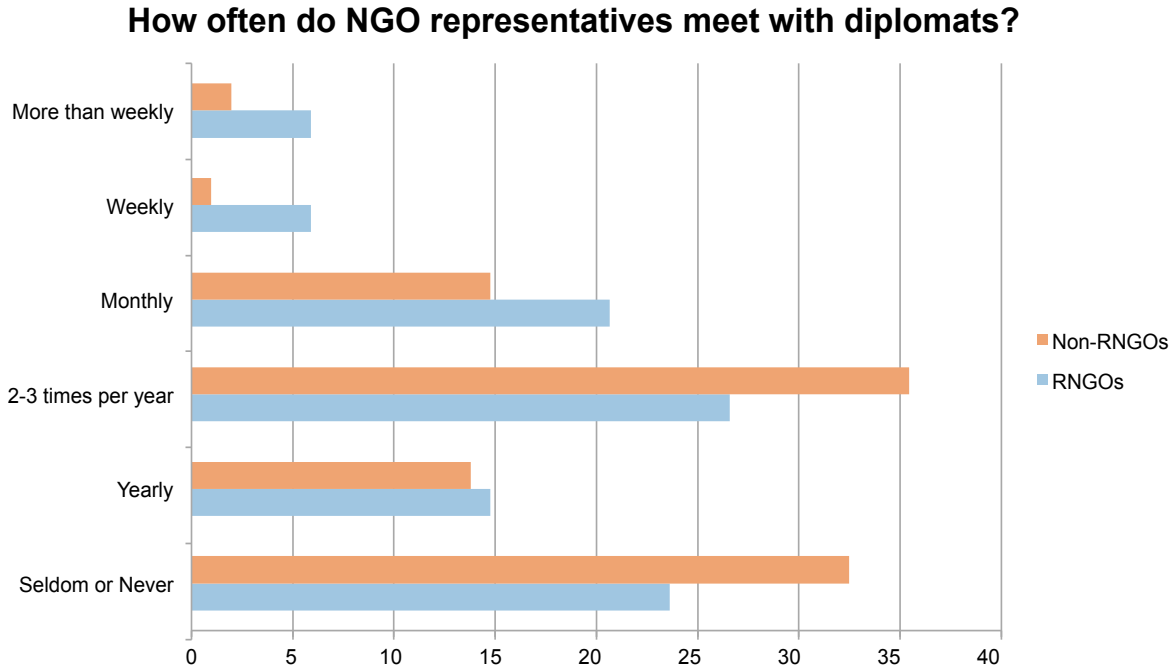
NOTE: The classification types listed are those given by NGOs in response to the questionnaire.

In and Out of the UN: The Church Centre



Across the street from the UN buildings in New York, the **Church Centre, 777 UN Plaza, New York**, has for a long time supported offices of 'religious' NGOs. This is a Methodist owned centre, but provides a place for networking many different groups. However, a contraction of resources has required many groups to reduce their presence. The Chapel in the Church Centre (opposite) is symbolic of the structural dominance of Christianity in the UN political system (the Christian cross is the only symbol resting in the concrete structure).

Meetings with diplomats: Assessing Influence



There are many ways to measure NGO influence. One way is through determining frequency of interaction with diplomats. As this table shows, although RNGOs are fewer in number than their secular counterparts, a lower level of influence cannot be assumed.

NGOs with weekly meetings include: Baha'i International, Caritas International and The Centre for Social Research.



4.

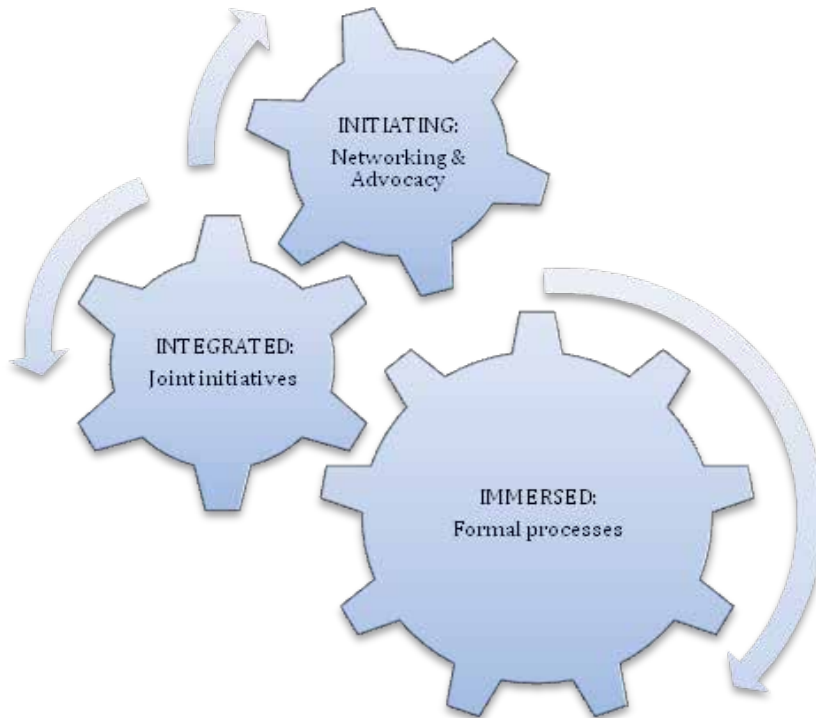
RELIGION AT THE UN IN NEW YORK

Verena Beittinger-Lee



NEW YORK

Three modes of religious NGO involvement at the UN headquarters in New York



- There are various modes of interaction - 'processes' – between NGOs and the UN:

IMMERSED

INTEGRATED

INITIATING

- These three modes of engagement are defined by the degree of distance or closeness with the official UN procedures and processes.

Immersed Involvement: Formal UN processes



This type of involvement is called “immersed” because the rules and procedures are determined by the UN and NGOs have very little or no say in their shaping. Therefore, whenever NGOs get involved with the UN through formal processes such as participation in sessions, meetings, etc., they are completely immersed in that world and have to comply with its rules and restrictions.

Examples:

- Participation in sessions of UN Commissions and Committees
- Submission of written statements
- Submission of oral statements /interventions
- Participation in debates, interactive dialogues, panel discussions, informal meetings within the UN
- Convening of side / parallel events

Integrated Involvement: Joint initiatives



Integrated involvement describes initiatives or events where NGOs act as partners alongside other stakeholders such as UN agencies or member states. Here they are to a certain extent participating in shaping the agenda.

Examples:

- Tripartite Forum
- Decade of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue,
- Understanding and Cooperation for Peace (2011-2020)
- Interfaith Harmony Week
- Programs with UN Agencies

Initiating Involvement: Networking and Advocacy



This type of involvement describes activities and initiatives that come from NGOs and are directed either towards the public, other NGOs or UN players (member states, the UN secretariat or other offices, employees of UN agencies, etc.)

Examples:

- Active participation in NGO Committees
- Building of networks, coalitions, working groups, etc.
- Organizing / attending briefings
- Organizing conferences, workshops, etc.
- Public events like lectures, movie screenings, exhibitions, etc.
- Religious processes (prayer, services, meditation, etc.)
- Publications, media statements, interviews
- Visiting and lobbying member states missions

Religious Networks and Groups at the UN in New York

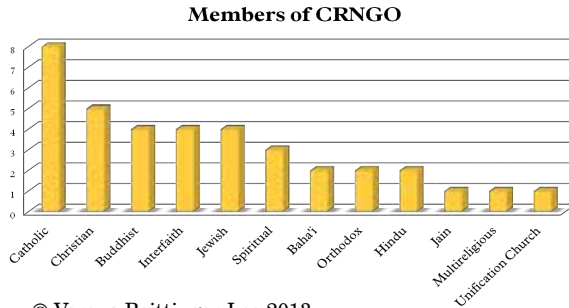


Religious NGOs are engaged with the UN on various levels with a varying degree of visibility. Many of the smaller organizations operate jointly through NGO Committees and other networks to increase their impact. Below are some of the networks, coalitions, and alliances formed or entered by religious NGOs in New York.

Examples:

- Committee of Religious NGOs at the UN (CRNGO)
- Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns (CSVGC)
- Religious at the UN (RUN)
- Ecumenical Working Group on the UN
- Ecumenical Women (EW)
- International Catholic Organizations Network (ICON)
- Values Caucus
- Spirituality Caucus
- Ecumenical Network on Small Arms (ENSA)
- Faith-based Caucus on the International Criminal Court
- Jubilee Movement
- Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EEA) on trade
- Working Group on Spirituality and Business

Committee of Religious NGOs (CRNGO)



The CRNGO (Committee of Religious NGOs) plays an important role for religious NGOs at the UN Headquarters in New York and has currently 37 official members, out of which roughly 40% belong to the Christian spectrum as the chart shows (this includes Roman Catholic, various Protestant denominations and Orthodox).

CRNGO was established to promote networking among religious NGOs and to highlight religious and ethical dimensions of the various programs and activities at the UN.

CRNGO also helps organizing Inter-Faith Harmony Week at the UN, which is held on the first week of February.

www.worldinterfaithharmonyweek.com





5.

RELIGION AT THE UN IN GENEVA

Sophie-Hélène Trigeaud



GENEVA

How Religious NGOs work in Geneva



- Religious NGOs have two means to intervene in the OHCHR (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights) of the UN in Geneva :
- **(1) formally** through means such as: attending the Human Rights Council, submitting written and oral statements, organizing or co-sponsoring 'side-events', participating in the Universal Periodic Review and in special procedures, working towards treaty(-based) bodies.
- **(2) informally** through networking, advocacy, lobbying, briefing and UN side meetings.

Formal Processes: Influencing States



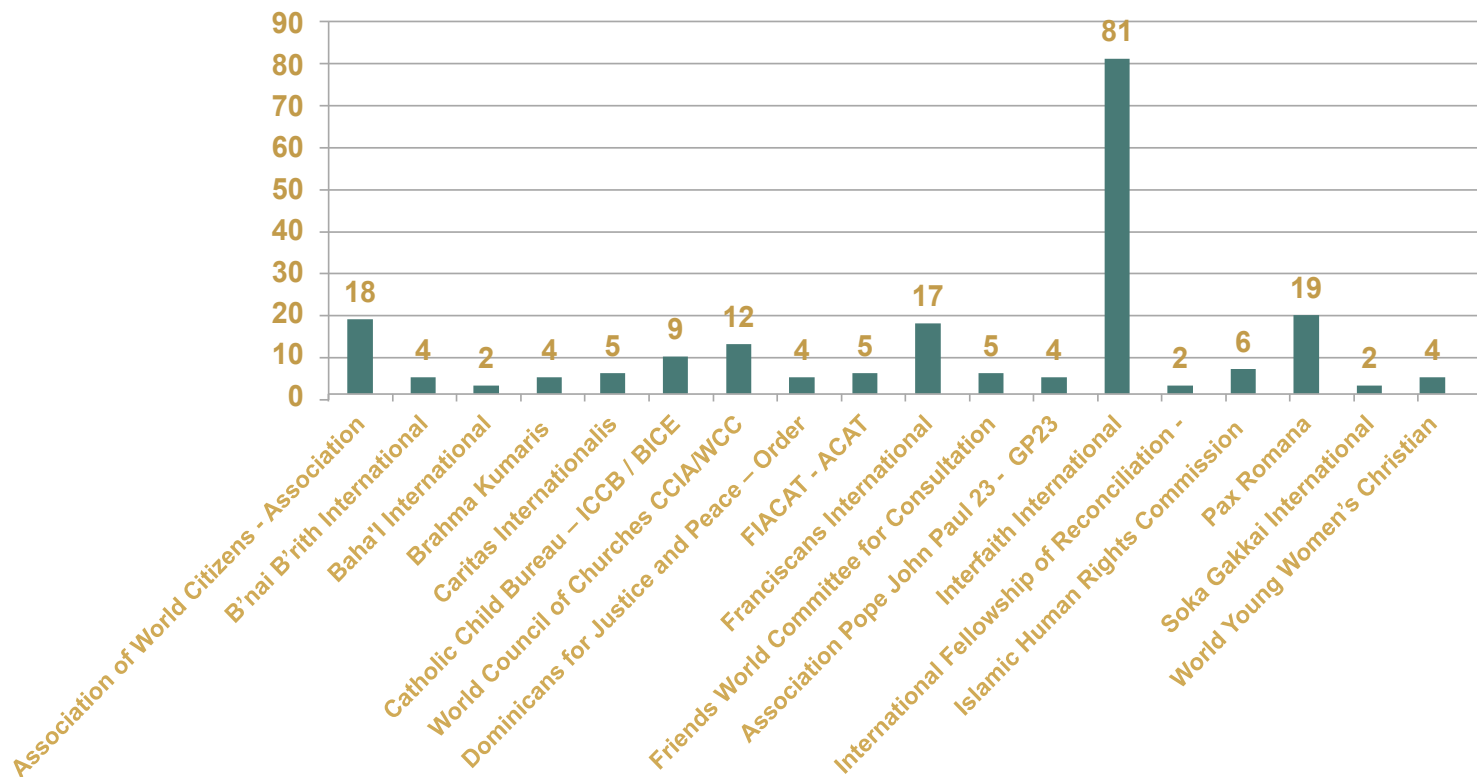
- NGOs with knowledge of the UN system are more effective. They can make effective written submissions. They are sometimes drawn into negotiations between states over drafts. The better informed and the better equipped with professional skills or field related expertise they are, the more likely it is that their wording may be incorporated in resolutions.
- Impact is difficult to evaluate. There are many fingers in the UN pie. In specialised areas NGO impact is demonstrable.

Informal Processes: Side Events



- NGOs operate alongside the formal UN system by organizing side-events during the sessions of the Human Rights Council. These are used for advocacy, informing diplomats and raising public awareness, as well as networking with other NGOs and informing diplomats.
- Some religious NGOs are more visible than others in the organisation of side-events. Side-events are more likely to generate influence when related to a subject which is a special field of expertise of the NGO.
- Not all religious NGOs choose to use their resources for side-events.

Religious NGOs and Number of Side Events at the Human Rights Council in Geneva



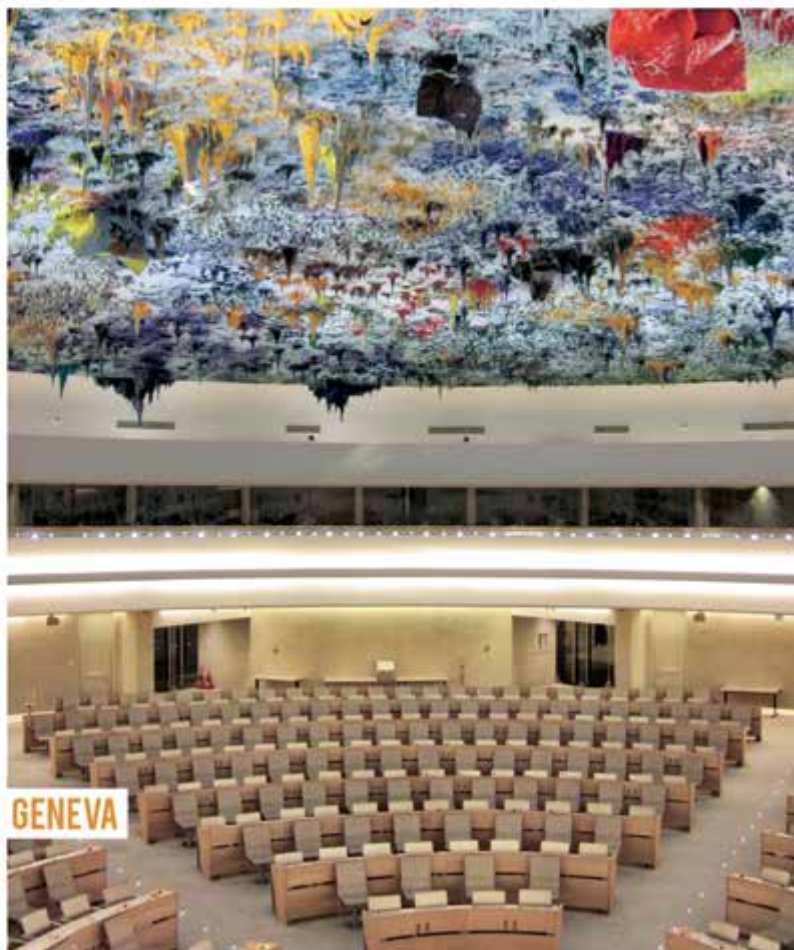
Religious NGOs Working Together



- With the expansion of NGOs, networking and collaboration have increased.
- Religious NGOs are more effective when they work together with other NGOs, religious and secular.
- During the fieldwork period, it was observed how religious NGOs worked together in NGO ad hoc groups, informal groupings and coalitions to secure actions on the rights of the child.
- NGOs from diverse religious backgrounds worked together on building the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. Catholic, Quakers, Jewish and Baha'i NGOs have been especially noticeable in this process.

6.

ISSUES: DEFAMATION, DIVERSITY AND DIFFERENCE

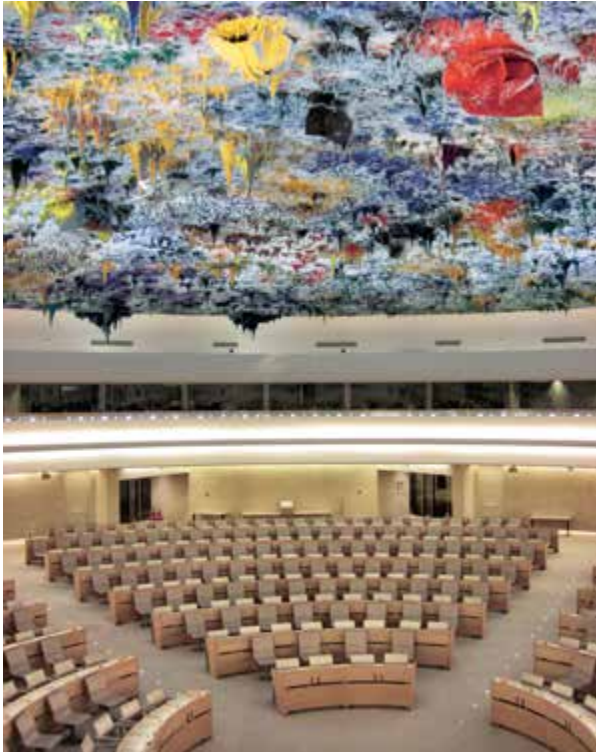


Issue 1: The Defamation of Religions Controversy at the UN, 1999-2011



- Religion is rarely discussed directly or explicitly in the UN, but when it is, it can be very polarising.
- The controversy over Defamation of Religion ensued from 1999 to 2011 and divided opinion inside and outside the UN.
- The 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) sought protection of religions against defamation. They were supported by Orthodox Russia and atheist China, and opposed by Western states and the Holy See, which insisted that individuals, not religions, were bearers of human rights. The controversy at the UN was influenced by 9/11, the war on terror, the Danish cartoons controversy and the treatment of Muslims in Europe.

The Resolution of the Defamation of Religion Controversy (2011)



- Muslim, Jewish, Christian and secular NGOs, together with the Holy See, opposed the effort of the OIC states to change the human rights regime.
- Some NGOs contributed to the eventual compromise.

The outcome showed:

- the UN *was* capable of addressing and resolving a charged issue touching on religious beliefs
- the system of individually based universal human rights prevailed. Its roots lie in the Western Judaeo-Christian tradition.
- the safeguarding of the minority rights of Muslims, Christians and other religious groups remains a contentious issue in domestic and international politics.

Issue 2 The predominance of 'Christian' NGOs at the UN



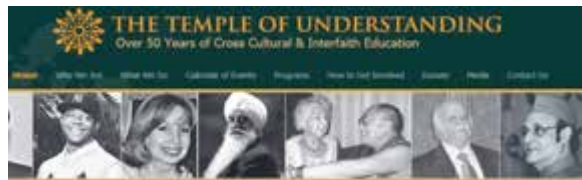
The predominance of Christian NGOs is due to multiple factors:

1. The history of the UN within western, liberal democracies.
2. The historical influence of Jewish and Christian 'civil society' actors.
3. The fact that Islam is more often represented through States rather than NGOs.
4. The financial limitations of countries with non-Christian majorities.
5. The tendency of economically limited actors to focus their resources on domestic issues.

Asian Religious NGOs and Inter-Faith



<http://www.bharatsevashramsangha.net/>



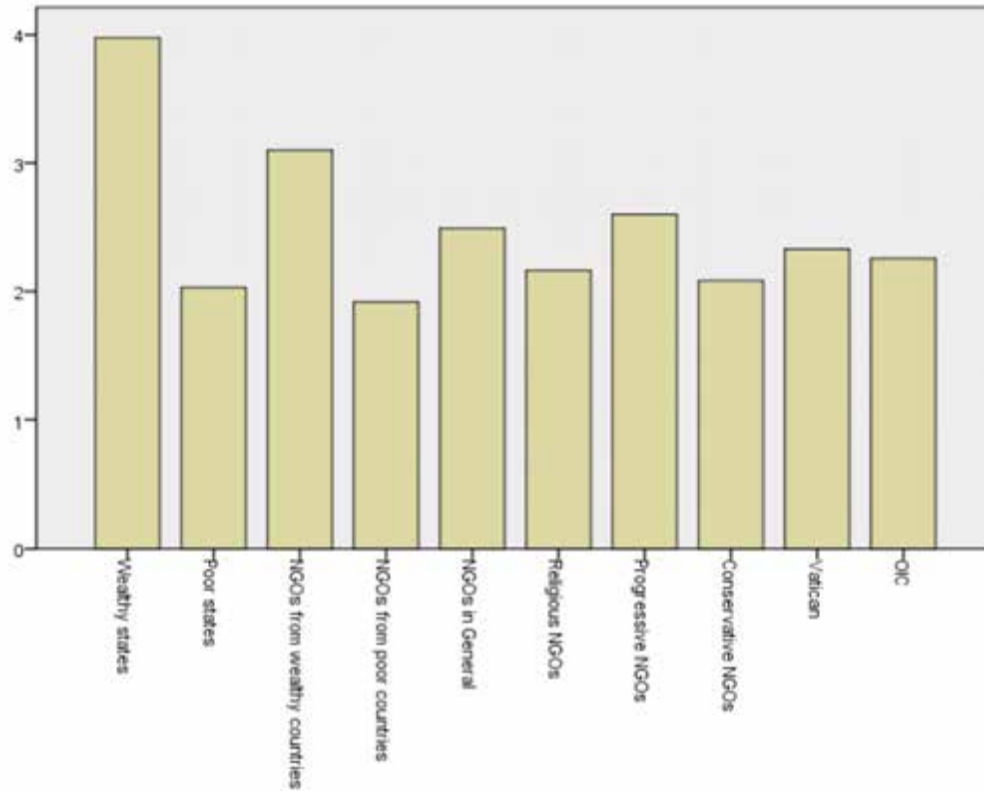
<http://templeofunderstanding.org/>



http://www.uri.org/about_uri

- Fieldwork and questionnaires did not reveal many specific Asian 'religious' NGOs with consultative status at the UN, although there are 'secular' groups working on a wide array of social issues in Asia, such as Forum Asia (<http://www.forum-asia.org/>).
- One UN diplomat in Geneva described this as an unexplored "disconnect" between Asian religious traditions and UN. The situation is partly related to finance and in-country focus.
- One visible **Hindu NGO** in recent years is the Bharat Sevashram Sangha, with Special Consultative Status since 2008. It has membership on the Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns (CSVGC) and The Committee for Religious NGOs (CRNGOs) and has been active at inter-faith events at the UN in New York.
- There are numerous **inter-faith NGOs** that engage with various aspects of Asian religion, such as the Temple of Understanding (Special Consultative Status 1995) and the United Religions Initiative (Special Consultative Status 2007).

There is a perception among NGO respondents that 'wealth' determines influence at the UN



Issue 3: Women, Religion and Human Rights



- There is strong debate about whether there is a tension in human rights for women and the human right for the freedom of religion.
- Religious groups have variably supported and challenged gender-based human rights claims.
- One of the conclusions of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in the December 2012 report (A/HRC/22/51) was that “special attention should be given to women from religious or belief minorities, many of whom may suffer from multiple or intersectional forms of discrimination”.



7.

FUTURE SUGGESTIONS



NEW YORK



GENEVA

Policy Suggestions: Awareness, Transparency and Equality

While religion is not always visible at the UN, its influence can at times be substantial. For example, religious identities are more salient and significant at state level and can be a factor in UN coalitions. Examining religious NGOs reveals the necessity of examining other (non-NGO) forms of religion operating in the UN system and understanding how, why, and with what consequences different religious traditions vary in terms of influence.

The following needs emerge from our research:

- The need for individual states to promote public awareness of how cultural and religious values inform governance issues.
- The need to be aware of how religions both enhance and constrain justice and human rights; and more generally the ways that religious groups both support and challenge UN goals and requirements for participation.
- The need to be aware of the differences between religious actors in the UN in terms of access, funding and divisions across the north-south divide.
- The need to be sensitive to the rights of religious minorities and different notions of civil society.
- The need to increase awareness of the work of the UN Alliance of Civilization and its important work on religious tolerance.
- The need for more research on how UN Security Council members can best address religious threats to international peace and security.

8.

APPENDIX: BIBLIOGRAPHY AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Post-Doctoral Fieldworker New York: Dr Verena Beittinger-Lee

Post-Doctoral Fieldworker Geneva: Dr Sophie-Hélène Trigeaud

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