

International Scholars gather in Trento to discuss State-Religion Arrangements

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“State-Religion arrangements in a Post-Western World” is the title of the fifth annual seminar on Religions and International Relations, organized by the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), the Province of Trento and the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The two days seminar, which took place in Trento, Italy, was partially open to the public (Oct. 17th) and partly closed-door (Oct. 18th).

In his welcoming remarks, Archbishop Luigi Bressan recalled that Trento is the city where the Council of Trento took place four hundred and fifty years ago. As such, Trento is a city of encounter and offers a special setting to host an international seminar on Religions and International Relations.

During the first-day public event, Fred Dallmayr spoke of religious freedom, as a spiritual gift, which needs to be nurtured, not ostracized, by the State. He then went on to speak figuratively of religions as the ‘salt of the earth’, which need to avoid the opposite perils of politicization and privatization.

Opening the second-day, closed door sessions, Fabio Petito challenged participants to question whether, and to what extent, the modern secular State is the condition sine qua non to promote the civil right to religious freedom in all its different facets: individual, institutional and collective.

Following Petito’s remarks, Silvio Ferrari recalled that the modern, Western, secular State (with its separation of Church and State) has led to the institutionalization of the individual right to opt in and out of a religious affiliation over and above the right of religious communities and institutions to public recognition by the State. The preference accorded to the individual right to religious freedom, however, is now being contested by both Western and non-Western religions.

In fact, it is increasingly evident that the established-religion model is not necessarily anti-democratic, whereas the explicitly secular State may run the risk of being undemocratic. As Gary

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Wilton argued, the Church of England is the only officially recognized faith in the UK. Yet, the UK supports all the nine major religions, and grants State-funding of Muslim schools. Wilson echoed Sayed Yousif Al-Khoei's remarks, during the first day public session, when the latter explained that different Muslim communities in the UK are not represented or recognized as whole, but by their organization.

The same could be said of Italy which, although excluding the new immigrant religions from the Concordat (Agreement with the State), grants members of all faiths the right to worship and belief, in virtue of its Constitution. The Italian case was at the center of a lively exchange during the first day public session, when Barbara Carfagna, the chair, asked a young Muslim woman from Trento, and the leader of the Italian UCOI, to share what it means to live the Muslim faith in Italy.

Religious Freedom: Individual, Institutional or Collective

The lack of consensus on what religious freedom, or an authentic religious expression is, constitutes one of the five main challenges facing foreign policies today – said Scott Appleby. Should governments protect the freedom of religious communities to display symbols? Should they simply protect the individual freedom to change and choose one's religion?

Scott Thomas précised that the individual right to religious freedom is the heritage of the Protestant Reformation, rather than a Catholic understanding. For the Protestants, the cultural element of religious freedom, that is the manifestation of religion in socio-cultural practices, was not so relevant. On the other hand, for Catholics, the connection between religion and culture is far more important, leading to an expanded notion of the civil right to religious freedom as a collective and institutional right.

Jianmin Zhao explained that the “mind-action” distinction, the notion of a forum internum (internal liberty) separated from a forum externum (freedom of exercise), is also foreign to Chinese religions, which adopt a more holistic view of the human person. As a consequence religion in Asia is connected to communal practices rather than being simply a matter of choice.

The lack of consensus on religious freedom constitutes one of the reasons why the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life has named his recent report, Global Restrictions to Religion, rather than Violations of Religious Freedom. As Brian Grimm explained, it is less controversial to observe the restrictions placed on religions around the globe, than to say whether this or that country has

violated religious freedom in doing so. As a matter of fact, what may look like a violation of religious freedom in one place, it may simply be perceived as a check on bad religious practices in another.

State-Religion Arrangements: the role of International Law

If this is the case, the problem still remains on a normative level about who is legitimized to decide what a good, or bad, religious practice is. The process of State adjudication is hardly ever free from political and economic power balances. Ihsan Yilmaz recalled that in Turkey, a purportedly secular State, the majority Muslim sect - Sunnism – is endorsed by the State, at the expense of the Alevi Muslims. Furthermore, Pejman Pourzand argued that the Ministry for religious affairs in Turkey (Dyanet) has appointed many women imams, going far beyond the French laïcité model in its control of religion.

According to Alessandro Ferrari and Pasquale Ferrara, religious establishments should be adjudicated by international law and international bodies, which are by nature less biased than national constituencies.

The scope of international law is not to adjudicate what is good or bad from an ethical-religious perspective. Rather it is to adjudicate what is right and wrong from a juridical point of view. If a Muslim woman were denied access to public services (i.e. education, inheritance rights) on the basis of her being non-Orthodox in the eyes of mainstream Islam, this would count as an injustice and a violation of international law. However, whether a woman should be nominated preacher or not, is a matter for religious communities to decide. It is an issue of faith, rather than a State problem.

Other speakers contributed to the rich debate, including Rama Mani, Peter Petkoff, Vladimir Fedorov, Finola Flanagan, Luca Ozzano, Armando Salvatore, John Milbank and Pasquale Annicchino.

Like every year, the fifth annual seminar on Religions and International Relations took place in parallel to the Trento Religion-Today Film Festival. On the evening of the first day, participants were invited to attend the screening of “Numbered”, a moving Israeli documentary on Jewish survivors to the Holocaust and their power of resilience in the face of violence.