

## Public presence as loss of power: Religious NGOs from Church diplomacy to civil society activism

*The increasing role of religion in public space must not be equated with an increase in socio-political significance. Analysing the early history of Religious Non-Governmental Organizations (RNGOs) in the context of the UN, **Karsten Lehmann** argues that the presence of religion in public space can also be the result of a decrease in traditional political influence.*



Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA) vice-moderator Emily Welty presents interfaith statement at NPT Review Conference, 2015. © Daniela Varano/ICAN

### A puzzling Bias

Throughout the last two decades, the discussions on the role of religions in public space have triggered some of the most productive debates in Religious Studies as well as Political Sciences and Sociology. Scholars such as José Casanova, Karl Gabriel, Timothy Fitzgerald, or Jean Baubérot have been central in reconfiguring the analytic categories of the study of religions as well as the theoretical understanding of religions in present-day societies.

One puzzling bias is, however, affecting significant strands of those discussions. Especially the protagonists of the resurgence-debates (such as Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, Scott M. Thomas or Mark Juergensmeyer) tend to interpret the presence of religiously affiliated actors in public space as an increase in their socio-political influence. Empirically as well as analytically, this equation has to be put under scrutiny.

To make this point, I will compare two historic episodes from one of my most recent books, *Religious NGOs in International Relations: The Construction of 'the Religious' and 'the Secular'*. On the basis of extensive archival work, the book analyses the early history of three organizations that are formally accredited to the UN (on the basis of Art. 71 of the UN-Charter) and self-describe as religious. The following two episodes will illustrate under which circumstances, the presence of these types of religiously affiliated actors in public space can be interpreted as the reaction to a decrease in the (traditional) political power of those actors. ^

## From Church Diplomacy to Civil Society Activism

The upcoming cases are based upon material from the archives of the **Commission of the Churches on International Affairs / CCIA** – a standing commission of the **World Council of Churches / WCC** that aims at supporting and representing the WCC with regards to all aspects of international politics. In the context of the present argument, the CCIA is of particular significance, in as far as it looks back upon more than 60 years of history and arguably is among the most established UN-related Religious NGO still in existence today.

The early history of the CCIA was largely influenced by two main protagonists: O. Frederick Nolde (CCIA-director from 1947 to 1968), and, his successor, Leopoldo Niilus (CCIA-director from 1969 to 1981). The biographies of these two directors as well as their early activities help to characterize the processes that led to the increasing public presence of the CCIA in international relations:

**O. Frederick Nolde** (1899-1972) was a Professor of Christian Education at the Lutheran Theological Seminar in Philadelphia and is counted among the US-Protestant human rights pioneers of the 1930s and 1940s. He was *inter alia* member of the *Commission to Study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace* where he became a friend of the future U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. During the discussions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Nolde was in repeated personal contact with UN-diplomats such as Eleanor Roosevelt, René Cassin and Charles Malik in order to influence the wording of the Universal Declaration – especially Art. 18 on freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

**Leopoldo Niilus** (1930-2015) was born in Estonia and received his professional training as a lawyer in Argentina and the United States. His relationship to the WCC emerged out of his active involvement into the *Student Christian Movement in Argentina*. The beginning of his term with the CCIA fell into a time of fundamental changes inside the UN as well as the World Council of Churches. Among Niilus' first activities as the new director of the CCIA were (a) the formulation of a public letter of Eugene Carson Blake (Secretary General of the WCC from 1966 to 1972) to U Thant (Secretary General of the UN from 1961 to 1971), as well as (b) attempts to further enhance the cooperation among all NGOs formally accredited to the UN.

These initial characterizations of Nolde and Niilus show not only how different they were in terms of their regional as well as their professional background, but the two directors were also embedded into very different socio-political milieus that shaped their approaches to the UN and international politics. Nolde acted as a *'Church Diplomat'* representing the WCC in what he perceived as the 'corridors of power'. Niilus presented himself as a *'Civil Society Activist'* with a certain distance to diplomats and politicians and the agenda to influence the public rather than elitist circles.

The self-perceptions of Nolde and Niilus illustrate more general changes in the very structure of the CCIA and its role within the WCC and international politics. Under Nolde, the CCIA established itself as an expert-commission within the diplomatic circles of the UN – its members attending formal UN meetings and contributing to the wording of UN documents. They were *inter alia* instrumental in the formulation of first generation human rights. Under Niilus, the CCIA activities became much more public. They were no longer restricted to diplomatic circles, but rather became much more activist in the sense of the newly emerging civil society.

Of course, these two episodes must not be over-interpreted, and many further aspects have to be added to the equation.

### For further consideration

First, we have to see the limits of the case analyses: Jeremy Carrett and his colleagues have for example made the very good point that the modes of public representation in the context of the

UN differ among various religious traditions. In their own research, they have looked at present-day RNGOs with a Muslim and a Hindu background. This research makes it very clear that those RNGOs had to use very different avenues to establish themselves in the UN-System.

Second, we have to take changes in the wider socio-political context into consideration. Authors such as Jeffrey Haynes, and the members of the United Nations Intellectual History Project have for example been very outspoken with regards to the general changes of the UN-System, and its increasing openness towards (or even dependence on) Civil Society-actors. So, the dynamic modes of access to the United Nations in the time period from the mid 1940s to the mid 1960s (and of course also from the 1970s to the 2010s) has to be kept in mind.

Finally, we have to scrutinize our analytic categories: I myself have argued elsewhere that analysts of present-day religions need a more differentiated terminology to grasp the processes in question. Along the lines of David Martin and Linda Woodhead, I propose that it makes sense to use the notion of 'sedimentation' in order to describe different layers in the constructions of the religious and the secular.

These differentiations notwithstanding, the two episodes add a new perspective to the links between presence in public space and political influence.

### Presence in public space does not equate political influence

To make this final point, let's consider the difference it makes whether someone is in the position to get an immediate personal response from political decision makers such as Eleanor Roosevelt or John Foster Dulles (as was the case with O. Frederick Nolde in the 1940s) or whether he or she puts their energy into writing a public letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations (as was the case with Niilus). A private phone-call might be more efficient than a public demonstration, and Nolde was in the position to make such a call whereas Niilus wasn't – or at least to a lesser degree.

Of course, this assessment very much depends upon one's perception of political influence, and political processes. As political individuals we have to ask ourselves – especially in the present state of national and international politics – whether this personal influence on political decision makers should be a promising tool or not. If an individual or an organization wants to influence policy makers at the national and / or international level we have, however, at least to be prepared for the fact that the first option might be more promising than the second.

As far as academic analyses are concerned, it is misleading to equate public presence with political influence. The above episodes from the 1940s and 1960s show that it makes at least sense to approach the increasing presence of religions in public space from the point of view of the classic secularization paradigm, and to see whether the emphasis on public presence might be the result of a decrease in direct political influence.

### About the author



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