

Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith

Why Care about Faith?

A collection of short essays and practical approaches for partnering with faith actors when tackling global challenges

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Introduction

Would giving greater consideration to the role that faith plays in peoples' lives and in society help improve the state of the world?

Faith permeates the world, providing a moral and ethical compass for the vast majority of people. While 84% of people are religiously affiliated, 75% now live with government restrictions on their individual freedom of conscience or belief. Research confirms that where there is less religious freedom, there is less women's empowerment, less economic development and more political instability, conflict and terrorism.

This undermines society, increases inequality, weakens the economy and is bad for businesses, organizations and individuals.

Regardless of one's personal opinion of faith, here are three reasons why engaging with people's beliefs is important and can improve the state of the world:

- **Partnerships:** The world's challenges cannot be solved by any one state or non-state actor. To address common concerns, all need to come together and work through global communities founded on a shared moral and ethical understanding. World faiths represent global identities and communities based on deep, shared values. Important foundations like the "Golden Rule" of reciprocity and respect are shared among all major belief systems and offer a practical basis for how to cooperate with the "other" – the individual or institution whose perspective and interests are different from one's own. Working within and between global faith communities, there is a substantial and mostly unrealized potential to address issues that affect all societies.
- **Reach and effectiveness:** Communities and organizations based on religion and shared beliefs are present throughout the world. They are often significant providers of essential health, education and community services – indeed, in many countries, particularly in the global South, they are the main sources of such social good, sometimes more so than the government itself. This capacity for service delivery, coupled with the moral and ethical leadership exercised by religious leaders, is a powerful means of enhancing social welfare and promoting change in attitudes and practices.
- **Transformation of conflict:** Conflict and tension corrupt human relationships on local, national and global scales. Arbitration alone does not offer a moral imperative to forgive, compromise and seek the other party's good, and a conflict not transformed is a conflict postponed. A shared understanding of religious identities and values can be instrumental in prevention or resolution of conflict. Often, a transformation of the heart in favour of resolving conflicts is the precondition to sustainable peace.

Attempts to achieve a more resilient and dynamic economy and system of governance are challenged by deficits in legitimacy, an erosion of trust and the risk of violent conflict. Of course, religion can also contribute to the problem, but the best of faith can defeat the worst of religion. For societies to be civil, states to be stable and for economies to flourish, faith is essential.

In the following pages, the Global Agenda Council on the Role of Faith has collected a series of essays, highlighting the practical aspect of faith and how to engage with faith actors in long-term and effective partnerships. The aim is to showcase the "value-added of faith" when it comes to tackling global challenges and dealing with emerging trends at the regional and international level. The essays provide examples of best practices and successful partnerships, and intend to serve as a source of inspiration on how to make faith part of the solution to some of the major challenges the world is experiencing today.

Global Challenges and Emerging Trends

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Climate Change and Environmental Conservation

By David Rosen, Rabbi and International Director, Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee and David Saperstein, Director, The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

Over the past 50 years, human activities – particularly the burning of fossil fuels – have released sufficient quantities of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases to affect the global climate. The resulting changes bring a range of risks to health, from deaths in extreme high temperatures to changing patterns of infectious diseases. Statistics are speaking clearly. Approximately 600,000 deaths occurred worldwide as a result of weather-related natural disasters in the 1990s, some 95% of which took place in developing countries.

Increasing water scarcity and rising temperatures are two of the most pressing issues related to climate change. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is predicting that by 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity. Water scarcity encourages people to transport water long distances and store supplies in their homes. This increases the risk of household water contamination, causing illnesses. Meanwhile, literature and evidence show that global temperatures are likely to increase by 4°C. This increase, along with its catastrophic implications, is not inevitable. With sustained policy action, global warming can still be held below 2°C, which is the goal adopted by the international community to prevent more serious damage and risks to the environment and human populations.

Why partner with faith actors?

- Religious communities are increasingly adopting the climate change issue in fulfilment of their stewardship values. They can help foster action at the community level.
- Changing the mindset of consumers through their faiths and traditions is more impactful than inventing new mechanisms to cope with the over-consumption that harms the environment.
- Partnering with faith leaders increases the effectiveness and strengthens the implementation of multistakeholder climate change partnerships.

The various world faith traditions all teach the value of sustainability and widely refer in their holy books to environmental protection and respect for nature and its creatures. Various studies have investigated the relationship between religion and environmental preservation, confirming the key role played by religious institutions and faith groups in promoting concerted ecological action, based upon their own teachings and traditions. Faith actors are committed stakeholders in the sustainability agenda and are key partners when creating and developing long-term environmental programmes, particularly as they can influence broad social and behavioural changes in their communities.

Best practices and partnership examples

- The Africa Muslim Environment Network – AMEN – operates as a network of Muslims and Muslim organizations in Kenya, Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and South Africa. The primary purpose of AMEN is to share information about successful environment friendly development initiatives by mosques, Islamic organizations (such as youth groups and women groups) and the diverse Islam communities in Africa.
- The United Planet Faith & Science Initiative – uniting prominent religious figures and leading scientists – initiated rounds of web-based meetings of scientists and faith leaders from around the globe to mobilize action for ecological sustainability among faith and secular communities (<http://www.interfaithsustain.com/united-planet-faith-science-initiative>).
- The Global Interfaith WASH Alliance was initiated to engage the planet's many faiths as allies in efforts to provide access to safe drinking water, improved sanitation and proper hygiene to communities around the world (<http://www.i-wash.org/>).
- More than 700 church institutions in Germany are engaged in environmental management according to European standards by saving energy, cutting down on waste and getting involved in nature-protection measures (<http://www.dw.de/people-are-unaware-of-the-churchs-influence-on-climate-issues/a-16714418>).
- A community-based ecological resource management project in Indonesia was undertaken by the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, an internationally recognized charity organization articulating Islamic perspectives on the environment that activates those properties inherent in Islam (http://fore.research.yale.edu/religion/islam/projects/islamic_foundation/).
- The Wildlife & Forests Project was initiated by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation and WWF US to address the concern expressed by many faiths over the destruction of wildlife through the illegal wildlife trade, particularly for traditional Chinese medicine (<http://www.arcworld.org/projects.asp?projectID=578>).
- The Green Pilgrimage Network is a global network of 28 pilgrim cities and other sites sacred to many religious traditions around the world. These sites strive to be models of green action and care by helping pilgrim places become cleaner and greener (<http://greenpilgrimage.net/>).
- In Kenya, the Anglican Church, with an estimated 5 million followers, has committed to increasing the country's forest cover by 10% in four years and to promoting soil conservation in 100,000 households (<http://www.irinnews.org/in-depth/9638773/>).

Civil Society and Civic Engagement

By Peter Prove, Director, International Affairs, World Council of Churches

Civil society is a vague and shifting categorization, including traditional NGOs but encompassing an ever wider and more vibrant range of organized and unorganized groups (both secular and faith-based). New civil society actors blur the boundaries between sectors and experiment with new organizational forms, both off and online. As discussed in a recent World Economic Forum publication, the ideal role of civil society is to be “the glue that binds public and private activity together in such a way as to strengthen the common good”.

However, in many countries and through various means, there are increasing constraints on political space for civil society action and engagement. The challenge is to ensure that civil society, despite its amorphous and decentralized nature, can be encouraged and enabled to play its critical role for the common good.

Faith actors as drivers of societal change within civil society

Faith communities – as longstanding networks of belonging, trust and engagement – are major and durable sources of “social capital”, which is disproportionately important to the poor and marginalized who lack other forms of capital. As such, faith communities are, and have historically been, a key motor of civil society.

Meanwhile, the secular ideals of civil society can run into conflict with religion in societies in which faith plays a leading role in public life, and particularly where religion and state are closely entwined. Religious diversity is frequently manipulated for political and other purposes, often with very negative consequences for peace and social justice.

Nevertheless, **the ethical and moral influence of religious leaders, faith communities’ networks of commitment and participation, and their organizational and operational capacities have been – and will be – of critical significance in the context of many civil society struggles.**

A clearer mutual understanding of the shared objectives of secular civil society and of faith-based organizations is necessary to ensure that the common good is effectively advanced, particularly with regard to social, economic and environmental justice, and the distinctive identity and role of religious communities relative to secular civil society.

Best practices and partnership examples

- UNESCO and other international organizations referred to national and international religious engagement in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1990s, recognizing the role of religion and religious institutions in supporting a new path towards lasting peace free of ethnic cleavages – even those expressed by religion and culture (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001888/188892eo.pdf>).
- The Jubilee 2000 movement for international debt relief relied on the activism and leadership of many religious organizations, groups and churches that partnered with development NGOs and policy-makers to press for deeper, faster debt relief for the world’s poorest countries (<http://jubileedebt.org.uk/>).
- Strong religious advocacy for immigration reform in the US was recorded in the past years, with Jewish, Catholic and Evangelical groups siding with technology and business groups and ramping up their lobbying efforts in light of their shared values of family, justice and community (<http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2013/04/22/religious-groups-throw-lobbying-cash-at-immigration-reform>).

Fragile States and Conflict Prevention

By Chris Seiple, President, Institute for Global Engagement

Elements of a government, a religious group, or business' treatment of faith can contribute to a negative cycle that exacerbates fissures in a fragile (even stable) state, inviting conflict. Likewise, each actor's interaction with faith can contribute to a positive cycle that builds resilience and prevents conflict. Various actions and reactions to faith are explored below by stakeholder group to highlight factors contributing to negative and positive implications to society.

Contributing to the problem

- Governments: Repression of faith communities drives them underground, separating them from society, destroying trust, and inviting the group(s) to militarize, strike back and seek international support.
- Religious communities: They may use their holy scriptures to encourage and/or validate violence against another group not like them (even within their own faith tradition).
- Businesses: There is an opportunity cost if executives are unaware of research showing that religious freedom is good for business, and/or not engaged on the issue.

Contributing to the solution

- Governments: Fostering an atmosphere of principled pluralism – where all faiths can practice and bring values to a shared moral framework in the public sphere – builds trust and loyalty resulting in mutual respect and mutual reliance to render the state more resilient to all types of conflict.
- Faith communities: Encouraging its members to live out the Golden Rule practically, faith communities serve the most marginalized while building trust that honours the sanctity of contract, corrodes corruption, and attracts foreign direct investment. The result is social cohesion, strengthening the security and stability of society and state.
- Businesses: They can create and sustain business opportunities that empower marginalized ethnic and/or religious minorities that provide jobs and justice, restoring dignity to individuals.

Practical examples of faith communities contributing to the solution

- Best practices
 - Establish a safe space for scholarship and a common standard of training that educates government, faith and business leaders together, reducing stereotypes of each other while creating an "alumni" network of "graduates" across sectors and provinces.
 - Build the capacity of governments, faith communities and businesses to work together.
 - Integrate women into all initiatives.

- Examples
 - In Mozambique, the Community of Sant'Egidio helped bring all parties together to build a peace agreement in 1992 that has lasted to this day.
 - In Liberia, Muslim and Christian women organized non-violent protests that led to a democratic government and the election of Africa's first female president (made famous in the movie "Pray the Devil back to Hell").
 - In Pakistan, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy engaged 2,700 madrasa leaders, working with them to reform curricula and pedagogy to develop critical thinking skills among the students and to inspire greater adherence to the principles of religious tolerance and human rights (particularly women's rights).
 - In Finland, the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation is building a coalition of recycling companies, technological research groups, faith-based NGOs and government agencies to develop profitable waste management enterprises staffed and run by overseas marginalized minorities, demonstrating their positive and profitable contribution to society.

Human Rights Promotion and Protection

By Mona Siddiqui, Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies, School of Divinity, The University of Edinburgh

The human rights discourse has over the past few decades become the dominant political and ideological narrative in most liberal democracies. Liberalism speaks a language of rights and claims, where the individual is at the centre of the world view but where individual choice must still be balanced with recognition of mutual rights. The rise of democratic rule, the desire for more political freedoms, changing concepts of civil society, and the advancement of gender rights and social equalities are all part of this new political and moral consciousness. This has given a new model of freedom to societies and has meant that in many parts of the world, religious institutions and religious voices no longer carry any privilege or any public hold but act as only one voice among competing voices in a nation's life. Still, they are an important and active actor in the human rights discourse, also in consideration of the fact that all major faith traditions share a common acknowledgment of and commitment to the value and dignity of human life.

The challenge for faith practitioners is whether they are telling a different story in the public space, promoting a particular kind of ethical framework which the state is failing to uphold in its own efforts to combat poverty, inequality and human degradation and conflict.

The role of religious organizations in protecting human rights

If institutional religion has witnessed a decline in many Western countries, religious organizations are nevertheless rich resources for promoting peace services and social tolerance, and for constructive conflict-management at a global level. They are communities of teaching and learning, providing a powerful foundation for raising awareness and consciousness of the principles and processes for the promotion and protection of human rights. Religious actors can be peace builders and peacemakers, providers of humanitarian aid and often upholders of human dignity and rights, even in those conflicts where religion itself is a factor in human rights abuses. They must always provide hope.

The modern framework of human rights which emphasizes certain inalienable rights shared by all is strengthened by concepts of human dignity prevalent in most religions. Religious thought has a rich history and narrative of human dignity which can challenge the state in many areas including bioethics, legal ethics, social inequalities and more egalitarian distribution of wealth. Faith actors often speak for the basic rights of the marginalized and those without a voice to imagine and often realize a world where human worth is not simply measured by one's economic worth. Faith leaders have an important role in combating all forms of discrimination.

Best practices and partnership examples

Religion expresses itself in praxis, not just in thought, and its central concern in many of today's societies is the dignity and welfare of the individual – the public good. Some significant examples include:

- Shanti Ashram is an organization that launched a literacy campaign in India to assist rural communities to become literate. It also enhances closer interactions

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For rights language to lose the link with religious language and institutions would be for it to lose something historically crucial.

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Rowan Williams, 104th Archbishop of Canterbury

with people, communities, institutions and governments through various activities. It often works with religious organizations to lead peace-building activities and promote interfaith collaboration (<http://www.shantiashram.in/AboutUs.aspx>).

- The American Jewish World Service (AJWS) is a Jewish human rights and development organization working to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world. For example in India, AJWS supports community organizing and advocacy for women's, girls', LGBTI and sex workers' rights, much of which focuses on changing discriminatory community attitudes and norms (http://ajws.org/where_we_work/asia/india/).
- The Global Interfaith Network on Population and Development is a partnership between the United Nations Population Fund and faith communities around the world that share a common commitment to strengthen cooperation on human rights and development (<http://www.unfpa.org/public/News/pid/1320>).
- World Vision International designed a child protection (CP) programme piloted in Sierra Leone. The training included children, Imams, pastors, and local law enforcement. The goal of the eight-day training was to change deeply entrenched, harmful attitudes that lie at the root of many CP issues. Trainers hoped to assist faith leaders with using scripture responsibly, disseminating accurate CP information and catalysing the faith community to be involved in local CP restoration and advocacy efforts (<http://www.wvi.org/churchandinterfaith>).
- The “Live the Promise HIV and AIDS Campaign” – launched by the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance in collaboration with human rights experts, civil society organizations, international institutions and other entities – actively encouraged members and partners to promote human rights principles and processes in the advocacy work (http://www.e-alliance.ch/typo3conf/ext/naw_securedl/secure.php?u=0&file=fileadmin/user_upload/docs/HIVFrameworkA4_EN__WEB.pdf&t=1402128930&hash=afcd9418fc2e36f420ebeeef21aeb3138).
- iENGAGE lobbying against Islamophobia in schools aimed at combating prejudice and propaganda against religious minorities (<http://iengage.uk.net/>).

Food Security

By Peter Prove, Director, International Affairs, World Council of Churches

The world is experiencing significant food security challenges: 842 million people – 12% of the global population, or one in eight people – suffer from chronic hunger, and are unable to meet their dietary requirements for an active and healthy life. The vast majority of hungry people – 827 million – live in developing regions, where the prevalence of undernourishment is now estimated at 14.3%. While the estimated number of undernourished people has continued to decrease, the rate of progress appears insufficient to reach international goals for hunger reduction in developing regions. Africa remains the region with the highest prevalence of undernourishment, with more than one in five people estimated to be undernourished.

In the global North, food insecurity is increasing in the context of the ongoing economic crisis and worsening income inequality. Agriculture and increasing meat production is a major and growing source of the greenhouse gas emissions driving climate change. Additionally, there is still insufficient consumer demand for organic, sustainably produced food to fundamentally re-orient the market towards sustainability in the global food system. Global food security is now dependent on far fewer crop species than 50 years ago, raising concerns about the resilience of the global food system in the context of climate change. The diversity of cultivated crops declined by 75% during the 20th century and a third of the remaining diversity could disappear by 2050. Food waste and post-harvest losses result in the loss of between one third and one half of all food produced for human consumption. The majority of the food consumed globally is produced by smallholder family farmers, but smallholder farming communities are also among the most food insecure.

In this context, religious leaders have a role to play in partnering with relevant stakeholders and communities to develop effective solutions to food insecurity and malnutrition.

The contribution of faith actors to the global food security agenda

- The ethical and moral leadership of faith leaders in both the South and the North help promote more responsible and sustainable farming practices, encourage action to reduce food waste by consumers, and drive consumer demand for organic and sustainably produced food.
- The majority of the faith community constituencies in the global South are smallholder farmers and/or people who are food poor. Faith communities have the best access to such populations for the purposes of assessing and communicating realities, disseminating information and good practices, and building networks.

- Faith communities are often significant landholders in the global South, representing a potential asset for food production and for teaching best practices within a smallholder farming population.

Best practices and partnership examples

- Farming God's Way (www.farming-gods-way.org) and Foundations for Farming (www.foundationsforfarming.org) were established as networks promoting conservation agriculture and soil restoration by smallholder farmers from a faith-based perspective.
- Pope Francis's leadership of the Caritas Internationalis global campaign against hunger, "One Human Family: Food for All", has been a resonant voice in the past year (<http://food.caritas.org/>).
- Islamic Relief has been partnering with communities and various stakeholders in Malawi to promote sustainable responses to the country's hunger crisis (<http://www.islamic-relief.com/NewsRoom/4-853-islamic-relief-responds-as-malawi-s-hunger-crisis-deepens.aspx>).
- The Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in West Africa campaign "Eat What You Grow – Grow What You Eat" was developed to increase agricultural production, overcome extreme hunger and improve the livelihoods of low-income people (<http://tinyurl.com/o7sof6k>).
- The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance's "Food for Life" campaign included promoting action on food waste and post-harvest losses, and leadership in the Global Consultation on Food Security and Nutrition in the Post-2015 Development Agenda (www.e-alliance.ch/en/s/food/).

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We are in front of a global scandal of around 1 billion – 1 billion people who still suffer from hunger today. We cannot look the other way and pretend this does not exist. The food available in the world is enough to feed everyone.

”

Pope Francis

Social Media and Digital Networking

By Christopher Helland, Associate Professor of Sociology of Religion, Dalhousie University and Muna AbuSulayman, Partner, Directions Consultancy

Social media is rapidly changing the world. The transformations that are occurring in the way individuals now communicate and network are challenging governments, business and social institutions to adapt quickly or become out of touch. These changes have impacted society on a number of levels and force people to acknowledge the transformative power of media. New understandings of media explain it as more than just a tool for delivering messages to share opinions or achieve effects. Rather, media is now recognized as “technologies of sensation, as embodied forms of participation in extended communities joined in imagination, feeling, taste, affinity, and affect”. Social media has become a new force and powerful tool for creating, maintaining, transforming and challenging the world.

The faith world has also invested in this transformation. Over the past few years, faith actors have engaged with social media tools to different extents and for different reasons. Various religious bodies and churches have published social media guidelines to provide a safe framework for their followers to use the web. The number of religiously-themed apps is growing and social networking sites have become the new normal for connecting individuals and communities on spiritual and religious topics.

Social media for faith

Social media has become a powerful mechanism for engaging faith and for producing real-world results and changes. With faith being the force that anchors people to beliefs, communities and relationships, there is an obvious and strong interdependent relationship between faith, networks and social media. Recent developments highlight the significant impact faith communities can have on individuals, governments, societies, cultures and groups through social media.

Minority religions and faith-based communities are hyperconnected through social media and have been actively using these new social networks for positive changes and developments. Faith has value and it is a resource that is now constantly mobilized and engaged through social media. This new form of faith-based network utilization has produced powerful, dynamic and even revolutionary changes on local, national and international scales. Political actions affecting minority religious groups can now be widely publicized to incite protective responses among global diasporas or concerned activists.

Social media has been a dynamic tool for mobilizing faith-based responses to natural disasters and human tragedy. When governments have been slow or ineffective in activating operational and immediate disaster relief, social media has been an essential tool in developing, maintaining and establishing effective networks of support through faith-based groups, which often operate transnationally.

Faith leaders with significantly high social media profiles (Twitter followers, re-tweets, Facebook likes, website hits, etc.) are also having widespread cultural impact and positive

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It depends on how you use them [Facebook and Twitter]. If the person, himself or herself, has a certain inner strength, a certain confidence, then it is no problem. But if an individual's mind is weak, then there is more confusion. You can't blame technology. It depends on the user of the technology.

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His Holiness the Dalai Lama

influence. Their influence through social media goes far beyond their traditional religious and national boundaries, and is engaging and influencing religious and nonreligious people from a variety of backgrounds.

Best practices and partnership examples

- Malala Yousafzai has been running worldwide campaigns for girls' education by frequently using social media tools and online communications (A Blog about the Brave Girl from Swat, www.malala-yousafzai.com).
- Minority groups have adopted new media platforms in a variety of ways for multiple purposes, like strengthening their identity awareness and historic heritage, expanding their visibility in the public sphere and challenging dominant discriminatory attitudes (<http://ejc.net/magazine/article/minority-voices-on-social-media-networks#.U5HJ-Pm1aVo>).
- His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been engaging with worldwide communities and individuals through a solid online presence: Twitter (8.66 million followers, <https://twitter.com/DalaiLama>), Facebook (8.3 million likes, www.facebook.com/DalaiLama) and Instagram (60,000 followers, <http://instagram.com/dalailama>).
- With more than half a million apps available for the iPhone or iPad, and some hundreds for the Android, an array of religious applications were developed for adherents to just about any religious group and for a large number of congregations, dioceses and other religious organizations (http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/5463/five_social_media_trends_that_are_reshaping_religion/).
- Pope Francis was recognized as a social media phenomenon, as the initiator of the Vatican's use of social media and his ability to utilize digital tools in dynamic and engaging ways to raise awareness of global challenges (<http://www.forbes.com/sites/tomwatson/2013/09/16/pope-francis-the-social-media-star-peace-love-and-a-new-understanding/>).

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Endnotes

1. <http://www.pewforum.org/Government/Rising-Tide-of-Restrictions-on-Religion-findings.aspx>.
2. Roger Finke and Brian J. Grim, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2010). Also, see Grim's TedX talk: <http://www.tedxviadellaconciliazione.com/speakers/brian-j-grim/>.
3. *The Future Role of Civil Society*, World Economic Forum, 2013. <http://www.weforum.org/reports/future-role-civil-society>.
4. An example of this trend is the rapid increase in food banks in the UK (from 50 to over 400 in the past five years).
5. David Morgan (2013), *Religion and Media: A Critical Review of Recent Developments*, Critical Research on Religion, vol.1 no.3, pp.347-366.



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