

## **AGENDA ITEM BRIEFING**

**Submitted by:** Michael K. Young, President  
Texas A&M University

**Subject:** Establishment of the Texas A&M Institute for the Study of Religion and International Affairs

### **Proposed Board Action:**

Establish the Texas A&M Institute for the Study of Religion and International Affairs at Texas A&M University (Texas A&M).

### **Background Information:**

Religious institutions, beliefs, norms and standards of conduct, especially when collectively expressed, have an enormous impact on international and global affairs, as well as on domestic political, social and even economic developments. Religion in all its manifestations has a significant, often decisive impact on international and foreign policy developments, as well domestic conflict, migration patterns, refugee movements, education levels and opportunities, social welfare, patterns of economic development, and civil and human rights.

The Texas A&M Institute for the Study of Religion and International Affairs will examine the role religion plays in a broad spectrum of international affairs to better understand its impact and develop responses to the challenges created. The institute will also focus on the conditions necessary to expand religious liberties in a country and how U.S. foreign policy might be better designed to advance religious liberties around the globe and to channel the positive aspects of faith-based institutions to enable them to contribute more effectively and more positively to domestic and international outcomes.

### **A&M System Funding or Other Financial Implications:**

Beyond certain start-up funds and the salary of currently employed faculty who will participate in the activities of the institute, and appropriate and conventional support for classes, all activities will be funded through university funds, donations and other external funds, such as research grants.

### **Strategic Plan Imperative(s) this Item Advances:**

Approval of this agenda item will advance The Texas A&M University System strategic imperatives 3, 4, and 5. Specifically, the institute will: a) provide students with a deeper understanding of the international relations among and between countries and the variables that affect those relations, and help them better understand the dynamics and patterns of international affairs and global, as well as domestic, developments, in support of imperative 3; b) enable our faculty to make a significant contribution to the very incomplete body of research and literature in this area, which will have enormous practical and immediate applications, in support of imperative 4; and c) respond to the needs of the people of Texas by providing better insight into international developments to enhance companies' abilities to take better advantage of foreign markets, aiding the further globalization of the Texas economy, in support of imperative 5.

**TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY**

Office of the President

December 12, 2019

Members, Board of Regents  
The Texas A&M University System

Subject: Establishment of the Texas A&M Institute for the Study of Religion and International Affairs

I recommend adoption of the following minute order:

**“The Texas A&M Institute for the Study of Religion and International Affairs is hereby established as an organizational unit of Texas A&M University.”**

Respectfully submitted,

**[ORIGINAL SIGNED BY]**

Michael K. Young  
President

**Approval Recommended:**

**[ORIGINAL SIGNED BY]**

John Sharp  
Chancellor

**Approved for Legal Sufficiency:**

**[ORIGINAL SIGNED BY]**

Ray Bonilla  
General Counsel

**[ORIGINAL SIGNED BY]**

Billy Hamilton  
Deputy Chancellor and  
Chief Financial Officer

**[ORIGINAL SIGNED BY]**

James R. Hallmark, Ph.D.  
Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs

## TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Texas A&M Institute for the Study of Religion and International Affairs

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### 1. Rationale for the Creation of the Center

Religious institutions, beliefs, norms and standards of conduct, especially when collectively expressed, have an enormous impact on international and global affairs, as well as on domestic political, social and even economic developments. Religion in all its manifestations has a significant, often decisive impact on international and foreign policy developments, as well as domestic conflict, migration patterns, refugee movements, education levels and opportunities, social welfare, patterns of economic development, and civil and human rights.

Even a brief review of daily news highlights this reality. Conflict in the Middle East and Africa are just two glaring examples. One does not have to reach far back into history to find dozens of other compelling examples. For example, the role of religiously centered institutions is equally apparent in the fall of communism (the Protestant church organized protest in East Germany and the Catholic based Solidarity (Solidarność) movement in Poland are just two such examples), in the civil rights movement in the U.S., the abolition movement in both the U.S. and England, the nationalist movement in pre-WW II Japan, and the frequent uprisings in China (the Son of the Heavenly King Rebellion, the Black Lotus movement, the Boxer Rebellion), to name just a few.

As the above brief list makes clear, many governments are deeply threatened by, and take steps to limit religion and religious activities in their countries. Indeed, after a brief period of openness and receptivity to religion by many governments, repression of religion has increased significantly over the past decade. According to the annual reports of the United States Commission on Religious Freedom, the number of countries where religious persecution is “severe” or “especially severe” has tripled over the past 15 years.

Ironically, this has occurred at the same time that data are emerging that highlight significant correlations between religious liberties and very positive social and economic outcomes. For example, the provision of religious liberties within a country is highly correlated with other freedoms (e.g., economic freedom, freedom of the press, civil and political liberty) and with other positive social outcomes (e.g., higher levels of earned income, better educational outcomes, especially for women, better health outcomes, longevity of democracy, lower levels of poverty, lower income inequality, etc.). The philosopher, Amartya Sen, summarized as follows: “Human freedom is not just a general opportunity for freedom in the abstract, but the specific processes within a country that result in better lives.”

Governments also frequently ignore or underestimate the role religion and religious institutions can play in advancing positive outcomes in international (and, of course, domestic) affairs. For example, faith-based organizations have played a significant role in conflict resolution (see, e.g., *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, D. Johnson and C. Sampson, eds.; *Faith-based Diplomacy Trumping Realpolitik*, D. Johnson, ed.), in international development, and in addressing migration crises. Advancing principles and practices of freedom of thought, conscience and belief also enhance desirable foreign policy outcomes, desirable at least from the perspective of the United States and other democratic states. As political scientists have observed, for example,

no two democracies have ever fought a war against each other. Professor Sen famously argued that no democracy has ever had a nationwide famine.

Peter Berger, one of the foremost sociologists of religion until his death in 2017, argued that the growing secularism in advanced democratic industrial democracies is not the norm across the globe. In fact the opposite is the case. Religion, regardless of the tradition, is at the center of most people's daily lives, particularly in traditional societies. Thus, wealthy democratic industrialized countries are an island of secularism in an ocean of faith in the rest of the world.

Religiously motivated movements have also had significant destructive force, including the mobilization of populations during conflict, resulting in an increase in conflict and enhanced difficulty in resolving conflict, as well as motivating target groups to engage in terrorist activities (see, e.g., *Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against American*, D. Benjamin and S. Simon).

Indeed, it is not too much to say that religious beliefs and norms influence virtually all aspects of human activity, focusing, as they do, on issues many consider most fundamental to their very human existence. Not surprisingly, when people act in concert, these beliefs and norms strongly influence that collective action. That collective action, in turn, creates the domestic and international activities that shape and determine a very broad set of international and domestic and political and economic outcomes, such as those described above.

### *A History of Defending Freedom*

Defending truth and freedom has been embedded in the DNA of Texas A&M University (Texas A&M) since its doors opened in 1876. To say that Texas A&M has helped save the world from tyranny, including religious repression, would not be an understatement. In 2018, Corps of Cadets Commandant Brigadier General Joe Ramirez, Jr. '79 had the honor of accepting the *Guardian of the Human Spirit Award* presented by the Holocaust Museum Houston for the role of Aggies in liberating Nazi concentration camps.

More common was and is the quiet humility of Aggies who selflessly served then and now. Current and former students, as well as more than 460,000 living former Aggies across 165 countries, bear witness in large organizations, corporations and communities in the interplay between religion and international affairs.



1942 Corregidor Muster

In addition to Aggies who serve the world are scholars and visiting scholars at Texas A&M across colleges who study and participate in the intersection of religion and politics, economy, family, community and society.

## **2. General Description of the Center and its Mission and Goals**

The goal and design of the Texas A&M Institute for the Study of Religion and International Affairs is initially to examine and better understand the role religion plays in this broad spectrum of international affairs, actively and interactively.

## **3. Potential Faculty Associated with the Center and Potential Collaborations**

Faculty associated with the institute will be:

- Francis Gause, Professor and Head, Department of International Affairs, Bush School of Government and Public Service
- Andrew Natsios, Executive Professor, Department of International Affairs, Bush School of Government and Public Service
- Valerie Hudson, Professor, Department of International Affairs, Bush School of Government and Public Service
- Michael K. Young, President, Texas A&M

Additional faculty in the College of Liberal Arts, whose area of expertise comprises of comparative religion, have also expressed interest in being involved with the institute and its activities. Discussions are underway and will be further explored with the Bush School of Government and Public Service.

## **4. Potential Activities**

In addition to the activities described above, the institute will focus on the conditions necessary to expand religious liberties in a country and how U.S. foreign policy might be better designed to advance religious liberties around the globe and to channel the positive aspects of faith-based institutions to enable them to contribute more effectively and more positively to domestic and international outcomes.

The institute will also study:

- how countries can better address religious extremism and terrorism;
- deleterious effect of these movements on domestic and international affairs;
- how the international community can better address these issues and respond to the challenges they create; and
- the relationship between religious liberty and other civil and human rights.

Competing versions of religious freedom and the appropriate role of religion in domestic affairs will also be a necessary area of study and analysis. The overall goal of all this work will be to inform better policy decisions necessary to create a more just, humane and peaceful world.

The institute will engage in, and sponsor a range of activities and areas of focus, including:

- religious liberties;
- religious freedom and U.S. foreign policy;
- religion and conflict (and conflict resolution); and
- religion and international development.

The institute will:

- initiate and sponsor research;

- offer classes;
- participate in thought leadership in policy making;
- sponsor and create internship opportunities;
- host public forums;
- create public and private working and study groups; and
- publish and disseminate the results of all these activities.

The institute will initially plan on:

- Two classes each semester, as well as other high-impact learning experiences;
- Four guest speakers and symposiums per year, an annual conference, and significant sponsored research grants; and
- Sponsorship of participants in international research and conference activities around the United States and the world.

As the activities expand, we will:

- Create visiting and permanent research and teaching positions, drawing from the academic, governmental and faith-based organization worlds; and
- Expand our activities to ensure an international presence among our faculty and researchers, as well as a broader domestic and international footprint for our activities.

## **5. Impact on Education and Training of Students**

Courses will be offered under the auspices of the Bush School of Government and Public Service and the College of Liberal Arts. In addition, research opportunities under the direction of institute professors will be available to challenge and expose students to political, social and economic impacts of religion on the region, state, and world. Internships with the appropriate branches of the federal government, foreign policy institutes, and non-governmental organizations are also being pursued on behalf of students.

## **6. Resource Requirements**

The activities of the institute will be underwritten with the amount of resources secured from private funding. Additional resources will be contingent upon the amount of private funds raised. Activities of the institute will include funding resources for faculty and student travel, research, conference attendance (presenting and professional development). The Estimated cost of any additional resources not secured through private funding will be forthcoming.

## **7. Sources and Future Expectations of Financial Support**

The university will support professors' salaries and make available minor administrative support. External funding will largely come from individuals and foundations interested in this area of study and research. Discussions regarding additional external funding are already underway with various potential donors and are very promising.

## **8. Governance and Advisory Structure**

As with all academic areas of study and research, the institute will report to the Provost and Executive Vice President of Texas A&M and Michael K. Young will serve as the designated director. A steering committee comprised of faculty and staff with knowledge and expertise in the

area of study will be assembled to advise and assist the institute's mission, goals, and purpose. Initial steering committee members will be:

- Andrew Natsios, Executive Professor and Director of the Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs, Bush School of Government and Public Service
- Valerie Hudson, Distinguished Professor and George H.W. Bush Chair, Department of International Affairs, Bush School of Government and Public Service
- Mark Welsh, Dean, Holder of the Edward & Howard Kruse Endowed Chair, and Executive Professor

## **9. Mechanisms for Periodic Review**

The institute will be reviewed annually by the Provost and Executive Vice President. Consistent with Vice President for Research processes and A&M System policy, the institute will be reviewed at least every five years to ensure its continued viability and consistency with Texas A&M's mission and strategic plan. This will include a self-assessment and a review by internal and external reviewers comprised of foreign policy specialists with significant knowledge and expertise in the areas of study. Initial external review committee members will be:

- Rabbi David Saperstein, Director Emeritus of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
- Mr. Leonard A. Leo, Co-Chairman and Executive Vice President, The Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies
- Dr. Richard Land, President, Southern Evangelical Seminary
- Mr. W. Cole Durham Jr., Susa Young Gates University Professor of Law; Founding Director, Center for Law and Religion Studies
- Dr. Michael Benedik, Vice Provost and Chief International Officer, Texas A&M