

Globalization, Religious Change and the Common Good

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While hardly new in world politics, religion has returned in force to the international agenda. The Shi'ite revolution in Iran (1978-1979) and the political awakening of the New Christian Right in the early eighties in the United States roughly coincided. Both events surprised journalists and politicians who bought in to a version of the secularization thesis and therefore underestimated or ignored the enduring power of religion to mobilize protest movements. The nineties saw the increasing prominence of Hamas (Sunni), Hezbollah (Shi'ite), and Gush Emunim (Jewish) in shaping the conflict in the Middle East, the electoral and cultural successes of militant Hindu nationalism in India, and the spread of Sunni Muslim radicalism, Al-Qaeda style, in parts of the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.

Yet the U.S. government was slow to respond effectively to situations where religion played a major role. Even after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, it was commonplace to hear U.S. officials describe the Ayatollah's revolution as fundamentally a secular movement—a socio-economic protest cloaked up in pseudo-religious wrappings. There is perhaps no more eloquent testimony to the secular bias that has distorted U.S. foreign policy than the fact that the word "religion" does not appear in the index *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger's encyclopedic account of American statesmanship, published in 1994. Nor does it appear in the index to Paul Collier's recent book about world poverty, *The Bottom Billion*, despite the fact that many of the conflicts involving religious actors occur in underdeveloped countries.

Beyond Secularization

Slowly, however, both the United States and the larger world began to take notice of this old/new force in global affairs. National leaders, for whom security concerns were paramount, focused almost exclusively on the destructive expressions of religion, especially “religious terrorism,” rather than its record of community service, integrity and conflict resolution. The tragic events of 9/11 only reinforced the tendency of politicians and media to see religion as a monolithic and largely destabilizing force.

Gradually the situation has begun to change. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair leads one promising effort to build coalitions between governmental and intergovernmental organizations and grassroots and regional religious communities on matters of concern, including healthcare, development, education, and conflict prevention. NATO formed a study and policy group to develop a more sophisticated analysis of religious and ethnic dimensions of post Cold War conflicts. From the Alliance of Civilizations to resolutions passed by the General Assembly, the United Nations is forging new partnerships with religions and religious communities. Meanwhile, nongovernmental international forums, such as the Parliament of World Religions and Religions for Peace, have increased in importance and provide a venue for multilateral progress on numerous issues of common concern.

In the United States, the progress toward a more balanced and wiser approach to religion has been halting but not insignificant. Over the past decade the CIA’s Office of Political Islam increased in size, sophistication, and influence. West Point established the Harmony Project to understand the worldview and (limited) appeal of Al-Qaeda and religious extremism more broadly. President Bush appointed a special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference in an effort to engage Muslims, while prominent task forces produced special reports recommending a new way forward in U.S. relations with the Muslim world and with religious communities more generally.^[1] USAID ran a number of programs designed to engage local religious leaders across a spectrum of sectarian groups as it disseminated foreign assistance. Even before September 11, the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 established a U.S. ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.^[2]

Like President George W. Bush before him, President Obama recognizes the important role of religion in combating social ills, inspiring human excellence, and promoting constructive social and political behavior. Building upon President Bush's own faith-based initiative (and office) to unleash "armies of compassion" that combat social ills in ways government programs could not, President Obama established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. How it will extend, expand, and re-direct the relationship between religious groups and the U.S. government is yet to be seen, but early signs point to further internationalization of the efforts and a different funding relationship to faith-based domestic groups. Specifically, the president has asked for recommendations on how to promote interfaith dialogue that would enhance the capacity of states and communities to address poverty, underdevelopment, delivery of healthcare, and other social arenas where religion and religious groups have demonstrated their effectiveness.^[3]

Historians may judge President Obama's speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, a turning point in U.S. foreign policy toward Islam. In any case, he spoke honestly and directly about mistakes and legitimate grievances on all sides, underscored the importance of religious freedom, and invited and challenged Muslims to join America in pursuing justice, peace, and development. At the very least, the speech contributed to laying a foundation for a fresh and bracingly bold approach to religions in their roles as nongovernmental transnational actors of increasing influence.

Dismantling Conventional Wisdom

The long overdue attention to religion by policy analysts and public officials is to be commended and encouraged. Attention, of course, is not enough; the new openness to engaging religions and religious communities must be marked by a quantum leap in understanding. The place to begin is by debunking lingering stereotypes about religion held by casual observers and non-specialists. That is the relatively easy part. More pressing and difficult is the need to dismantle the conventional wisdom about religion held by even its expert observers but now rapidly becoming outdated by the current wave of globalization, which is transforming the face and expressions of religion and religions, virtually all of which are now transnational in nature.

1. Believers tend to be undereducated, superstitious, and naïve or illiterate about

modern science. The Marxist claim that “religion is the opium of the masses”—quelling social unrest with a promise of heaven for those who postpone their quest for justice—never was a reliable guide to religious behavior; today it is empirically groundless. Indeed, religious groups are becoming ever more involved in politics: religious leaders play a vital role in building peace and resolving conflicts; some religious organizations provide valuable social services; and some politicians use religion to help chart the destiny of their nations, for better or worse.

And while religious observance is growing fastest in the non-western world, interestingly “it is exactly the sort of upwardly mobile, educated middle classes that Marx and Weber presumed would shed such superstitions who are driving the explosion of faith.” In India, Turkey, Israel, and even China, “modernization has helped to create the up-and-coming bourgeoisie that [secular leaders] prayed for; but these people are the most fervent supporters of the religious parties.”^[4]

2. Religion is the source of most of the world’s deadliest violence. This stereotype holds that people inspired by faith are driven by “sacred rage” to demonize and annihilate their enemies. Fighting a cosmic war in God’s name, the holy warriors are not merely entrenched; they are irrational and inhumane. In the face of this ubiquitous threat, only the legitimate violence of the liberal secular state can preserve order and secure the common good.

In an important new book, William Cavanaugh offers a counter-narrative to this conventional “myth of religious violence.” The myth, he claims, authorizes a sort of secular amnesia, enabling us to overlook the egregious and unjust acts of violence and war committed almost routinely by the modern nation-state. The state may be “liberal” (i.e., killing in the name of freedom and democracy) or “illiberal” (killing in the service of sheer power), but the magnitude and scope of its violence dwarfs religious terror—and is the source of much religious revolutionary violence. Focusing the spotlight on religiously inspired atrocities nonetheless provided a rationale for the state’s colonial expansion and claim to a monopoly over internal violence.

Religion as it was framed by European Enlightenment thinkers in the early modern period, for example, accompanied and supported the rise of the liberal state as a way of totalizing authority over public as well as private lives. Cavanaugh claims that secular rulers (and their

historians) have created a willful misreading of the empirical record of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wars in Europe. Rather than bloody struggles over the competing doctrines of Catholics and Protestants that necessitated the rise of the modern state, the so-called wars of religion were caused in large part by the armed resistance of Catholics and Protestants (sometimes acting in alliance) to the territorial and absolutist political ambitions of religious as well as secular princes, kings, and other “state-building elites.” The modern state-building process, in short, divinized the secular ruler. “In the process the state did not rein in and tame religion but became itself sacralized,” Cavanaugh writes. “The transfer of power from the church to the state was accompanied by a migration of the holy from church to state.”

One can see similar shenanigans at work in the way today’s global conflicts are framed. The framing of Islam, not merely Islamic radicalism, as “essentially” a violence-prone religion is a case in point. Overlooked are the empirical realities standing behind so-called “Muslim rage.” Thanks to the media and political discourse, we know a great deal in America, for example, about the intolerance and fundamentalism of Ayatollah Khomeini, but not much about the overthrow of democratically elected Iranian leader Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 and the CIA support for the repressive policies of the Shahs of Iran—which provided the relevant political context for the Shi‘ite-led revolution of 1979.

3. Religion polarizes people, oppresses women, impedes economic development and deepens conflict. While there is more than a little truth to this characterization, it is hardly the whole story. Even a casual familiarity with history demonstrates that religion is also one of the world’s great agents of healing, health care, education, and reconciliation. Its prophetic character has been a powerful ally in modern campaigns for civil and other human rights. “Devotion to the absolute” can, it is lamentably true, motivate mistaken men to kill their brothers in what they believe is an act of piety. But it is also the devotion that inspires men and women to pursue justice, forgive their enemies, seek reconciliation, and refuse to pledge ultimate allegiance to any state or secular regime.

The Globalization of Religion

The world’s religions are now transnational and global in nature. The dynamism of international travel and migration, and the widespread access to modes of personal

communication across vast distances has led to close interaction and intermingling between peoples who once were separated definitively by time and space, knowledge and culture. Not least, it is hard to find a religiously-inspired movement or institution that remains entirely local in character. Most religious organizations are now linked electronically and personally to affiliates in other regions, or to networks that span borders and continents. Even community-based service groups tend to have partners or headquarters far removed from the point of physical contact with their clients.

Globalism thus fosters an unprecedented plurality of forms and expressions of religious behavior and belonging. It does so by unlocking the possibilities for adaptation and evolution that were always theoretically available to the devout as a result of the natural, historically-derived internal pluralism of the religious community. In other words, the variety of interpretations of sacred texts and traditions, the disparate historical practices, the multiple locations of authority—all of these implicit features of every religious tradition—have now been put on display and made accessible for millions of people around the world. The religious genie of creativity is out of the bottle, and there is little that traditional authorities can do about it.

The global consciousness now possessed by local and regional religious actors and the movements they lead or join, extends and intensifies both the constructive and destructive tendencies of religion noted above. Significantly, several of the world's long-running conflicts—between Israelis and Arabs in the Middle East, between Iran, Iraq and other Persian Gulf states, among different communal groups in India, and among competing ethnic groups in West Africa—have recently taken on a harder religious edge. For almost a quarter of a century, to take one example, the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas has depended for financing on sympathetic organizations and networks in North America as well as South Asia and Africa.

At the other end of the spectrum, faith-based NGOs and faith-inspired movements for social justice have joined, and sometimes led campaigns for debt reduction, intercultural dialogue, environmental stewardship, and arms reduction. For example, recent decades have witnessed the genuine internationalization of Roman Catholicism as a global humanitarian presence. In the 1990s Catholic NGOs expanded their missions to incorporate peacebuilding, development, and human rights advocacy to complement longstanding

charitable, relief, and refugee work. New religious movements that mobilize millions of young people in dozens of nations for charitable causes have gained recognition by the Vatican. The groups are more loosely configured than traditional religious communities, and their members are almost all lay men and women.^[5]

Among other observers of the effects of religious globalization, John Atherton has argued that the new coalitions of faith-based networks and movements are making a significant contribution to the evolution of free market capitalism. While Atherton generally endorses a market economy as the least harmful way of operating increasingly complex modern economies, he joins other cultural critics in lamenting capitalism's tendency to erode the social bases of trust, mutual obligation, norms and networks that are the basis for its successful operation. In this regard he echoes recent literature by social psychologists who argue that human happiness and fulfillment is born not of material prosperity alone, or from gratifying consumer desires, but rather from active participation in the formation of constructive social relationships of mutual service. In the language of Catholic social teaching, this finding would be rendered as follows: Humans are not isolated, autonomous individuals, as utilitarianism might suggest, but natural members of society, born into and constantly nurtured by the community. Concern for and pursuit of the common good is therefore found among the highest and most fulfilling aspirations of every person.

From this perspective, faith communities are the single largest repository of social capital. Religion is an indispensable source of moral intuition, ritual enactment of the underlying values of the community, and practices promoting happiness such as worship, meditation, character formation and the experience of the transcendent.^[6]

While globalized religious movements for progressive social change clearly have, and will continue to have, direct implications for politics and public policy, they aim higher and deeper by striving to transform culture. Behind his critiques of capitalism and communism alike stood Pope John Paul II's conviction that culture, not politics or economics, is the primary source of social progress toward the realization of innate human freedom and dignity. It was this conviction, demonstrated on the world stage in the collapse of Poland's Communist government and eventually the Soviet Union itself, that both reflected and inspired Catholicism's turn to civil society—labor unions, the media, political parties, schools, and other voluntary associations—as the sector where the Catholic Church would focus its efforts to influence world events. Similarly, the most influential Muslim, Hindu,

and Jewish movements today are arguably those dedicated to education, moral formation, media, and culture.

Conclusion

This new context for religiosity will have far-ranging impact in matters ranging from youth culture to the construction of “ethnic” identity to social values informing decisions about military policy, urban planning, and genetic engineering. Policymakers slow to comprehend the implications of these global cultural and religious trends will miss not only the big picture, but also the telling details that inform sound decision making. Incumbent upon them—and upon all educators and peacebuilders as well—is an obligation to become literate in religion, to develop a vocabulary and sensibility that will inform successful decision-making in our decidedly post-secular age.

1. 1. See “Mixed Blessings: U.S. Government Engagement with Religion in Conflict-Prone Settings,” report by Liora Danan (Washington DC: CSIS) August 2007; “Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations With the Muslim World.” Report of the Leadership Group on U.S.-Muslim Engagement, Washington DC: February 2009, <http://www.usmuslimengagement.org/>; and “Progress and Promise: Engaging Religion in Global Affairs,” from the The Chicago Council on Global Affairs’ Independent Task Force on Religion and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy (forthcoming, February 2010),
2. 2. Religious freedom is rooted in Article 18 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights but had previously been neglected in U.S. foreign policy. IRFA recognizes it in U.S. law as a core value critical to healthy democratic societies.
3. 3. President Obama laid out four priorities for the Office. The first three were domestic in orientation. The fourth, however, was new. The Office was to focus “beyond American shores, work with the National Security Council [and] foster interfaith dialogue with leaders and scholars around the world.”
4. 4. John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 18.
5. 5. Chief among these new lay movements are Focolare, Communion and Liberation,

and Sant'Egidio. Most prominent in the category of Catholic NGOs is Caritas Internationalis, the Catholic umbrella organization that includes Catholic Relief Services based in the United States and active in more than eighty countries. In the 1990s, CI and CRS developed a “social justice lens” and a “peacebuilding and reconciliation” lens by which to evaluate relief and development work around the world.

6. 6. John Atherton, *Transfiguring Capitalism: An Enquiry into Religion and Global Change* (London: SCM Press, 2008).