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Women's human rights: [www.whrnet.org](http://www.whrnet.org)

# Religion and International Relations

John Anderson

The demise of religion, or religion's relegation to the private sphere, has been a recurring theme for over two centuries. However, recent decades have witnessed a global resurgence of politicized religion, with religious motivation being claimed by various actors who seek to change societies, to bring down authoritarian regimes, to promote bo conflict and reconciliation. Religious motivation has also played a strong role in modern global terrorism. This chapter will examine this phenomenon through an examination of the relationship between religion and international politics. The first section will explore and explain the alleged absence of religion from the study of international politics. Second, the development of a global resurgence of politicized religion will be analysed. Finally, several case studies will be used to demonstrate how religion has entered the international political arena.

## INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND THE ABSENCE OF RELIGION

Despite the apparent resurgence of political religion since the 1970s, scholars of international relations only recently took the phenomenon seriously, often preferring to argue that religion was merely a façade behind which could be found more traditional considerations of power and interest. The reasons for such thinking can be outlined as follows.

↳ most courses / scholars

↳ religion / in international relations

↳ faith - hard / to explain

thinkers such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud proffered the idea that religious belief would decline as society became more modern. Secularization theory, however, suggests that the social and political significance of religion would decline as the world became more secular, leading to a process of social fragmentation and differentiation wherein the state would assume responsibility for many of the welfare services hitherto supplied by the churches. Secularization theory was also a response to scientific rationality and the growth of rationality, though this does not necessarily suggest that science and religion are incompatible. The roots of secularization theory can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century when Reformers undermined the notion of a single truth by emphasizing the right of all believers to interpret scripture for themselves. In doing so, the Reformers undermined the efforts of states to promote a single religious vision, the long-term consequence of which is still felt in the exclusion of much of religion from the public sphere and the legal exclusion of religion from public life in states such as France and the USA.

### Implications

The absence of religion from politics can also be traced back to the Westphalian assumptions that inform much of the study of international relations. The Peace of Westphalia (1648) brought to an end the religious conflicts of the Thirty Years War and consequently based much of its principles on the further privatization of religion as an exclusion of religion from the public sphere. The treaties of Westphalia undermined the ruler of each state to control religion within his own borders without interference or hindrance from other states, a series of principles that angered the Catholic Church and Pope Innocent X who denounced the treaty as 'damnable, obsolete, inane and devoid of meaning for all time'. Whilst the treaties established the role of states and the essentially secular principles that have come to be associated with political realism - sovereignty and non-intervention - they also established the principle that religion was best kept out of international politics. Underlying this principle was the assumption that if allowed into the public sphere, religion always led to division, intolerance, chaos and destruction.

### Additional perspectives

In addition to the theoretical perspectives such as realism, liberalism and Marxism failed to consider religion as an important or significant factor in international relations. Early realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr may be rooted in an Augustinian view of human nature as fundamentally flawed and prone to evil, but additional realism focuses on states, power and interests, and consequently marginalizes the importance of ideas, values, culture and religion. In a world of powerful state actors who remained little room for non-state religious actors, though Machiavelli pointed in the sixteenth century that religion could be a useful tool for legitimating or justifying political action. Interestingly, Marxist approaches to international relations tend to share the view that religion is secondary to other factors such as economic forces

actors but failed to recognize religion as a significant factor in international relations.

For all of these reasons - and inevitably the descriptions given here represent a considerable simplification of much more complex arguments - the discipline of international relations has been rather slow to respond to the re-appearance of politicized religion.

## THE GLOBAL RESURGENCE OF POLITICAL RELIGION

By the 1980s secularization theory was under serious challenge from a global resurgence of religion. Nietzsche's proclamation that God is Dead came under increasing scrutiny as people in many parts of the world re-embraced religion and reinvigorated religious ideals. However, many scholars suggested that such events were less a religious revival - after all, most of the peoples concerned had always been religious - but a depri-  
vatisation of religion with religious actors returning to the public sphere. In other words this was a resurgence of politicized religion, and one that was affecting many parts of the world, such as the Iranian Revolution of 1978-9 where the Western regime of the Shah was overthrown by a religious coalition led by Ayatollah Khomeini, or in the 1978 election of an activist Pope, John Paul II, who used his frequent travels to promote his faith-based ideas about human rights. More recently there has emerged the American Christian Right, a group of conservative Protestant organizations seeking to bring American public life into conformity with their understanding of Christian teaching. There has also been a gradual replacement of national-ism by Islam as the key mobilizing ideology in the struggles of the people of the Middle East and wider Muslim world, and religion has played a role in motivating terrorist activity, as was evident in the Islamist terrorism of 9/11. Additionally, there has been the use of religion by nationalist politicians in India, Yugoslavia and elsewhere who want to mobilize their people in pursuit of specific goals and as a means of identifying the enemy. The significance of religious organizations in political action and debate is also increasing (as in the contributions made by the Roman Catholic Church and other churches to undermining authoritarian regimes and promoting human rights observance) and the role of religious actors in promoting reconciliation in times of conflict (as in South Africa).

Despite the better efforts of religious organizations, media focus typically distorts religious political activity as extremist or fundamentalist. Indeed, much of the modern religious political agenda stems from a conservative perspective and promotes religious observance and traditional values, but this should not be confused with the promulgation of political violence or extremism. In the case of religiously inspired political violence, religious scriptures are often used selectively and the groups often utilize very modern communications and weaponry.

South America

## RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE

alternative to the failure of post-colonial, nationalist regimes to deliver either prosperity or justice  
reaction to the social and psychological dislocation of modernization  
moral response to the brutality of authoritarianism and its undermining of man dignity  
an effort to revive traditional values in a globalized world  
consequence of modern communication allowing greater interfaith exchange

## ENGAGEMENT WITH POLITICS

section will consider case studies of religious engagement with international politics on issues relating to revolution, nationalism, political change, conflict and terrorism. The case study selections do not represent a comprehensive study of the topic, but provide a cross-selection of topical issues that provide a basis for assessing the roles played by religion in international politics.

### on and the Islamic revival

st views of religious engagement with politics are often coloured by extremists such as 9/11, and likewise, the roots of Islamic radicalism are often traced to the Iranian Revolution of 1979. However, political Islam's intellectual roots go back much earlier in the twentieth century when thinkers such as Hassan al-Banna (1949) in Egypt and Maulana Abdul A'la Maududi (1903-1979) in Pakistan sought to explore the political implications of Islam. Typically described as fundamentalists, al-Banna and A'la Maududi argued that a truly just society should be based on religious values and laws, but such movements made relatively little impact on society as a result of authoritarian suppression of religious activism. However, the Iranian Revolution of 1979 provided the opportunity for the spread of political Islam, an idea that inspired further Muslim movements to challenge both domestic authoritarianism and foreign domination.

In the 1970s saw the Shah of Iran, Muhammed Reza Pahlavi (1919-1980) embark on a modernization programme based on the country's extensive oil revenues. However, in addition to bringing wealth to Iran, the Shah's modernization programme also led to extensive disruption that resulted in a potent alliance between the urban poor, the merchant class whose influence had been undermined, and sections of the clergy who rejected many of the innovations (such as secular education programmes and the closing up of large estates upon which religious institutions depended). Following a period of repression, the Shah's army proved increasingly unwilling to suppress the protest movement and in January 1979 the Shah fled the country leaving a vacuum in government dominated by the Ayatollah Khomeini. Two months later a

subsequent months a new constitution was drafted that gave extensive power to the clergy; simultaneously, all those not loyal to Khomeini were gradually removed from office in a context of extreme brutality against opponents.

## BOX 15.2 AYATOLLAH RUHOLLAH MUSAVI KHOMEINI (1902-1989)

- Until the 1960s, Khomeini was a cleric devoted to study and writing
- In 1961 Khomeini emerged as leader of the clerical opposition to the Shah's Westernizing reforms
- Khomeini was exiled to Iraq after participating in a rebellion that was brutally put down by the army
- In Iraq, Khomeini continued to develop his ideas about Islamic governance
- In 1978 Khomeini was expelled from Iraq and travelled to France where he maintained growing support
- In February 1979 Khomeini returned to Iran where he controlled a successful Islamic-led revolution

Khomeini came to power advocating the need for substantial clerical oversight concerning public life, and in the years prior to his death argued that the supreme spiritual guide (himself and his successors) could contradict Islamic precepts in the interests of the state. Following Khomeini's death in 1989 the total dominance of the clerics was reduced and there emerged a degree of pluralism within the political system, albeit within certain religious inspired constraints. In terms of a religious/political context, the Iranian revolution is important for two reasons. First, it created considerable international insecurity as traditional Muslim regimes feared contagion and powerful states such as the USA opposed the spread of Islamic revolution by supporting radical movements in Lebanon, Palestine and elsewhere. Second, it provided both Sunni and Shi'ite Muslim activists with the belief that political Islam could triumph over domestic tyrants or international oppressors.

Prior to the Iranian Revolution broader developments in the Islamic world had begun to presage change and rethinking. Contributing factors, such as Israel's defeat of the Arab armies in the 1967, the failure of Arab nationalism to deliver either prosperity or justice, the oil boom which strengthened Muslim self-confidence, and the Iranian Revolution itself all led to a rediscovery of Islam as a source of identity and political mobilization. Throughout the Middle East and in the wider Muslim world there occurred a revitalization of religious practice and an organizational revolution as wide varieties of groups sought to provide welfare and social services, as well as promote political change. The goals and methods of such organizational groups often differed - ranging from social support, propaganda and electoral campaigning to political violence and terrorism - but all proclaimed the need to create a society based upon the principles of Islam. Whether Islam has a single political message was less clear and often these groups differed violently about what an Islamic society would look like - the Taliban's Afghan

the answer to the problems facing their societies.

## Nationalism in India and Yugoslavia

The populist view of the relationship between religion and national identity often assumes that conflict is the inevitable result. Historically, there occurred a natural and obvious relationship between religion and national identity – each usually contributing towards and informing the other. Ancient Israel provides an example of such an explicit link between a single group of people and a single religion. More recently such a relationship occurs by the role of clergymen in creating national languages and of churches in providing national myths of victory and defeat. In contexts where there are no immediate distinctions between peoples, religious difference can serve as a means of identifying the community and establishing alternative groups based on religious difference. Such distinctions, in turn, can lead to conflict and violence when religious and/or secular leaders use the rhetoric of sacred causes or holy wars. However, the ease with which religious difference can be manipulated by political entrepreneurs means that it is often difficult to disentangle religious motivations from more politically motivated considerations relating to power or interests.

Developing a Hindu fundamentalist movement is problematic given the absence of a more scripture or distinctive religio-legal tradition within the Hindu faith. Consequently, Hindu activists in India (where 80 per cent of the population are Hindu) have developed a variant in the shape of religious nationalism based on the notion of *Hindutva* or Hinduness. Based on the rejection of Islamic and Christian influences, *Hindutva* can be traced to the post-Second World War creation of India as a secular and religiously neutral state. The notion of *Hindutva* became an established political reality with the 1980s creation of the Indian People's Party (BJP) and their consequent parliamentary representation and participation in coalition governments throughout the 1990s. The BJP has sought to reduce what it sees as privileges granted to minority communities, to approve so-called cow-protection laws, and to promote Indian nuclear development as a counter to the perceived Muslim threats coming from Pakistan. Most controversially, the BJP presided over the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992 following a centuries-old religious dispute between Muslim and Hindu communities concerning the site of the Mosque's construction in the early 1900s. During the 1980s, the Hindu nationalist movement organized a campaign in which communities throughout the country consecrated bricks to be used for construction of an alternative Hindu temple and in 1992 Hindu demonstrators broke into the compound and tore the mosque down (despite a Supreme Court injunction to the contrary). During the 1990s the BJP committed itself to building a grand Hindu temple on the site. Though the role of religion can be disputed in the creation of Hindu nationalism, there is little doubt that the rise of Hindu nationalism has contributed significantly to the inter-communal tensions that have beset India since independence.

In Yugoslavia the role of religion as an ethnic identifier contributed to ethnic cleansing and mass murder on a scale not seen in Europe since 1945. Previously held together by President Josip Broz Tito's commitment to a common Yugoslav nationality, the

the primary cause of violence, but became a tool used by politicians to sharpen the conflict following the dislocations of the communist collapse: Serbian spokesmen revived memories of Catholic treachery and past Muslim occupations, and Catholics and Muslims often reciprocated in kind. The Serbian religious press in particular played a role in demonizing opposing nationalities. During the war that followed religious sites were often targeted for destruction. Although not a religious war in that the objectives had more to do with power, territorial gain and interest, the language of difference was often infused with a religious rhetoric that sometimes contributed to brutal atrocities by all sides in the conflict.

## Religion and democratization in Latin America and Eastern Europe

The first two case studies have focused on contexts where the religious contribution to politics has often involved conflict or violence, but of equal (though less newsworthy) importance are the roles played by religious organizations and ideas in achieving peaceful political transformations and conflict resolution, or the so-called third wave of democratization. Since the mid-1970s a series of countries in Southern Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe have overthrown authoritarian regimes and adopted more democratic forms of governance. In many such circumstances the Christian churches, and in particular the Roman Catholic Church, have made a significant contribution to political change. Though the Protestant tradition had contributed to, or at least accepted, the development of democratic politics, the Roman Catholic Church had vigorously opposed notions of popular sovereignty and human rights through much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Catholic hierarchies in Latin America, Southern Europe and elsewhere had tended to support authoritarian political regimes – sometimes this was because they shared a vision of a good society as hierarchical, disciplined and ordered, but it was also often the result of shared interests as many of these regimes privileged the church by providing financial support or allowing them to control the education system. However, the experience of communism and fascism, and the horrors of the Second World War encouraged the church to rethink certain political issues under the assurances from leading American churchmen that democratic governance could benefit Catholics in many countries. Consequently, at the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) the Catholic Church adopted a series of ecclesiastical reforms that gave the Catholic Church's qualified approval to democracy, human rights and freedom of conscience. In turn, this led to a growth of Catholic activism in criticizing human rights abuses and speaking up for the victims of repression, promoting and defending civil society organizations and offering support services as mediators or negotiators in the process of political change.

In part, the critique of authoritarian regimes focused on (social injustices) which bishops and priests speaking out against economic policies that deprived the poor land or income, and against landlords whose abuses were supported by the forces of the state. The most radical form of this critique was to be found in *liberation theology* which combined traditional Christian concerns for social justice with Marxist analysis of economic exploitation and, sometimes, a willingness to countenance violence as a legitimate response to the violence of the oppressors. More common, however, was

