

Globalization and Post-Secularism

Religions and a Universal Common Identity

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The most celebrated “return” of religion on the international scene has been considered by analysts, scholars, and diplomats mainly as a confirmation on a wider scale of the hypothesis of a “post-secular” era. What is missing, however, is a reflection on the present-day functioning of religions in connection with the systemic analysis of international relations in a phase of global transformation. If world religions are to be taken seriously in the field of international relations, this would require an approach to their role in the international system as a structural element rather than a mere cultural phenomenon with only a derivative or secondary influence on world order. In particular, it will be useful to make a clear conceptual distinction between the two diverging paradigms of “globalization” and “universalism,” as embodied in an explicit or implicit way in many world religions today; and to

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investigate if and how religions could contribute to the formation of a global collective identity, both symbolic and pluralistic.

Religions and International Relations

The most celebrated “return” of religions on the international scene has been considered by analysts, scholars, and diplomats as a confirmation on a wider scale of the hypothesis that we have entered a “post-secular” era.¹ This phenomenon would, therefore, not be confined to internal political systems. It should also not be read as a completely unexpected and surprising implication of the old theory of domestic analogy, that would be vindicated in cultural rather than in political terms. The controversial perspective of the domestic analogy is not the correct way to conceptualize the “contamination” of the international political sphere with religious and even theological categories. In the words of Julia Kristeva, while today humankind is capable of destroying the earth in the name of beliefs, religions, or ideologies, at the same time, the “constituent religiosity” of the human being is being recognized.²

In their analysis of the role of religions on the international scene, experts have chosen, on the one side, to focus on the impact of new religious radicalisms on the relations among “civilizations.” On the other side, they have devoted their attention to the possible role that motivations based on religious beliefs can play in the process of conflict prevention and resolution. There is, however, a different reading of the new religious phenomena based on the

1. Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2005).

2. Julia Kristeva, “Intervention at the Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World,” Assisi, October 27, 2011.

complex interplay of national, international, and trans-national effects of religious identities. What is needed, in my opinion, is a reflection on the function of religions in connection with the systemic analysis of international relations in a phase of global transformation. If world religions are to be taken seriously in the field of international relations (IR), such a reflection must approach their role in the international system as a structural element (without any pretention of exclusivity or “centrality”), rather than a mere cultural phenomenon with only a derivative or secondary influence on world order.

One way of contributing to clarity in this regard is to try to be more accurate in the various characterizations of the connection between religions and world politics. It is this particular relation—between religions and *world politics*—that, in my opinion, best describes the new role of religious factors in the international arena. I will make the case for the role of religions in the international realm that goes beyond pure Westphalian and state-centered categories, but at the same time avoids characterizing religions as mere “global faith-based NGOs.” Religions have a say in world politics, but they cannot be portrayed reductively as lobbies or constituencies. They operate in a *public sphere* that does not overlap completely with the international *political sphere*. Another important marker that I propose to adopt is the alternative between an approach to religion as a general “category of the spirit” and concrete religions as a vast phenomenology of human religious needs. It is the plural form “religions” that is relevant for world politics.

This being the case, within this larger scheme we should then distinguish at least the following dimensions:

- Religions and *interstate relations*

- Religions and *internationalism*
- Religions and *trans-nationalism*
- Religions and *globalism*

I will refer to these dimensions through my own interpretation of their defining characteristics. Interstate relations focus on *foreign policy*; internationalism focuses on legitimacy of international bodies and *international democracy*; trans-nationalism focuses on *collective identity*; and, finally, globalism focuses on the agenda of *world politics*.

Religions and Interstate Relations

Religion from the interstate point of view is *religion inside a box*. It is a way of combining religion and nationalism that is a matter of governments rather than peoples. It can take very different forms with very different outcomes. Two heterogeneous cases are, for instance, the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Russian Orthodox Church after the fall of the Berlin Wall (and to a certain extent even before). Political Islamism often takes the form of a national political factor. Strictly speaking, the phenomenon of a growing relevance of political Islamism should be dealt with more as a matter of comparative politics than a specific subject of international analysis. If we adopt this perspective of the level of analysis, religion and interstate relations is a subject that Kenneth Waltz will perhaps include in the “second image” in the study of IR, that is, in the motivations of state behavior in the international arena. As such, religions could be considered relevant as fundamental drivers of foreign policy rather than genuine international politics. I maintain that only *internationalism*, *trans-nationalism*, and *globalism* are the relevant dimensions for an IR theory that would study,

at the appropriate level of analysis, the role and the place of religions in world politics.

Religions and International Democracy

As far as internationalism is concerned, what is interesting is the relation between religions and the concept (and practice) of *international democracy*. There are many ways to conceptualize in political terms the relatively new notion of “international democracy.” The one to which I will refer here has to do with procedures and decision-making mechanisms of the “international community,” understood as a web of international organizations both of an intergovernmental nature and a supranational character. In this version, international democracy refers to the principle of inclusion and to fair and politically justified rights and “votes” of governments in international bodies.

There is another conceptualization of international democracy that is less state-centered and more focused on participation of individuals and groups in the decision-making process of international organizations, as well as on their ability to influence political choices and agendas at the international level. This second version could be better defined as *global or trans-national democracy*. The debate on the obsolescence of the features of the “Westphalian state” and on the creation of political conditions for cosmopolitan citizenship (a contemporary, partial version of the Kantian project for “perpetual peace”) is very relevant but it would take me off topic. To be brief, I fully share the analysis of David Held and Anthony McGrew when they affirm that:

the contemporary world order is best understood as a highly complex, interconnected and contested order in which the

interstate system is increasingly embedded within an evolving system of multilayered regional and global governance. There are multiple, overlapping political processes at work at the present historical conjuncture.³

This perspective is even more complex when compared to the global democracy model, and has been defined by Held and McGrew as the domain of a “cosmopolitan social democracy” nurtured by some of the most important values of social democracy—such as the rule of law, political equality, democratic politics, social justice, social solidarity, and economic effectiveness. From this cosmopolitan social democracy approach, those principles should be applied to the new “global constellation” of economics and politics.⁴

In dealing with the notion of international democracy, I am basically concerned with some fundamental, or “primordial,” aspects of the international system, particularly the debate on the legitimacy of the international order. Legitimacy is the result of many elements, including the composition of the political bodies considered, their deliberative patterns, and, last but not least, the very outcome of the decision-making process. In several discussions regarding the legitimacy of new bodies of the global governance, like the G20, what seems to create consensus is the obvious statement that those international fora, in order to be legitimate, must first and foremost demonstrate their usefulness. That is, they must be perceived not as perfectly representative, but as reasonably functional and effective. Other elements of legitimacy are considered complementary and optional.

3. David Held and Anthony McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization: Beyond the Great Divide* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 130.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

However, legitimacy is more than a satisfactory outcome. As Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler point out, “there is very little in the international relations literature that directly addresses the role of religious legitimacy in international relations.”⁵ Religious legitimacy in international relations should be understood in a radically different way vis-à-vis the tradition of the metaphysical foundation and justification of power in the internal order. The notion of religious legitimacy in the international system is unrelated to theoretical reflection on the source and the nature of power. According to Fox and Sandler:

There are three reasons to believe that religious legitimacy should be influential in international relations. First, normative factors are having an increasing influence on international relations. Second, the growing literature on instrumentalism demonstrates that other cultural factors such as nationalism and ethnicity have provided legitimacy for political activities. Third, identity is clearly an influence on international politics and religion is an influence on identity.⁶

I consider as relevant two of the three factors of religious legitimacy listed by Fox and Sandler: the normative functions of religions regarding global governance and their potentialities in forging or strengthening collective identities.

Other interesting suggestions regarding legitimacy in the international system come from the approach known as the “inter-cultural construction of global democracy,” which is based on the assumption that the prevailing frameworks of global governance

5. Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing Religions into International Relations* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004), p. 36.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

lack democratic legitimacy on the grounds of Western cultural domination. The conceptualization of global democracy should come as a result of an interregional, intercultural, interdisciplinary, ideologically pluralistic, and action-oriented epistemological dialogue. The primary aim of this approach is “to counter the ideational inequalities that arise when certain ways of knowing the world are arbitrarily subordinated and sometimes also forcibly repressed and to explore how cultural unilateralism in global governance can be replaced with a ‘positive inter-culturality.’”⁷

When it comes to the structures of global governance, one important debate also addresses the level of inclusion of the different formats. Among the many aspects of the inclusiveness, religious diversity should be taken into account as a way of strengthening the legitimacy of these informal bodies. For instance, in the G8, there is no country with a Muslim majority; also, there is no doubt that the presence in the G20 of countries like Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey constitutes an important element in the creation of a more balanced representation of one of the world’s most widespread religions. This conclusion should not sound surprising. In the UN system, the geographical representation in the main bodies is considered one way to ensure a pluralistic structure of that universal organization. In the EU a fierce battle is raging around the predominant languages in the operations of the EU institutions. These are fundamental criteria in assessing the degree of cultural pluralism and diversity of international organizations in order to strengthen their legitimacy. Why exclude religion from this puzzle?

7. J. A. Scholte, “What is Globalization? The Definitional Issue—Again,” Center for the Study of Globalization and Regionalization Working Paper No. 109/2002, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom.

Unfortunately for the supporters of selected formats, the need for more inclusion can also work against the legitimacy of informal international bodies. As an example of such a problematic outcome, I would recall the position on the formats of global governance taken by the 2010 Religious Leaders' Summit. There, the participants criticized the composition of such bodies by pointing out how "power and economic dominance are the basis for inclusion in a G8 and G20 global leaders' summit," and denouncing, although in a footnote of their document, the fact that "not represented in these summits are 172 members of the United Nations where proposals to address structural causes of poverty and ecological devastation are currently under discussion."⁸

Religions and Trans-Nationalism

It has become commonplace to consider globalization as the antithesis of universalism (as it happens in the "Samuel Huntington vs. Francis Fukuyama" discourse), but the interplay between the two categories is more complex and nuanced than a mere opposition. This is particularly true when we try to understand how religions adapt to, or, on the contrary, resist globalizing forces. In a recent work, Olivier Roy writes that the major religious movements of our times are in a process of "deculturation."⁹ Religions, according to Roy, are *reformatting* themselves as global faiths rather than expressions of a national culture since "today's religious revival is first and foremost marked by the uncoupling of culture

8. World Religious Leaders' Summit, 2010, "A Time for Inspired Leadership and Action," <http://www.faithchallengeg8.com/pdfs/2010%20Interfaith%20Statement%20-%20English.pdf>.

9. Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

and religion, whatever the religion may be."¹⁰ In this interpretation, religions are no longer confused with other elements deemed constitutive of cultural identity; on the contrary, they represent a way to "escape" from a "framed" cultural environment and so to avoid falling into the "identity trap." This is an accurate description of the "liquid" version of globalization. In Roy's vision, it means "uprooting from given societies in an attempt to develop systems of thought that are no longer linked to a given culture, systems of thought or practices, behavior, taste, and modes of consumption."¹¹ This process raises concerns since "the success of all forms of neo-fundamentalism can be explained by the fact that, paradoxically, it vindicates the loss of cultural identity and allows a 'pure' religion to be conceptualized independently of all its cultural variations and influences."¹²

From his perspective, José Casanova points out in a recent article that religions are affected by the same latent schizophrenia that hits other territorial, political, or symbolic aggregations: the contextual presence in the same narrative of the attachment to the "roots" *and* the ambition of a projection onto the global scene. Particularism, even localism, on the one side, *and* cosmopolitanism and universalism on the other side, not only coexist but very often progress together. "Actually," writes Casanova, "one finds practically everywhere similar tensions between the protectionist impulse to claim religious monopoly over national and civilizational territories, and the ecumenical impulse to present one's own particular religion as

10. Olivier Roy, "Islam in Europe," in Michalski Krzysztof, ed., *Religion in the New Europe*, Conditions of European Solidarity Series, vol. 2 (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006), p. 131.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

the response to the universal needs of global humanity.”¹³ Religions are becoming more and more de-territorialized and de-centered, as is happening with Pentecostalism, which Casanova considers “the first truly global religion” that is the more visible manifestation of an “emerging global denominationalism.”¹⁴

In Casanova’s view, it is high time to admit that there are “multiple modernities,” among which modernity based on Western rationality is only one version and as such does not necessarily represent a universal process of human development. For Casanova, global religions are progressively incorporating features that can be described as forms of the generalization of the Islamic notion of *umma*, as trans-national imagined religious communities that present fundamental challenges both to international relations theories that are still functioning within the premises of a Westphalian international system and to secular cosmopolitan theories of globalization.¹⁵

So, on the one hand, religions rightly underline the need to protect cultural and spiritual identities; on the other hand, initiatives and fora like the Alliance of Civilizations and Religions for Peace help in creating the awareness of a shared identity, a collective identity. The latter can be crucial if we really want to see a concrete implementation of the idea of global common goods, such as the protection of the environment and the availability of food and water for all the inhabitants of the planet. If religions “go global” without strings attached, this phenomenon could also be conceptualized as a way for religions to move beyond the shortcomings and contradictions of globalization, if we understand globalization

according to Fukuyama’s interpretation as a process of worldwide diffusion of one dominant culture. This process would give religions the chance to present themselves in terms of interpretations of the world with the ambition to embody some level of *universalism*, that is, some critical vision of the reality that can be an alternative way of understanding the global era.

The core issue here is *how* religions “de-nationalize” in order to make their inclusive claims flourish. Religious identities are not a danger per se to international relations; on the contrary, religions could reinforce the idea of a global common identity, both symbolic and pluralistic. From the standpoint of international theory, one field of research could be exploring a possible constructive role—if there is any—of those processes leading to the uncoupling between religions and their original backgrounds. In other words, we should consider the possibility that the process of deconstructing the territorial and culture-specific frame of religions might obviously imply the destruction of some identities, but also the assembling of new elements capable of creating more comprehensive and more inclusive structures of meaning.

When Benedict Anderson wrote about “imagined communities,” he made it clear that a nation as a product of cultural imagination should not be confused with the notion of “invention.” Anderson argued that any nationalism is a particular kind of cultural artifact, a cultural product that by the end of the eighteenth century was reproduced in different regional contexts. As Anderson wrote, the creation of these artifacts:

was the spontaneous distillation of a complex “crossing” of discrete historical forces; but that once created, they became “modular,” capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social

13. José Casanova, “Public Religions Revisited,” in Hent de D. Vries, ed., *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 30.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

15. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations.¹⁶

An *imagined* community is not an *imaginary* community. What counts for the “imagination” is the *scale* of the social and political body, which goes well beyond the possibility of a direct experience of the subject. As Anderson put it, “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.”¹⁷ Anderson described the “imagined communities” as being a result of the fragmentation of the medieval universalism and the process of secularization and individualization of an ethnic-cultural-religious complex into the new frame of the nation. What we might be experiencing today is a sort of “reverse process,” in which religions try to rebuild their *universal* claims for peace and unity without necessarily destroying the nations, but by extending the scale of the “imagined community” beyond that of the traditional boundaries of the state.

Another interesting perspective on this whole issue is provided by the constructivist approach to international relations, especially as far as the implications of the notion of “collective identity” are concerned. According to Alexander Wendt, the possibilities for collective action in international relations cannot be explained in full without assuming that interaction at the systemic level changes state identities and interests. For Wendt, “the key structures in the state system are intersubjective, rather than material,” and “state identities and interests are in important part constructed by these social structures, rather than given exogenously to the system by

16. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalisms* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), p. 4.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

human nature or domestic politics.” Wendt claims that these intersubjective systemic structures consist of “the shared understandings, expectations, and social knowledge embedded in international institutions and threat complexes, in terms of which states define (some of) their identities and interests.”¹⁸

What is the role of religions in those processes of identity shaping and reshaping? Is what is true for states also true for transnational and non-state actors? Here we have an entire program of research. It is widely recognized that if one wants to put in place a functioning global governance, a certain degree of “like-mindedness” among the members would be necessary, although it is clear that no real effectiveness is possible if we seek a full “commonality of values.” To use Wendt’s terminology, we may need at least some low-intensity or thin “collective identity” if we really want to put in place a functional and legitimate structure of global governance.

Religions and Globalism

From the point of view of world politics rather than from the perspective of IR as a discipline, religions should be understood mainly as a phenomenology, not an ontology. To borrow the language of one of the most debated issues of the failed European Constitution, if the “roots” of a civilization matter, no less important are the fruits of such a metaphoric “tree.” In the realm of world politics, religions are more important in terms of *doing* rather than in *being*.¹⁹

18. Alexander Wendt, “Collective Identity Formation and the International State,” *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994): 389.

19. M. K. Sheikh, “How Does Religion Matter? Casual Effects of Religion in International Relations,” paper presented for the International Studies Association, New York, February 2009.

In diplomatic circles that are becoming more and more attentive to the subject of religions in world politics, you can often hear the firm statement that “We don’t do religion; we don’t do theology; we do international politics.” This might sound, and perhaps it is, simplistic to a political scientist, who knows how difficult it is to work with independent variables because the result of such an attitude is the aprioristic assumption that religion is something that we find in nature and the only thing we can do with it is to study its effects. However, there must be a middle ground in which one needs to know “few important things”—to follow the famous Waltzean epistemological recommendation—about what a religion *is* in order to better understand the consequences and implications for world politics.

What I propose here is a simple categorization of religious narratives along the conceptual continuum of inclusion/exclusion. How a religion sees the vast and diverse world of peoples and nations in terms of cooperation or competition, connection or confrontation, is relevant for IR theory and practice. Through the prism of inclusion and exclusion it is possible to conceptualize the important function of religions both as “clients” and “vectors” of trans-nationalism.

According to Richard Falk, there is a “uniting feature of religious consciousness, the oneness of human family that can give rise to an ethos of human solidarity, the unity of all creation, and, with it, the sense of both the wholeness of human experience and the dignity of the individual.”²⁰ In many religious traditions we

20. Richard Falk, “A Worldwide Religious Resurgence in an Era of Globalization and Apocalyptic Terrorism,” in Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, eds., *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), p. 196.

can find the same basic idea of “universal community,” or “human family,” whose “working method”—so to speak—should be constituted by the implementation of the Golden Rule on a world scale. This idea has been dismissed for a long time as a commendable ethical aspiration, irrelevant for the international order and un-influential in terms of the adoption of policies that reflect asymmetries of power and interests.

On the contrary, I think that such a universal approach as an alternative to the ideological globalism could give some more concrete and democratic meaning to the vague and somewhat oligarchic idea of *global governance*. For instance, I consider very useful the gathering of representatives of the world’s religions and spiritual traditions on the occasion of major political summits like the G8 and G20. In those cases, religions can influence the agenda of international bodies through supporting or advocating for specific policies on political and moral grounds. That is why the meeting of prominent members of world religions that took place in Assisi in 2011, under the auspices of the Catholic Church, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the previous similar initiative held in Assisi in 1986, was an event of utmost symbolic relevance.

Another promising framework involving religions dealing with global issues in a structured way is Religions for Peace, a large international coalition of representatives from the world’s major religions dedicated to promoting peace. The network’s purpose is to create multi-religious partnerships aimed at “stopping war, ending poverty, and protecting the earth.” This organization has a clear self-consciousness of the potential impact of religious mobilization in helping to solve global issues: “Religious communities,” you can read in its mission statement, “are the largest and best-organized civil institutions in the world, claiming the allegiance

of billions across race, class, and national divides. These communities have particular cultural understandings, infrastructures, and resources to get help where it is needed most.”²¹ Similarly, the World Council of Churches (WCC), which brings together 349 Christian churches, is one of the broadest and most inclusive among the many organized expressions of the modern ecumenical movement. The WCC created a program called *Public Witness: Addressing Power, Affirming Peace* through which it aims at challenging “the economic, social, political and cultural powers” in order to offer “a prophetic witness for justice, peace and security.”

These organizations are just two examples. There are many possibilities for religions to forge pragmatic, pro-active, and creative ways of combining justice, community, and dialogue in international relations. If we deal with the topic of religions and global governance in terms of “policies” of global governance, there are at least two fields that are particularly relevant. First is the relationship between religions and global public goods (namely, environment, health, and stability). Second is the relationship between religions and human security. These are two related aspects of what Falk defines as “humane global governance,” as opposed to the emergence of “inhumane social patterns” at the global level. Falk is persuaded that “religious visions provide a potential political grounding for humane global governance that cannot arise otherwise.”²² Religions based on the paradigm of inclusivity, Falk argues, can play an important role in strengthening “globalization from below” and provide an alternative vision to the Westphalian

21. <http://www.religionisforpeace.org/about/>.

22. Falk, p. 197.

tradition that usually associates solidarity with territorial sovereign states.²³

Religions and Political Transitions in the Mediterranean

To refer to a concrete political context in the Mediterranean, religions can reconceptualize the political narrative of that region, too often trapped between geopolitical and deterministic visions (“Broader Middle East,” “Middle East and North Africa,” “Southern Shore”). Moreover, in the Mediterranean there is a need to “compare notes” and exchange points of views on how to overcome the current crisis of democracy as a political system in which comprehensive visions of the world have been “sterilized” rather than considered components of a positive-sum game. The same goes for formal and informal international institutions, whose legitimacy is sometimes challenged on the ground that they are the offspring of a “Westphalian,” state-centric logic of organization rather than representative of the global civil society.

In the search for new “models,” Turkey is a case in point. For decades, the fulcrum of political debates regarding Turkey was the apparent clash between Islam and democracy. Now that a southeastern European and Islamic version of the Western “Christian Democratic Party” model is in power in that country, that dilemma seems to be outdated, though naturally not everyone shares this view. There are still doubts among European political leaders about the ability of the new “confessional” political class to bring about the reforms needed to qualify for EU membership. Such reservations could be entirely wrong, but the question now is of a

23. Ibid.

different nature. Instead of considering religions as an obstacle to cooperation and understanding, Western countries should first do their homework, moving away from simplistic and reductionist visions of the religious sphere in international relations as the realm of either intolerance or naïveté. A crucial test of such a move will be whether or not we will see a correct and balanced assessment of the new political environment in the Mediterranean, where, especially since the Arab Spring, religions will certainly play a crucial role in the framework of fragile transitions toward democracy.

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