religion and democracy: international, transnational and global issues

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Abstract

Growing attention is given in IR theory and diplomatic circles to the ambivalent role of religion in world politics. However, there is a need for more analytical clarity, identifying at least four different domains: religions and inter-state relations; religions and internationalism; religions and trans-nationalism; and religions and globalism. The most promising approach is the one that concentrates on the transnational projection of religions, connecting it to the way religions address global issues to influence international actors.

Keywords: Religions, Democracy, International Relations, Global Governance.

There was a time when, in International Relations theory, religion was almost irrelevant. Privatized in the internal forum, religion was also supposed to have vanished for good from the international arena. According to the realist approach, only material forces (such as economic development, military strength, geopolitical factors) were thought to have influence on the structure of international relations,.

That time is over. Today, we can talk of an 'industry' of religion and IR ('International Political Theology'). Post-secularism has made its way into the post-modern world. One might even get the impression of having fallen to the opposite extreme. From the works of Gilles Kepel (1991) and José Casanova (1994), many candles have burned in the theoretical aisles of the huge cathedral of internationalized and even globalised religions. In traditional IR theory, we were haunted by the *ignorance of the Holy*; whereas a recent outlook provided by Olivier Roy (2010) is about *Holy Ignorance*.

Despite the monumental bibliography on the subject, however, there is a good deal of confusion and theoretical uncertainty. One central question is very seldom clarified; is it religion that went international or rather IR that became more sensitive to religion? Now, it is not my intention to initiate a new extra 'meta-debate'.

What I'll try to do is to offer some fragmented and preliminary reflections that can in principle combine the need for more theoretical clarity with some possible policy implications.

One way of contributing to the cause of clarity is by trying to be more accurate about the various characterizations of the connection between religions and world politics. In my opinion, it is this particular relation – between religions and *world politics* – that best describes the new role of religious factors in the international arena. I will make the case that there is a role for religions to play in the international realm that goes beyond pure Westphalian and state-centred categories, without 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* which doesn't overlap completely with the international *political sphere*. Another important marker that I propose 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. Is it the plural form, 'religions', that is relevant for world politics.

Within this larger scheme we can then distinguish at least the following dimensions:

- Religions and inter-state relations;

- Religions and internationalism;

- Religions and trans-nationalism; and

- Religions and globalism.

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

RELIGIONS AND INTER-STATE RELATIONS

Religion from the interstate point of view is *religion inside a box*. It is a way of combining religion and nationalism. It 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 Berlin Wall (and to a certain extent even before). Political Islamism often takes the form of a national political factor. Strictly speaking, the idea 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 the perspective of the level of analysis in IR, religion and interstate relations is a subject that Kenneth Waltz will perhaps include in his 'second image', that is, the motivations of state behaviour in the international arena. As such, religion could be considered relevant as one fundamental driver of foreign policy rather than genuine international politics.

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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 INTERNATIONALISM

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 I will refer to here has to do with procedures and decision-making mechanisms of the 'international community' understood as a web of international organizations both of inter-governmental nature and supra-national 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.

In dealing with that notion of international democracy, I'm basically concerned with some fundamental or 'primordial' aspects of the international system, and 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 the 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.

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' (Fox and Sandler 2004:36). Religious legitimacy in international relations should be understood in a radically different way,

meaning 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 the theoretical reflection on the source and the nature of power. When it comes to the structures of global governance, one important debate refers to 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; and 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, 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 rages around the predominant languages in the operations of EU institutions. These are fundamental criteria to assess the degree of cultural pluralism and diversity of international organizations, in order to strengthen their legitimacy. Why exclude religion from this puzzle?

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 problematic outcome, recall the position on the formats of global governance taken by the 2010 Religious Leaders' Summit, where 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' (WRLS 2010) and denouncing, although in a footnote of the 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' (WRLS 2010).

RELIGIONS AND TRANSNATIONALISM

In a recent work, Olivier Roy (2010) writes that the major religious movements of our times are in a process of 'deculturation'. 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 and religion, whatever the religion may be' (Roy, 2006:131). 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' (Roy, 2006:132).

For Casanova, global religions are progressively incorporating features that can be described as forms of generalization of the Islamic notion of umma: as transnational imagined religious communities that 'present fundamental challenges both to international relations theories which are still functioning within the premises of a Westphalian international system and to secular cosmopolitan theories of globalization' (Casanova, 2012:33).

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 (1991) 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. 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' (Anderson 1991: 6). Anderson described the «imagined communities» as a result of the fragmentation of the medieval universalism, and as 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 the scale of the traditional boundaries of the State.

Another interesting perspective 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 (1994), 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 states 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 human nature or domestic politics' (Wendt 1994:385). 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 you have an entire program of research.

We could add that in the contemporary world, more than the internationalization of traditional state powers, we are witnessing the transformation of the very notion of power in

terms of its dissemination and fragmentation (what Foucault would define as the 'microphysics of power'), its nature ('soft power', 'smart power'), and its agents (non-state actors, transnational organizations).

RELIGIONS AND GLOBALISM

From the point of view of world politics, rather than from the perspective of IR as a discipline, religions are understood mainly as a phenomenology, not an ontology.

To borrow the language of one of the most debated issue 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* (Sheikh, 2009).

In the diplomatic circles which 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'. Now this might sound – and perhaps it is – simplistic to a political scientist, who knows how difficult is to work with independent variables. After all, 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 you need to know *a 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

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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 transnationalism.

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' (Falk 2003: 196). In many religious traditions we 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 the universal approach of religions, as an alternative to 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/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's why the meeting of world religions prominent members convened in October 2011 under the auspices of the Catholic Church, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the previous similar initiative held in 1986 in Assisi, can be considered an event of utmost symbolic political relevance.

Another promising framework allowing religions dealing with global issues in an structured way is *Religions for Peace: a* large international coalition of representatives from the

world's great 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' ('Mission', *Religions for Peace* website 2011). This organization has a clear self-conscience notion of the potential impact of religious mobilization to help 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'. ('Mission*, Religions for Peace* website 2011). Similarly, the World Council of Churches (WCC), that 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' (WCC website 2011).

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: the relationship between religions and global public goods (namely environment, health, stability) and the relationship between religions and human security. These are two related aspects of what Richard Falk (2003) 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' (Falk 2003:197). Religions based on the paradigm of inclusivity can play an important role in strengthening 'globalization from below' and provide an alternative vision to the Westphalian tradition that usually associates solidarity with territorial sovereign states (Falk 2003: 197).

CONCLUSION

The international dimension of post-secular trends has not been analyzed in its distinctive characters, since the experts of these phenomena have chosen, on the one side, to focus on the impact of new religious radicalisms on the relations among 'civilizations' (adopting a perspective which is mainly sociological and anthropological); 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. According to the first account, religious narratives can cause conflicts; for the second account, those same narratives, if reinterpreted, could provide a universal understanding of the aspiration of each identity to find its 'right' place in a greater picture.

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, this must imply an approach to 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.

Scott Thomas (2005) argues that religious ideas or beliefs can be categorized as *worldviews*, *principled beliefs,* and *causal beliefs*. World religions provide *worldviews* with the ambition to embody both cultural symbolism and scientific rationality. Religious ideas can also be considered as *principled beliefs,* since they are in many cases part of larger traditions that allow for a pluralistic debate on the elements of what is virtue and what constitutes a good life. Finally, religious ideas can also be conceptualized as *causal beliefs w*hen they play a role in influencing the choices and strategies of political actors based on wider conceptions of the common good that could be ultimately seen as the slow sedimentation of convictions originally disseminated by religious creeds (Thomas, 2005: 107-108).

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A recent, accurate appraisal of this subject suggests that religions, from the point of view of IR, could be understood in three ways:

- religions as beliefs and communities;

- religions as powers; and

- religions as claims (Sheikh 2009).

The challenge for world religions in relation to world politics is to transform the universal and somewhat abstract claims for a just and legitimate world order into *causal beliefs* for global decision-makers.

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KEY QUOTES:

p.3 "I will make the case that there is a role for religions to play in the international realm that goes beyond pure westphalian and state-centered categories…"

p.4: "Religion from the interstate point of view is *religion inside a box*."

p.6 "in the G8 there is no country with a Muslim majority..."

p.9: "In the realm of world politics, religions are more important in terms of *doing* rather than in *being*"