The Resurgence of Transnational Religious Non-State Actors in World Politics

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the role which transnational religious non-state actors play in world politics. Conventionally, world politics has been organised around the principle of state sovereignty since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The overall point is that nearly all countries officially organise both domestic and international politics according to "secular" principles, that is, where religious beliefs do not significantly inform decision making. The Peace of Westphalia secularised world politics by undermining religion and enshrined the territorially bounded sovereign state as the basic unit of world politics. This paper covers some salient issues as regards religious non-state actors and world politics. First, it discusses how the international system evolved in a highly secular fashion after the great wars of religion in the seventeenth century and how these secularising events were expressed in the academic study of world politics in the form of the secularisation thesis (the idea that religion is losing potency in shaping world politics). Second, this paper examines the rationale behind global resurgence of religion in the second half of the twentieth century. Third, it looks critically at misconceptions among scholars, political leaders, soldiers, and government bureaucrats as well as the role of religion in changing the landscape of world politics. Finally, this paper

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brings into focus the impact of transnational religious nonstate actors on world politics, with particular reference to the Catholic Church.

Key Words: Transnational Religious Non-State Actors, Secularisation Thesis, Global Resurgence of Religion, Catholic Church, Religion.

Introduction

World politics evolved in a highly secular manner from the Peace of Westphalia to the latter half of the twentieth century. The Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), one of the longest and most devastating of the great wars over religion, fought between warring Protestant and Catholic states. It was agreed to, at Westphalia, that religion had a largely divisive, discordant, and pernicious influence on politics and that it should be excluded from the international system (Kavalski, 2015).

The Peace of Westphalia signalled the rise of the modern nation-states and transferred temporal ruling prerogatives away from religious institutions and ideas (that is, the Catholic Church and the divine right of kings) towards secular sources of political legitimacy, resulting in a diminution of religious influence in the political realm. From that point on, authority was centralised in the hands of sovereign, secular and independent nation-states, with individual rulers exercising complete control over their own territories (Rowe, 2012).

The secularism inherent in these historical realities made its way into the major theories of world politics. The marginalisation of religion in the field of world politics can be attributed to the dominance of the secularisation thesis. This thesis maintained that religion would fade in importance and influence over time. The main thrust of secularisation thesis is that, as modernisation extended its grip, religion would no longer be a collective force with significant mobilising potential for social and/or political changes. Believers in this thesis, such as, Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Talcott Parsons, Herbert Spencer and Marx Weber, generally welcomed religious demise, believing that religion was irrational, divisive, prone to violence and largely detrimental to human progress (Carlson and Owens, 2003).

However, over time, world politics developed impeccably secular credentials which led, first, to the secularisation of Western Europe and then, via various colonialist and imperialist mechanism, the rest of the world. The result is that secularity became the dominant principle of world politics, with the result that formerly powerful religious leaders were over time excluded from the public realm (Norris and Inglehart, 2004) . The perceived superiority and desirability of secular power and authority over religion was made the key ideological and organisational principle, of both the American (1776) and the French Revolution (1789).

Factors that aided the Resurgence of Transnational Religious NonState Actors

Among the reasons that aided global resurgence of religion in the postWorld War II era was the utter failures of secular ideologies. During the twentieth century, the rise and fall of two extremist secular ideologies, that is, fascism and communism, which led in both cases to extreme tyranny and to the deaths of millions of people by the state in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, fatally shook the perceived moral superiority of secular thinking and ideas over religious ones. These horrible events clearly showed that religion did not have a monopoly on conflict and repression as claimed by proponents of secularisation thesis, and by the end of the Cold War, certainties of a "superior" secular world order were severely shaken (Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003). Recently, also, globalisation has called into question the claims of the state to unconditional sovereignty, thereby creating space for the (re)emergence of transnational religious actors in world politics. In other words, the situation has changed and religion has returned to world politics (Haynes, 2013).

Furthermore, communications and transportation revolutions that characterise globalisation propelled one of the most striking dimensions of global resurgence of religion, that is, the evolution of religious non-state actors into transnational political actors after centuries of marginalisation in world politics (Toft, Philpott, and Shah, 2011). It is to be noted, for instance, that a key component of globalisation is an accompanying technological revolution, involving in particular the internet and instant electronic communications methods. The implication of this for our purposes is that

numerous non-state religious actors can now organise activities across state borders through transnational networks. Apart from solely religious goals, many transnational religious non-state actors also pursue a range of secular objectives including, cooperation, conflict, development, democracy, security and human rights (Shah, 2012).

A transnational religious non-state actor may be defined as any nongovernmental actor which claims to represent a specific religious tradition which has relations with an actor in another state or with an international organisation (Neusner, 2003). Transnational religious non-state actors have attempted to take the advantage of the opportunities afforded by globalisation to articulate a transnational identity which, potentially, challenges the international order of territorialised nation-states which dates back to the Peace of Westphalia.

Misconceptions about the Role of Religion in Shaping World Politics

The reasons why so many people who should know better consistently and spectacularly get religion wrong in world politics go back over two millennial. In his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Athenian general and historian, Thucydides was impatient with the traditional Greek practice of attributing success in battle to having the favour of the gods. He argued that religious ideas and ethical norms had no place in world politics, where material military power reigned supreme. Long before the creation of the modern sovereign state system in 1648, he articulated many components of what would later be incorporated into the "Realist" worldview.

Throughout the twentieth century, both the so-called Idealist and Realist approaches to world politics believed that religion ought to be kept out of world politics (Waltz, 2010). Idealists believed in the importance of ideas such as democracy, but believed states should promote only secular ideas. To the idealists, religion belongs to the private, personal sphere, not in the arena of public or world politics. Realists believed that religious ideas and actors were unimportant in world politics. According to Realists, only the material military and economic power of states mattered, therefore religious ideas and identities ought to be a private matter, not the concern of secular states. The Realist view formidably dominated both the theory and practice of world politics in the past century (Philpott, 2001).

Not only International Relations scholars were wrong about the role of religion in world politics. Sociologists also practiced and promoted the "secular theory," that modernisation meant the demise of religion (Berger, 1999). Voltaire predicted that Christianity would wither as man became more enlightened. Marx argued that religion was a tool of ruling class exploitation that would disappear with the birth of classless society. Nietzsche proclaimed that "God is dead. God will remain dead. And we have killed him" (Bruce, 2002). These views were not restricted to universities, but were widely held by statesmen, soldiers and government bureaucrats as well. All these views, minimising the relevance of religion in world politics, from Thucydides to Communists, Idealists, and Realists, are based on several misconceptions. Chief among these misconception it the belief that religion could play only a destructive role in world politics. The ways in which religion aided peace, democracy, human rights, and development were not given adequate attention (Rowe, 2012).

Soviet leader, Josef Stalin dismissively asked "How many divisions does the Pope have?" (Carlson, and Owens, 2003). His point was that leaders without armies are powerless. Stalin's assessment of the unimportance of religious actors in world politics was later proved wrong. Just a few decades after Stalin's dismissive comment, the Soviet Union hired assassins to try to murder Pope John Paul II, because the first Polish Pope inspired and supported the anti-Communist Solidarity Movement in Poland. The Pope was wounded but lived, helping to bring about the demise of Communist rule in Poland, followed by the death of the Soviet Union itself. The Pope never commanded any divisions in Poland against the Soviet military superpower, but religious ideas and organisations, in combination with other factors, helped to end the Soviet empire and the Cold War. This history is very much on the minds of Chinese leaders as they repress religious groups in China today (Machowska, 2009).

The world has been ill-served by this dismissal of the role of religion in world politics. The secular government of the Shah of Iran was replaced by a fundamentalist Shi'a Islamist theocracy in 1979. Thirty years later, the world is still perplexed in navigating relations with the Iranian regime. From Iran's Middle Eastern neighbours to its former European colonial conquerors, to its former ally, the United States, few have clear insights into the religious dynamics and institutions that underlie the Iranian regime (Love, 2011).

Furthermore, when religious and non-governmental organisation actors joined forces across borders to work to ban landmines, many academics and world leaders were dismissive. Conventional wisdom said the effort of religious and non-governmental organisation actors was bound to fail since the government of the world's most powerful state (the United States) was against the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). Later events proved this assertion wrong. The International Mine Ban Treaty was signed, banning the production, sale, and use of anti-personnel landmines, mandating mine removal and assistance to landmine victims, and international transparency and reporting regarding landmines (Rutherford, 2010).

Moreover, when United States President, George W. Bush, assumed power in 2000, he and his administration were briefed on the immediate threat that al-Qaeda posed to the United States and allies. But those who attempted to warn the administration were brushed off as "alarmist" and off-base (Thomas, 2007). Domestically, the administration believed that conservative religious voters were a key component to the Republicans maintaining a permanent majority in domestic politics. Internationally, the administration viewed religiously motivated non-state actors as unimportant. Instead, the military of powerful states were what counted in world politics. On September 11, 2001, a handful of suicide bombers who believed their reward would come in heaven, killed nearly 3,000 citizens in four simultaneous, coordinated attacks in the political and financial capitals of the United States. Even after the "impossible" occurred, the Bush administration could not believe that non-state, religiously motivated actors were responsible. On the very day of the attacks, Vice President Cheney and Defence Secretary Rumsfeld pressed for the invasion of the secular state of Iraq in retaliation for 9/11, despite the utter lack of evidence linking Saddam Hussein's government to the attacks (Love, 2011).

In all these important cases, leaders of powerful states and many mainstream academics were totally wrong. They failed to understand the importance that religiously motivated actors can play in world politics, in saving lives or in destroying them. But as one fallacy loses ground (that religious actors and dynamics are unimportant), another fallacy remains, that religious actors and dynamics can play no constructive role in world politics (Huntington, 2011). The one-sided theory extols only the destructive

qualities of religion, even though in practice, people, governments, and international organisations rely extensively on religious actors in response to the problems of failed and failing states.

The Catholic Church and World Politics

In any theoretical discussion of non-state actors the Catholic Church assumes a highly distinctive, if not unique place, because the Catholic Church is one of the oldest and largest transnational actors. As one of the oldest institutions on earth, the Roman Catholic Church sustains a farflung flock whose one billion adherents comprise one-sixth of the globe's population (Hertzke, 2010). This alone ensures political import, but equally crucial is the Church's deep tradition of engagement with worldly affairs, that is, a comfortableness with politics not shared by all religious faiths. Such size and tradition, combined with the legacy of John Paul II, ensure the visibility and impact of the Church on world politics. With around one billion baptised Catholics and a presence in nearly every state, the Church remains a major power within many societies while the evangelising impulse which is intrinsic to Christianity has left an enduring and dynamic legacy for the transmission of influence. That influence has often been seen in material terms, for example, the Vatican's long and bitter struggle for statehood that culminated in the Lateran Treaty. Lateran Treaty is the agreement signed in the Lateran Palace in 1929 by Italy and the Holy See which recognised the Vatican City as a sovereign and independent papal state. As a result of the Vatican's unique status as both a temporal state and the seat of the Roman Catholic Church, as defined by the Lateran Treaty of 1929, the Pope is able to perform his duties on a global scale not only through the ministry of local bishops, but by accredited diplomats to countries throughout the world. However, the Church has usually regarded the formation of values, beliefs and culture as the key battleground, hence the enormous effort devoted to establishing Catholic schools, universities, newspapers, radio stations and political parties which would in turn secure a significant Catholic input into society (Wallace and Josselin, 2002).

From its inception the Catholic Church has been enmeshed in worldly affairs. The Catholic Church, however, remains a quintessentially conservative body with a hierarchical organisational structure designed to

preserve traditional theological teachings. This impulse produces conservative stances on sexual morality, abortion and marriage, and puts the Church in alliance with other religious traditionalists, including Muslims. Also, Catholic teachings on the dignity of the human person and the authenticity of the common good produce concern for the poor in the global economy and, especially in recent decades, advocacy of religious freedom, human rights and democratic governance (Philpott, 2005).

The Catholic Church is a unique multifarious institution. Headquartered at the Vatican City, the Holy See retains remnants of state sovereignty, including an elaborate diplomatic structure that sends and receives ambassadors (Allen, 2004). But the Church's myriad institutions also function as interest groups or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that lobby governments or have observer status at the United Nations (Ferrari, 2006). Indeed, the Catholic Church encompasses a vast array of national or regional Episcopal conferences, religious orders, relief and development organisations, charities, hospitals and educational associations enmeshed in politics and government (Philpott, 2005).

The most important focus for the Catholic Church remains the United Nations and its specialised agencies. Uniquely, the Holy See remains the only religious organisation to have permanent observer status at the United Nations. Although constrained to neutrality because of the Lateran Treaty, the Holy See maintains diplomatic relations with 168 countries (Wallace and Josselin, 2002). Through its missions in New York, Geneva and Vienna, it is a vigorous advocate of its own interests and a committed supporter of the Charter. For the Holy See, the United Nations and its agencies such as UNESCO offer a unique opportunity to exert influence over a range of concerns, particularly over the area of fundamental rights; above all the rights to life and religious freedom which the Church, not surprisingly, considers to be the bedrock for all others. Given that there has, since 1945, been a change in public and official attitudes towards human rights, the Church has been able to capitalise on its own theology of the rights and responsibilities of the person by supporting United Nations initiatives in both the civil and economic sectors. One example of this can be seen in the Holy See's enthusiastic support for the creation of a permanent International Criminal Court (ICC).

As a transnational actor, the "Holy See directs a truly global church" (Ferrari, 2006). Thus, it has both tangible interests to defend and religious values to promote at different times and in different settings. One of the signal thrusts of Pope John Paul II was human rights, with special focus for the first decade of his papacy on communist countries (Weigel, 1999). With the collapse of the Soviet empire, the emphasis expanded more generally to authoritarian nations and the Islamic world, along with the communist remnant. In particular, the Pontiff became the globe's most visible promoter of religious freedom. For example, in a widely cited speech before the Vatican diplomatic corps in 1996, he sounded the clarion call against communist and militant Islamic regime that "practice discrimination against Jews, Christians, and other religious groups." The Pope condemned such persecution as an "intolerable and unjustifiable" violation "of the most fundamental human freedom, that of practicing one's faith openly, which for human beings is their reason for living" (Rooney and Negroponte, 2013).

Especially animating the Vatican has been the waxing of militant Islamist movements, making the lives of Catholic minorities in the Muslim world more vulnerable to harassment and persecution. This includes democratic countries like Indonesia, where violent attacks by Islamic radicals have terrorised the Christian population. And it also involves allies of the West like Pakistan, where anti-blasphemy laws have been exploited to attack Catholic religious leaders and laity (Hertzke, 2004).

While John Paul II criticised some Islamist regimes, he also sought to build bridges by engaging in extensive dialogue with Islamic leaders. He travelled to Turkey in 1979 and then, after an unprecedented invitation from King Hassan, to Morocco in 1985. Thousands of enthusiastic college students in Casablanca heard the Pontiff proclaim that "we believe in the same God, the one God, the living God" (Hertzke, 2010).

Pope Benedict XVI, on the other hand, took a more aggressive stance toward the Islamic world. As Joseph Bottum observes, "as communism was to Pope John Paul II, so radical Islam is to Pope Benedict XVI." His Regensburg speech on 12 September, 2006, in which he quoted a fourteenthcentury Byzantine emperor's statement that Islam brought "things only evil and inhuman," created a firestorm in Muslim nations (Hanson, 2014). However, massive demonstrations, riots and violent reprisals stunned

the Pontiff, who issued an apology and assured Muslims that the quote did not reflect his views. In an apparent concession, Benedict reversed his opposition to Turkey's entrance into the European Union (Fisher and Travernise, 2006). But Benedict did not back down on his demand for "reciprocity," that Christians in Muslim nations be afforded the same rights to religious freedom that Muslims enjoy in the West, including the right "to propose and proclaim the Gospel" to Muslims (Kahn and Meichtry, 2006). This position reflected an agreement among the cardinals of the Church, whom Benedict had summoned on 23 March, 2006, that persecution of Christians in the Islamic world required a sustained diplomatic push (Allen, 2006).

As the Vatican sought meaningful dialogue with Muslim leaders, so it also strove to build links to the Jewish community. This included an unprecedented visit to a synagogue by Pope John Paul II, then a trip to Israel. In a move that Jews worldwide celebrated, the Vatican also established diplomatic relations with Israel (Hanson, 2014). Because Pope Benedict has taken a more assertive posture toward the Islamic world, where anti-Semitism is on the rise, some Jewish leaders hope for even more initiatives.

Concern about the plight of the world's destitute has led the Vatican to champion efforts to ameliorate poverty and provide succour to refugees. Agencies like Catholic Relief Services work in some of the harshest places on earth, such as Darfur refugee camps, and funnel information and policy recommendations to the Vatican. An example of one broad policy initiative concerns debt relief, which is particularly pressing in poor African countries, where debt services payments crowded out expenditures for education, healthcare and economic development. In highly visible gestures, Pope John Paul II endorsed the 2000 "Year of Jubilee" campaign to write off such debts and even met with rock star Bono, the celebrity working for debt relief (Hanson, 2006).

Another notable foray into global politics concerns war. While the Church is known for having the most fully articulated "just war" doctrine, it has moved toward a greater scepticism about the use of force in international relations. As Drew Christensen observes, "with Pope John XXIII's landmark encyclical Pacem in Terris (1963)," the Church began developing a concept

of peace as more than "the absence of war." Pacem in Terris is an encyclical letter of Pope John XXIII, dated 11th April 1963, on the achievement of peace through the establishment of justice. It argues that peace can be established in the world only if the moral order "imprinted by God on the heart" is obeyed. This trend accelerated from 1991 onward, as John Paul II promoted social justice as an antidote to war and lauded "nonviolence and forgiveness in world politics." Increasingly, the Pope questioned whether modern warfare could meet the criteria of just war, and erected a high moral threshold for the use of force (Seiple and Hoover, 2004). This posture was demonstrated during the run up to the US-led war against Iraq in 2003. Both in private conversations and public pronouncements, the Pope inveighed against the war, and his nuncio to the United States joined the American bishops in challenging its justification (Allen, 2004).

For the Holy See, a crucial lobbying target is the sphere of International Law. Catholicism, imbued with the Judaic and Roman law tradition, has always placed an enormous emphasis on the promulgation of a comprehensive system of law and has in its canon law a code that governs the life of the institution in exhaustive detail. That legacy ensures a keen awareness of the importance of the role of international conventions, such as those negotiated through the United Nations (Rooney and Negroponte, 2013).

Perhaps the most controversial of all the UN-sponsored meetings were those on Population and Development, held in Cairo during 1994, and the 1995 Beijing conference on Women. In both cases, abortion was the key theme for the Holy See. The Church's absolute condemnation of abortion ran headlong into the Clinton administration's determination to push forward a radical agenda on the issue, in conjunction with the United Nations' Fund for Population Activities and NGOs such as the International Planned Parenthood Foundation. Vice-President Al Gore, representing the Clinton Administration, promoted language in conference documents that advocated "reproductive choice" and wide access to all forms of birth control, including abortion. This position was widely backed by an alliance of Western nations, other countries, feminist groups, and many nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). For John Paul II, the United States government's insistence on abortion as a human right was anathema. During the Reagan era, the United

States' Catholic Church had succeeded in ensuring that its government took a firm anti-abortion line at international conferences, but with the election of Bill Clinton that influence evaporated (Wallace and Josselin, 2002).

However, Catholic Church envoys fought tenaciously against abortion language, in effect "filibustering" for changes. Frustrated delegates negotiated with Catholic representatives and agreed to alter wording that often drew fine distinctions (Cowell, 1994). The Church went so far as to enlist allies among Muslim nations, including Islamist states, such as Iran and Libya. Not only was this initiative successful in getting several countries to denounce abortion provisions, but leaders of Al Azhar Islamic University in Cairo, "a foremost centre of Islamic learning," condemned "the proposed United Nations document as offensive to Islam" (Tagliabue, 1994). Overall, what makes this episode striking is that the Catholic Church, acting both like a state and an NGO, was the only religious body with delegates engaged in actual negotiations over United Nations population recommendations.

In the preparatory meetings in New York, the Holy See found itself outmanoeuvred and isolated, despite a lobbying campaign which had seen John Paul intervene personally and the summoning of all 168 ambassadors accredited to the Holy See to a meeting with senior Vatican cardinals. The combination of the Holy See's lobbying and the domestic pressure which the United States' Catholic Conference could in theory apply to a president was ineffective, because of Clinton's personal commitment and his recent election victory. Yet even a president in the first flush of office was not entirely immune to pressure, as indicated by the audience which Bill Clinton sought with the Pope later in the year, and the sending of Undersecretary of State Tim Wirth to meet with the United States cardinals. At the conference itself, the Vatican gained more than it expected, in that the United States backed away from insisting that abortion on demand be enshrined as a human right.

Yet that qualified success owed less to direct domestic lobbying in the United States than to some careful coalition building by Vatican diplomats with Islamic states such as Pakistan and some traditionally Catholic Latin American countries. Given the flat refusal to recognise abortion as a form of family planning by the previous population conference ten years earlier in Mexico, events in Cairo represented a setback for the Vatican's line.

However, for the Clinton administration Cairo arguably represented a greater setback, given its dominance of the preparatory commission. The United States, perhaps overconfident after events in New York, was taken by surprise at the effective lobbying of the developing countries that the Holy See had undertaken (Wallace and Josselin, 2002).

At the following year's Beijing's United Nations conference on Women, the Vatican, acutely conscious of its image problem in the area of gender, made sure that more than half its members were female, including a Harvard law professor, Mary Ann Glendon, who was to play a highly visible role in the delegation. For both the United States and the Vatican, Beijing was seen as a replay of Cairo. This time the Holy See's carefully arranged coalition was not viable, because of the United States pressure on the developing countries and radically different views between the Catholic and Islamic representatives on the social role of women. Yet for the Vatican the real threat to its position came from the European Union, which had made a series of proposals radically at odds with the Holy See's position. In what amounted to a textbook illustration of lobbying, Glendon ensured that every major European newspaper immediately received a copy of the Vatican's critique. As domestic Catholic opinion began to mobilise, the commission, anxious to avoid controversy, began to soft pedal its previous position. In neither Cairo nor Beijing has the Vatican managed to block the liberalising trend which it so opposed. What it has achieved in both cases was to modify the final documents sufficiently to frustrate the creation of an international consensus on abortion, which for John Paul justified the considerable effort which the Holy See had put into the issue.

This prominence ensures the Church a hearing on related issues. The Church, in fact, has found diverse allies in its condemnation of forced sterilisation and infanticide, China's harsh one-child policy, and the widespread abortion of females in some countries (resulting in severe imbalances between men and women). Church agencies also promote access for girls and women to education, medical treatment, and economic opportunity as efficacious means of stabilising populations. At the United Nations' summits on women, Vatican envoys have especially championed female education in developing countries.

Catholicism remains one of the few belief systems or ideologies which operates on a global level and which aspires to global influence. In essence, the universal Church draws its international influence from its national roots. The lobbying efforts of the Holy See tend to cluster around the issue-areas of human rights, peace, security, and broad cultural issues, all of which, in classic fashion, are addressed bilaterally and through international organisations. The Holy See, in common with other small states, places great emphasis on a vibrant and effective United Nations.

Conclusion

The issue of global resurgence of religion and world politics formed an often implicit backdrop to this paper. The belief among scholars that religion was dying which became conventional wisdom during most of the twentieth century was proved wrong by later events that unfolded. Secularisation thesis turned out to be wrong. Instead of fading away as prophesied, religion made a return to prominence in world politics. Most scholars would now accept that the opposite to religious marginalisation has recently occurred. For example, a senior American professor of Sociology, Peter Berger (1999), once a leading proponent of secularisation thesis, today accepts that, "far from being in decline in the modern world, the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false."

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