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# Religious Movements and Religion's Contribution to Global Civil Society

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PAUL S. ROWE, JAN 1 2016

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Global civil society has become an important theme of investigation for scholars of global politics. The expansion of globalisation over the past decades through technological innovation has intensified the influence and impact of global civil society. Religious organisations are natural participants in this global civil society, articulating their members' concerns to global society. The expansion of their independence since the end of the Cold War has been identified as an explanation for their seeming resurgence as political actors in the past twenty years, according to many scholars. Though the expanded influence of religious actors is viewed by many as a dangerous development, this reflects the way in which anti-social activities of radical religious movements dominate media headlines. When we assess the day-to-day activities of global religious movements, we find a wide array of actors involved in development and peace advocacy and contributing to the cultural vitality of global society. The normative power of religious movements to shape global civil society is an important theme of inquiry for political science into the future.

### Religion among Global Communities of Purpose

The increasing pace of social change and its spread to the four corners of the globe have led many political scientists to emphasise globalisation's role in bringing change to international politics. One of the key features of globalisation is the way in which people relate to one another in new ways mediated by new information technologies as well as improved transportation links. Step by step since the early 1990s, computerisation, satellite communication, the fax machine, the internet and social media have created new platforms on which politics plays out in transnational space. They challenge the extent to which politics is local and they create new communities of purpose, including religious movements. Everyone in the world seeks purpose and meaning in some way, and religious communities provide fundamental answers to the larger proportion of the world's population. These communities in turn relate to states and to one another. As globalisation links humans in more complex ways, these communities of purpose create a new political geography. Issues of religion and politics are no longer confined to one locality: they become items of global concern.

One does not need to look very far to see ways in which religious matters have become global issues. During the late 1990s, the Jubilee 2000 campaign, largely spearheaded by Christian groups in the United Kingdom, inspired a larger campaign for Third World debt relief that eventually featured prominently at the 2005 G8 Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland. In late January and early February 2006, violent protests gripped several Middle Eastern capitals after concerned Muslims learned about the publication of a series of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*. In July 2010, Terry Jones, the pastor of a small radical Christian congregation in Florida, also created a global furor with his plan to burn the Quran in a symbolic trial against the Muslim scriptures. The plight of the Rohingya Muslim minority population, subject to violence and discrimination at the hands of Buddhists in Myanmar, grabbed headlines in 2013. In June 2014, the eyes of millions of Christians worldwide turned to northern Iraq, where a militant Islamist group known until then as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)

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conquered northern Iraqi cities and forced indigenous Christians to flee, convert, or pay an extortionate tax. Tens of thousands worldwide converted their Facebook profile picture to the Arabic letter nun, in solidarity with the displaced who had been forced to self-identify as *nasiri*, the Quranic term used for Christians.

The principal communities of purpose in each of these cases—whether advocacy groups calling for action in defence of human rights, vigilante groups that target other sects, movements of Facebook users, or religious groups seeking recognition of their concerns—are not states but sub-state groups, what political scientists refer to as organisations of 'civil society'. Prominent sociologist of religion Peter Berger describes civil society as the independent sphere in which people organise themselves into groups: it exists somewhere between the individual and the state, in what we might call 'the tertiary sector'. Politically, it is 'the ensemble of institutions that stand *in between* the private sphere (which notably includes the family), on the one hand, and the macro-institutions of the state and the economy, on the other hand'.<sup>[1]</sup> Because of the ascriptive quality of many religions—which can seem much like ethnic groups rather than self-directed organisations—some question the extent to which religion is part of civil society. But religious groups in the twenty-first century tend to be malleable and fluid, contributing a great deal to the construction of a larger society in which personal choices shape the politics of the day.

Almost all religions become social phenomena through self-constituted sects, groups, or organisations. Buddhism has been spread over the centuries by the *sangha*, the community of monks. Christians organise themselves into churches, parishes, monastic and lay orders, missions and parachurch movements. Muslims participate in their faith through involvement in neighbourhood mosques, *da'wa* organisations and Sufi orders. Jewish synagogues and community centres provide social networking sites that support the work of charitable groups pursuing *tikkun olam* (healing for the world). This panoply of organisations is increasingly innovative and responsive to the needs of individual believers, seeking to capture a larger 'market share' by presenting new and exciting ways to participate, even in the case of ancient traditions.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Religion as a Feature of Global Civil Society

In the early 2000s, Mary Kaldor argued that the emergence of sub-state actors at the transnational level signalled the creation of 'a new form of politics', a global civil society.<sup>[3]</sup> The nature of this society was constantly evolving based on the interactions of people within the system. Civil actors became the motors of change, propelling the system forward and determining what issues would be significant to the politics of the future. Over the next few years, many political changes underscored the importance of these civil society actors. Small groups brought attention to the AIDS crisis and the ongoing civil war in many parts of Africa. Others lobbied governments to take action to ban the use of landmines and cluster munitions. Dictatorial regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen were overthrown during the so-called 'Arab Spring' of 2011, set in motion by young activists who often spread their message via Facebook and Twitter, a message later broadcast via al Jazeera to a world audience.

The role of religion in this global civil society is controversial. Numerous books have been published over the past several years that point to the growth of religion as an influence on political behaviour, contrary to the predictions made for many decades by secularisation theorists. In one groundbreaking work, Mark Juergensmeyer argued that with the collapse of ideological polarisation during the Cold War, religious nationalism emerged to fill the gaps left by disillusionment with capitalism and communism.<sup>[4]</sup> Later, Scott Thomas identified multiple ways that religion had made a resurgence twenty-first century politics.<sup>[5]</sup> More recently, Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah have addressed the way in which the independence of religious groups from state authority enhances their importance to global politics. They challenge the presumption that the state's embrace of religion is the most important way in which religion becomes 'political'. Instead, they present the case that religion's resurgence as a political force has more to do with the relative independence and autonomy of religious actors, which thrive in liberal democratic societies and oppose authoritarianism that limits their free exercise.<sup>[6]</sup> Religious actors survived the repression of modernist and communist regimes and thrived as liberty expanded in the wake of the Cold War.

Not all viewed the expansion of religion in the post-Cold War world as a positive development. The late Christopher Hitchens, in particular, articulated the view that the role of religious movements was consistently negative.<sup>[7]</sup> Indeed, one might assume that the increasing salience of religion to global civil society is inherently divisive. Religious

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organisations often present exclusive claims to truth. They often stand behind conflict, motivating the faithful to lay aside compromise and to give up even their own temporal existence in the pursuit of a more ultimate and transcendent goal. Wouldn't a religious resurgence be dangerous to global society, causing it to be more 'uncivil'?

It is true that religious resurgence has often emphasised the fundamental differences between religious groups. Often this occurs because of pent-up stresses related to the repression of religion in the past. For example, the modernist White Revolution instituted in Iran in the 1960s and 1970s led revolutionaries to enshrine Islamic guidance in the Iranian constitution of 1979. The Soviet-led government of Afghanistan had introduced numerous secular reforms in the 1980s that became the primary targets of the Mujahedeen (and later the Taliban) regimes of the 1990s. In other cases, religious movements make instrumental use of religious difference as a means of political gain. India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was able to make use of a controversy over the existence of a mosque at the legendary birthplace of the Hindu god Ram to slingshot to the top of the polls in the early 1990s. Their supporters went on to target Muslims and their shrines in numerous incidents over the following decade.

## Religion's 'Normative Promise'

However, in spite of the common complaint that religious organisations pursue divisive political action, it would be inaccurate to assume that the reactionary and instrumental use of religion in global conflict is its most common form. For every headline that describes the violent and reactionary actions of religious radicals, there are thousands of unreported activities that arise out of the pro-social intentions of religious devotees. The quotidian efforts of religious people do not capture wide public interest but they contribute to the normal functioning of the majority of the world's societies.

The work of many scholars shows that the expanded role of religion in civil society helps to reflect natural divisions in society even as it supports liberalism and pluralism in those states that embrace religion's independence. Toft, Philpott, and Shah observe that religion has had an extremely important role in the expansion of democratisation over the past few decades: 48 out of 78 cases of 'substantial democratisation' were influenced by religious actors, such that '[i]n most of the cases where democracy was on the march between 1972 and 2009, freedom had a friend in religion'.<sup>[8]</sup> Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell analyse the role that religion plays in modern American society. They argue that even though religion divides Americans, the very connections that religion encourages among human beings also help to mitigate conflict among the American people.<sup>[9]</sup> Religious pluralism in civil society therefore both reflects our divisions over fundamental values and provides the key for living with those divisions. John Coleman, a Jesuit scholar, presents the case that religious organisations provide numerous social goods that encourage the formation of social capital: they promote volunteerism and a communitarian vision of the world, they address major social problems including poverty, crime and health issues, they provide opportunities to build civic skills and promote economic justice.<sup>[10]</sup> What is more, such religious organisations by definition work within a global orbit, as most religious traditions are confined not to one country but to several.

Reflecting on the work of the World Council of Churches in bringing down the apartheid regime in South Africa in the 1980s, Kevin Warr speaks of the 'normative promise' of religious organisations in contributing to a more peaceful, harmonious, and democratic world. Religious organisations are uniquely powerful actors in civil society because

they have the ability to change peoples' worldviews, based on a shared version of ultimate truth. Therefore, these organs of global civil society are able to foster social capital transnationally in a manner that travels well.<sup>[11]</sup>

What this means is that religious organisations transcend national boundaries and speak deeply to the hearts of people, in a way that facilitates cultural and social change.

Today, global civil society is enriched by the participation of religious actors. Some of the world's largest relief and development organisations are rooted in religion, including World Vision, Caritas, the Aga Khan Foundation and Compassion International. Many other religious organisations present the case for action on behalf of relief and development at the state level. Religious actors promote human rights and freedom of conscience: for example, the International Justice Mission, a global advocacy group based in Washington, DC, promotes the freedom of modern-

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day slaves in the sex trafficking industry.[12] Peace movements seek alternative means of promoting political change: Soka Gakkai, a peace movement rooted in Nichiren Buddhist philosophy, works to promote peaceful enjoyment of culture and personal enrichment through the actions of committed 'engaged Buddhists' throughout the globe. The experience of Baha'i, many of whom have been persecuted for their faith, contributes to the active participation of Baha'i throughout the world in promoting peaceful development and human rights. Concerned about the way in which religious polarisation has affected Western politics since the terror attacks of 11 September 2001, numerous small initiatives have arisen in the past decade throughout North America and Europe that bring together people of many faiths to promote interfaith understanding.[13] One of these, the Interfaith Youth Core, was the brainchild of interfaith activist Eboo Patel and works on college campuses throughout the United States and abroad.[14]

Religious actors have long been important influences on the domestic politics of states. Today, they are increasingly working on the global stage: interacting with one another, with intergovernmental organisations, development organisations, and foreign actors. As the politics of religion globalises, it puts more and more believers in dialogue with one another and it transforms and expands our knowledge of one another. Religious organisations articulate the basic normative assumptions of most of the world's population and thereby contribute to authentic interaction between people. Religious traditions have withstood the test of time and respond to the inner lives of believers and as such it is unlikely that religious organisations will disappear any time soon. Although religious organisations may do so in a way that is uncompromising or even violent, in most cases they simply take action on issues and problems that are common to all the world's peoples. A world of many religions, all of which make a contribution to global civil society, can be both daunting and thrilling. Global politics into the future will increasingly reflect the pluralism of a world where spiritual voices provide deeper meaning to our common experience as human beings. As such, political science will need to grapple with the influence of religious organisations as important actors in global civil society.

## Notes

[1] Peter Berger, 'Religion and Global Civil Society', in Mark Juergensmeyer, *Religion in Global Civil Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12.

[2] Ted G. Jelen and Clyde Wilcox, eds., *Religion and Politics in Comparative Perspective: the one, the few, and the many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11-15.

[3] Mary Kaldor, *Global Civil Society: an answer to war* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 2.

[4] Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious nationalism confronts the secular state* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

[5] Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: the struggle for the soul of the twenty-first century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

[6] Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah, *God's Century: resurgent religion and global politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 81-85.

[7] Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: how religion poisons everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

[8] Toft, Philpott, and Shah, *God's Century*, 93-95, 98.

[9] Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: how religion divides and unites us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 4-5.

[10] John Coleman, 'Religious Social Capital: its nature, social location, and limits', in Corwin E. Smidt, *Religion as Social Capital: producing the common good* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2003), 34-36.

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[11] Kevin Warr, 'The Normative Promise of Religious Organizations in Global Civil Society', *Journal of Church and State* 41, no.3 (1999), 522-523.

[12] The story of IJM and a larger network of religious human rights organizations is told in Allen D. Hertzke *Freeing God's Children: the unlikely alliance for global human rights* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

[13] Jean Idleman Smith, *Muslims, Christians, and the Challenge of Interfaith Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[14] Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

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