Four Religions of Foreign Policy

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JOHN A. REES, SEP 18 2015

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Religion was once discounted as a primary factor in the strategic thinking of states. To be sure, religious traditions did influence the cultural interpretation of 'national interest' in many contexts (in this, and other important ways, religion has been a constant in international politics[1]) but only on rare occasions were faith traditions consciously deployed as the drivers of state policy. The main priorities were instead ideological, as state actors measured success against military and economic capabilities in the service of one prevailing political vision or another.[2] Such priorities clearly remain, yet analysts of foreign policy increasingly understand traditional state motivations interacting with religio-cultural elements now considered to be as important as they are enduring. These changes in foreign policy reflect what some scholars see as a larger 'postsecular turn' in IR.[3] In this context, the present chapter enters an important debate on current state approaches towards religion and sketches an alternative policy framework that incorporates the nuances of religion at play in the international sphere.

Faith and Foreign Policy

Explanations for a shift in international policy towards religion are complex and varied, including the following: the emergence of 'soft power' diplomacy allowed cultural, and in specific cases religious, authorities a seat at the negotiating table;[4] Third World nations began to prioritise 'authenticity' alongside economics as important for nation building, providing a foundational role for religion in some contexts;[5] international organisations recognised religious NGOs and communities as key development agents;[6] emphases on 'civilisations'[7] and 'strategic culture'[8] grafted religion onto important discussions of global security; the multifarious importance of Muslim-majority politics worldwide has raised important debates about pluralism in international society;[9] and the post-Cold War outbreak of nationalism has at times been inspired by religion and can be conceived as a form of political religion itself.[10]

Foreign policy—understood as the sovereign interest of states exercised in the international realm—is the latest domain of world affairs to focus on religion as a primary resource for political activity. Perhaps the most notable development is the strategy by the US State Department to 'engage' religious leaders and faith communities in the areas of humanitarian assistance, advancement of democratic norms, and conflict prevention and security.[11] For the West more generally, the theme of religious freedom now links issues of democracy, development and security into a single foreign policy agenda.[12] Globally, religion emerges at the forefront of central policy dialogues between state diplomats and global institutions of religion, notably on issues of peace and stability.[13] This high-level uptake has attracted the scrutiny of analysts who have begun to raise important ideological and practical questions about the current embrace of religion in the international policy sphere. It is to these that we briefly turn.

Religion and International Policy: Are We Still Caught in a Binary?

Several scholars have responded to the rise of religion in foreign policy by querying whether these initiatives bring new agendas or simply reinforce existing interests.[14] One way to approach the question is to read emerging policy

Four Religions of Foreign Policy
Written by John A. Rees

initiates against prior 'new agenda' arguments on religion in the wider discourse of IR. For instance, Martin E. Marty reconceptualised the world as 'religio-secular' and in so doing has helped a new generation of scholars move beyond a secular-versus-sacred binary towards a more incorporative model.[15] Are the recent foreign policy initiatives on religion an expression of this more integrated understanding? Further to this, do states now engage religion as partners in policy making, and what interests set the agenda for doing so?

In a seminal article on the place of religion in international policy,[16] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd offers a detailed critique of the current international 'drive to operationalise religion',[17] arguing that such initiatives remain predicated on a binarian approach. According to Hurd, state actors adopt a split view of religion itself, releasing the resources of what *states themselves* consider to be 'peaceful religion' as a counter to the destabilising influence of what *they* determine to be 'dangerous religion'.[18] In an ISIS-age of religious extremism, where so-called 'moderate' religion is being enlisted to counter the extremist threat, the logic of such a policy framework indeed seems compelling. However, Hurd convincingly argues that this 'two faces of faith' approach[19] actually limits the full potential of religious engagement in international policy because it still 'relies on an institutional "secular versus religious" landscape'.[20] In other words, the construction of religion by states to fulfil 'special' state interests remains the dominant characteristic of foreign policy. Thus, what looks like a new policy engagement with religious actors and interests is actually the containment of religion via traditional state agendas.

Towards an Alternative Policy Framework

Hurd then takes us beyond the binary by arguing that, irrespective of latter-day realisations about the utility of religion in international affairs, religion has always 'assumed different forms and occupied different spaces under modern regimes of governance'.[21] Such a view echoes Talal Asad's cogent insight that traditions of faith have 'always [been] involved in the world of power'.[22] How might this view impact the making of foreign policy? In the first instance, it would require new policy models that were less concerned with the special inclusion of religion in policy thinking and more focused on *the nuances of religion that regularly inhabit policy spaces*. Such a refocus is reflected in Peter Mandaville's astute comment on the Department of State religion initiative:

the single greatest contribution such an office could make is to help foreign affairs officers and diplomats across all regional and functional bureaus understand that engagement with religion and religious actors needs to become a routine and standard part of the diplomatic toolkit.[23]

This is important because reframing religion as a regular feature of foreign policy activity offers state policy makers more strategic options for engaging religious actors and interests in any given context. Yet how can the complexities of religion be incorporated into a strategic framework regularly applied by foreign policy makers who, for the most part, will not be religion specialists?[24] We now begin to sketch a new framework that potentially recognises more of the nuances of religion while respecting the logics that policy makers still operate within.

Four Religions of Foreign Policy

States must strategise. Accordingly, state actors would profit from regular attempts to understand the nuanced ways religion features in the power arrangements of countries and regions where their strategic interests lie. That is to say, and in keeping with Mandaville's comment above, thinking about religion should be a regular habit of mind for foreign policy makers. This is most effectively done via a stable set of categories that can be consistently applied to multiple contexts.

While the peace/danger framework is easy to understand and implement, it arguably misrepresents how religious actors and interests operate on the ground. As an alternative approach, the four categories introduced below constitute a new diagnostic grid designed to assist policy makers better understand these complexities in their foreign policy deliberations. The first two categories repurpose concepts originally applied in the foundational work of Jose Casanova.[25] All four categories are constantly interacting at the global level and are thus more precisely described as 'dynamics'.

Four Religions of Foreign Policy

Written by John A. Rees

The dynamic of collision – when secular and religious spheres are formally separated in the building of a modern political order. The dynamic of collision has its roots in the Westphalian notion of the separation of church and state.[26] Religion becomes subordinate to, and contained by, state sovereignty in the formation of a secular society in the service of civic life.

The dynamic of collusion (combination) – when secular and religious resources combine in the creation of a political culture. In contrast to the European experience of collision and partition, in the United States the resources of religion and state each contribute to the creation of a durable Enlightenment secularism.[27] Religion becomes an expression of citizen freedom and a form of social capital for nation and community building.

The dynamic of coercion – when religious actors are targeted and expelled from the public sphere by the threat and practice of state violence. This dynamic has its modern roots in communist and developing world contexts where muscular secularism repressed religion as an imperative for rapid modernisation. Contrasting the political cultures of Western Europe and North America, in contexts of coercion secularism is carried via political autocracy and military control. Religion can be used by these regimes, but more significantly, becomes a resource for grassroots identity and resistance against secularist oppression.[28]

The dynamic of co-option – when political culture is established upon the concepts, institutions and laws of a single religious tradition. The dynamic of co-option can be seen as the corollary to coercion, though arguably more representative and therefore less predicated on the necessity for political violence. Numerous states, notably in the Islamic world, utilise strong majority religious traditions in the development of national and cultural unity, producing a variety of political cultures from absolute monarchy (Saudi Arabia) to clerical oligarchy (Iran) and democracy (Indonesia).[29]

I suggest that the dynamics described above have the potential to be used as 'policy optics' by foreign policy makers trying to understand the political culture of states and regions where their foreign policy interests are located. Single categories are not intended to describe an entire context, as most will feature at least two—and likely more—dynamics of religion at play in the same geopolitical space. Moreover, changes in political circumstance will likely re-order the characterisation of religion from a political perspective. The 'four religions' framework thus provides analysts with an efficient mechanism for understanding how these issues might be important in the policy-making process without examining religion under the constraints of a false binary. I shall attempt to illustrate this via a very brief consideration of religious dynamics in the recent political upheavals in Egypt.

The Example of Egypt (2011–2014)

Situating the influence of religion in the politics of Egypt is as important as it is difficult. What follows is an introductory application of the 'four religions' framework as a means to assist foreign policy makers better understand the role of religion in the Egyptian context.

Egypt is the most populace nation in the Middle East and North Africa (est. 86 million), over 90 per cent of whom are Muslim (the vast majority Sunni).[30] A minority Christian community (mainly Coptic) has also played a significant role in Egyptian political and economic life.[31] Egypt has been pivotal in the formation of modern political identity across the MENA region. Aspects of such influence began, according to Asad, via the importation of European legal codes in the nineteenth century.[32] It is contested, however, whether this represented an imperial effect or was built upon a more complex interaction with existing religious law and tradition.[33] In the post-war period, Gamal Abdul Nasser's efforts to modernise Egypt and unite the region under the banner of Arab nationalism had an equally complex connection to religion as both a marginalised element of culture and a vital force of political identity.[34] Once a regional leader in post-colonial politics of the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt again became the central theatre of political change via the democratic revolutions of 2011, with religious actors and interests playing a major role in the unfolding drama. What religious dynamics have characterised the Egyptian political landscape over time, and how do they influence our thinking at the level of foreign policy?

Coercion and Co-option: Religion under Autocracy (1954–2011)

Four Religions of Foreign Policy

Written by John A. Rees

Prior to 2011, religion and politics in Egypt was shaped by a complex interplay of *coercion* (the autocratic control of religious actors by the state) and *co-option* (the use of religious tradition in governance and law). The targets of coercion were the Muslim Brotherhood, who sought political reform and resistance to colonial influence based on the introduction of Islamic laws and traditions, and an overlapping network of militant groups seeking political and cultural change via more extremist violence.[35] While Egypt's three military rulers—Nasser (1954–1970), Sadat (1970–1981) and Mubarak (1981–2011)—actively opposed the militant threat, they also had varying regard for the Brotherhood. Sadat, for example, helped to revive the Brotherhood after it was driven underground by Nasser, as a way to counter the interests of the Soviet-inspired Egyptian left.[36] Mubarak by contrast, ruling in an emerging post-Cold War world order, feared the grassroots legitimacy that the Brotherhood had achieved among Egyptians as both a social development and political entity.[37] In Mubarak's view, movement towards democracy would seek to further empower the Brotherhood.[38]

Egyptian politics was also shaped by the central *co-option* of religion within the structures and protocols of government. For instance, Article 2 of the 1971 Constitution declared Islam as the state religion and Islamic jurisprudence the principal source of legislation.[39] (This remains essentially unchanged in the 2012 Constitution.) Yet the central legal embrace of Islam coincided with the regulation of Islamic associations. For example, writing in 2008, Jonathan Fox notes: 'All mosques require licenses and the government appoints and pays the salaries of their prayer leaders. The government recently began to bring under its control unofficial mosques located in residential buildings. Religious political parties are illegal. The Muslim Brotherhood, a fundamentalist Islamic organization, is banned.'[40] Thus, while *co-option* is an embedded characteristic of Egyptian politics in this period, the overarching dynamic is that of autocratic *coercion* exercised against the freedom of religious association.[41]

Collusion: Religion in Revolution (2011)

Revolutions that swept the MENA region, beginning in Tunisia in 2010, were embodied in Egypt by a broad-based religious and secular coalition that *colluded* and *combined* its energies to form a movement for change that helped remove the Mubarak regime from power in early 2011. A dynamic of *collusion*—whereby the resources of religion and state contribute to the creation of a durable politics—can be seen in the 'al-Azhar document' of June 2011, named after Egypt's pre-eminent mosque and university. According to Nathan Brown, the document was negotiated by 'leading religious scholars and prominent intellectuals' who were able to agree to 'a set of lofty principles, generally interpreting Islamic teachings in a manner very consistent with liberal values and democratic practice'.[42] Thus, the al-Azhar document 'represents not only a laudable search for common ground but also a measure of a political bargain'[43] where some sort of postsecular democratic accommodation could be achieved. Yet at the more illiberal end of the spectrum, Brown also notes that 'talk of "collusion" and a "bargain" between the Brotherhood and Egypt's military rulers soon passed from the realm of rumour and allegation to accepted fact without any serious evidence'.[44] What was more certain was that the Brotherhood's wide social operations stood it in good stead to contend as the major force in democratic elections. In a closely fought multi-round campaign, Mohammed Morsi of the Brotherhood became Egypt's elected president (2012), potentially beginning a period where the majority religious identity would *combine* more explicitly with secular standards in the democratic governance of the nation. This was not to be.

[Co-option] and Coercion: Fear and the Return of Autocracy

What dramatically entered Egyptian politics was not a new dynamic of religion so much as the fear of one. As with many incoming national administrations, Michael Wahid Hanna reports that 'the Brotherhood-led government floundered and squandered much of its goodwill', overreaching with 'a single-minded focus on factional gain and power all but ignoring the crushing economic burdens that Egyptian society was forced to bear every day'.[45] This context, together with the miscalculation by Morsi of granting himself sweeping powers to overcome parliamentary gridlock, made secular democrats and the military establishment fear that a Brotherhood-led Egypt would be *co-opted* by an autocratic style of Islamism, even though alternative political outcomes were possible. How the Brotherhood would have managed its newfound democratic legitimacy over time will never be known. As a consequence of the fear of Islamist co-option—represented here as [co-option]—the Morsi administration was overthrown in 2013 via a military coup, subjecting the religious politics of the nation to the rule of *coercion* once

Four Religions of Foreign Policy

Written by John A. Rees

more—where religious actors are targeted and expelled from the public sphere by the threat and practice of state violence—under the new presidency of former general President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Indeed, in a salient commentary on the evolution of coercive power in Egypt's 'crystallizing dictatorship', Dalia Fahmy can write of a deepening crisis characterised by 'the closing of political space, the elimination of public dissent, and the removal of the trappings of democracy'.[46]

In sum, applying the four religions of foreign policy to the Egyptian context, policy makers can deduce a shift from the dynamic of coercion (as military control), to collusion (as revolution and renewal), to the fear of co-option (the rationale for *coup d'état*), and the return of coercion (as autocracy). The absence of collision (producing a civic religion in service to a democratic secular state) is understood given the religio-demographics of the people, and certainly not to be confused with coercion, which is characterised by a lack of representation in favour of a reliance on force.

Conclusion

Whatever points of debate exist regarding the Egyptian situation, applying the 'four dynamics' approach arguably holds more potential and offers more insight for foreign policy makers to engage religion in this complex political space than the peace/danger model currently in vogue as a policy perspective. Indeed, it is arguable that a peace/danger logic is partly responsible for returning Egypt to quasi-military control, resisting as it does modes of accommodation between religion and politics that existed in the hard fought hopes of the 2011 revolution.

Beyond the example of Egypt, once the dynamics of religion have been deduced in any given policy context, the work of foreign policy would then be to situate the dynamics of religion within a state's own strategic priorities. In this way, the present chapter has begun to sketch a way that foreign policy makers can first understand the landscape of power where religion readily resides before deciding how to prioritise religious interests in the foreign policy process.

Notes

[1] For example, on the dynamics of the Cold War – a period assumed to have had little religious influence – see Muehlenbeck, P., ed. (2012) *Religion and the Cold War: A Global Perspective* , Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, and Kirby, D., ed. (2003) *Religion and the Cold War*, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

[2] Periods of US foreign policy may have been the exception, notably under Eisenhower who saw a religious foundation to the ideological conflicts with the Soviet Union. See Herzog, J.P. (2011) *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* , Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press. Though Third-Worldism drew at times from deep religio-cultural wells, the common drivers were politico-economic. See Berger, M. (2004) 'After the Third World? History, destiny and the fate of Third Worldism', *Third World Quarterly*, 25(1): 9-39. Religion, never completely dismissed in the Soviet Union, was a tool used at times by the Communist elite for domestic and international purposes. e.g. see Kenez, P. (2006)*The History of the Soviet Union from Beginning to End. New York*, Cambridge University Press, pp.152-154.

[3] E.g. see 'Special Issue: The Religious as Political and the Political as Religious: the blurring of sacred and secular in contemporary International Relations', *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 15(3), 2014; and 'Special Issue: The Postsecular in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 38(5), 2012.

[4] Haynes, J. (2012) *Religious Transnational Actors and Soft Power*, Surrey: Ashgate; Johnston, D., ed. (2003) *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.

[5] Thomas, S.M. (2000) 'Taking religious and cultural pluralism seriously: the global resurgence of religion and the transformation of international society', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29(3): 815-841

[6] Belshaw, D., Calderisi, R., Sugden, C., eds. (2001)*Faith in Development: partnership between the World Bank and the Churches of Africa* (Oxford: Regnum); Marshall, K. & Keough, L. (2004)*Mind, Heart and Soul in the Fight*

Four Religions of Foreign Policy

Written by John A. Rees

Against Poverty, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank; Clarke, M., ed. (2013)*Handbook of Research on Development and Religion*, Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

[7] Huntington, S.P. (1996) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* , New York: Simon and Schuster.

[8] Johnston, A. (1995) 'Thinking About Strategic Culture', *International Security*, 19(4): 32-64; Booth, K. & Trood, R. (1999) Strategic Cultures in the Asia-Pacific. Auckland: Macmillan.

[9] Esposito, J.L. & Voll, J.O. (1996) *Islam and Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Nasr, V. (2006) *The Shia Revival: how conflicts within Islam will shape the future*, New York & London: W.W. Norton; Cesari, J. (2014) *The Awakening of Muslim Democracy: religion, modernity and the state*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[10] Smith, A.D. (2000) 'The "sacred" dimension of nationalism', *Millennium*, 29(3): 791-814.

 [11] US Department of State, "US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement" (accessed 14/8/2014)

[12] Eg: Canadian International Council, 'Religion and Foreign Policy', http://opencanada.org/indepth/religion-and-foreign-policy/ (accessed 18/8/2014). For media commentary on the EU guidelines regarding religious freedom see The Economist, 'The EU and Faith: A religious policy by stealth', www.economist.com/blogs/erasmus/2013/07/eu-and-faith (accessed 26/8/2014)

[13] E.g. 'At Vatican, Shimon Peres Proposes "United Nations of Religions"', The Algemeiner, 4 September, 2014 (accessed 10 September, 2014). On religious international organisations and world politics see Marshall, K. (2012) *Global Institutions of Religion*, London and New York: Routledge.

[14] For a discussion on the US Department of State initiative see The Immanent Frame, 'Off the Cuff: Engaging religion at the Department of State', 30 July, 2013 (accessed (14/8/2014).

[15] Marty, M.E. (2003) 'Our Religio-Secular World', *Daedalus* 132(3): 42-48

[16] E. Shakman Hurd, 'International Politics after Secularism', *Review of International Studies*, 38:5 (2012), pp. 943–961

[17] Hurd, p.945

[18] Hurd, p.947.

[19] The phrase can be linked to Toy Blair and the work of the tony Blair Faith Foundation. See Tony Blair, 'Taking Faith Seriously', New Europe Online (2 January 2012).

[20] Hurd, p.953

[21] Hurd, p.953

[22] 'If the secularisation thesis seems increasingly implausible to some of us this is not simply because religion is now playing a more vibrant part in the modern world of nations. In a sense, what many would anachronistically call "religion" was always involved in the world of power.' Asad, T. (2003) Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. p.200. Italics original.

[23] The Immanent Frame, 'Off the Cuff: Engaging religion at the Department of State', 30 July, 2013 (accessed (14/8/2014)

[24] Consultation with religious stakeholders is understood to be equally important. The present concern is the regular 'habits of mind' undertaken by policy makers alongside the consultation process.

[25] Casanova, J. (2006) 'Rethinking Secularisation', The Hedgehog Review, 8(1-2): 7-22.

[26] 'As a result of this protracted clash, the Enlightenment critique of religion found here ample resonance; the secularist genealogy of modernity was constructed as a triumphant emancipation of reason, freedom, and worldly pursuits from the constraints of religion; and practically every "progressive" European social movement from the time of the French Revolution to the present was informed by secularism.' Casanova, p.11.

[27] '…the triumph of 'the secular' came aided by religion rather than at its expense, and the boundaries themselves became so diffused that, at least by European ecclesiastical standards, it is not clear where the secular ends and religion begins. Casanova, p.12.

[28] Perhaps most prominent in a European context is Catholic resistance to Soviet control in Poland in the 1980s. See Thomas, S.M. (2005) The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. pp. 3-7. Beyond Europe coercion can be seen in varied contexts in recent political history including Buddhist resistance to the junta in Burma, the challenge of the Falun Dafa movement to displays of religion in the public domain in China, and Islamist democracy movements opposing military dictatorship in the Maghreb prior to the 2011 revolutions. On the latter see Tamimi, A.S. (2001) Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat with Islamism. New York: Oxford University Press, pp.105-124.

[29] See Rahnema, S & Moghissi, H, (2001) 'Clerical Oligarchy and the Question of "Democracy" in Iran', Iran Chamber Society. Found at: www.iranchamber.com/government/articles/clerical_oligarchy_democracy_iran.php. (accessed May 4, 2013); Gu, Man-Li & Bomhoff, Eduard J. (2012) 'Religion and Support for Democracy: A Comparative Study for Catholic and Muslim Countries', Politics and Religion, 5(2): 280-316; Volpi, F. (2004) 'Pseudo-Democracy in the Muslim World', Third World Quarterly 25 (6): 1061-1078.

[30] Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Mapping the Global Muslim Population, Washington DC: Pew Research Centre, October 2009, pp.16-17

[31] Palmer, M. (2007) The Politics of the Modern Middle East. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage, p.74. The small indigenous Jewish community was largely expelled in 1956.

[32] Asad, pp.252-253.

[33] See Asad, pp.205-256.

[34] E.g. 'Nominally secular-patriotic in outlook and socialist by creed, Arab nationalism was the secularisation of Sunni political identity in the Arab world.' Nasr, p.92.

[35] Palmer, pp.78-79.

[36] Palmer, p.55. The Brotherhood had tried to assassinate Nasser in 1954. The aftermath of this event led to the diversification of Islamist resistance against the state into reformist and militant schools.

[37] al-Awadi, H. (2009) 'A struggle for legitimacy: the Muslim Brotherhood and Mubarak, 1982–2009', Contemporary Arab Affairs 2(2): 214–228.

[38] Palmer, p.58.

[39] Fox, J. (2008) A World Survey of Religion and the State (New York: Cambridge University Press) p.237.

[40] Fox, p.237.

[41] Importantly, this control was also exercised for the protection by the state of religious minorities such as Coptic Christians.

[42] Brown, N.J. (2012) 'Contention in Religion and State in Postrevolutionary Egypt', Social Research, 79(2):540.

[43] Brown, p.541.

[44] Brown, p.544.

[45] Hanna, M.W. (2014) 'God and State in Egypt', World Policy Journal, 31(2):68.

[46] D. Fahmy, 'This is Not Mubarak-lite: The New Face of Authoritarianism', The Immanent Frame, 19 May 2014. (accessed 20 May 2014).

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