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# Holism, Religion and Geopolitics

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DON HANDELMAN, OCT 31 2015

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During the latter half of the twentieth century, distinguished Western scholars and radical theologians announced the 'Death of God', the precipitous decline (according to polls and surveys) of explicit religious affiliation and observance. In a world becoming globalised and transnational, God was no longer counted among the players making a difference; religion could be counted out in comprehending geopolitics. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the 'God is Dead' formulation appears an unwelcome apparition, one now dead and deeply interred. The effects of religion in the geopolitics of North Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and indeed in the USA and Russia are undeniable and profound. What is it that occurred in the brief span of a few decades? Did Westerners and others quite suddenly find religion again? Were the survey-takers simply off the mark? Did the rush to judgement and speedy conclusions—no less an affliction of today's academic researchers than of political pundits—supersede cultural common-sense? Today's students of geopolitics must take into account the burgeoning religiosities in numerous global conflicts. But just what is it that must be taken into account? What is it that makes 'religion' special in its effects on populations from the small to the huge? Is there something to religion that demands taking on a different perspective, one of longer range and one that for good reason is resistant to the kind of narrow analysis—like that of game theory and other theories of strategic analysis—that severely restricts broader perspectives?

My response is that the most critical aspect of religion is the constitution of a vision and value of holism. Religion is the prime conveyor of values of holism (of whatever scale) in a world continuously fragmenting and reworking through politics and economics. I claim further that this understanding of religion in the abstract stands the tests of time from the ancient through the present. Yet what do I intend through the idea of holism? And why should a vision of holism be important in considering the effects of religion in geopolitics in a very wide variety of social and political orders?

## Holism and Religion

Anthropologist Louis Dumont understood holism as value (that he phrased as ideology) through which social order is organised.[1] Holism is the most inclusive of values in that in part, 'Holism entails the *integrity* of the *entirety*, where the entirety may be any kind of human unit—cosmos, group, and even the individual in certain instances—of differing scales, complexities, and consequences'.[2] In this usage the emphasis within an entirety is on integrity, in the senses of entirety, completeness, soundness with their implications of integration. However, *integration* refers more to parts added together to make a whole, so that in the first instance the connections between parts is additive, while the intention here is that integrity refer more to synergetic relationships within and among the parts of a whole. Thus, the connections between parts must be *relational*. Given the relational-ness that is carried by values of holism, one should be concerned with the logics of how cultural and social wholes hold together with the clear intimation that this 'holding together' is in the first instance dynamical rather than structural.[3] Moreover, holism is not restricted to particular sizes of human organisation. Rather, values of holism may be embedded in human units from the large scale of entire groups and peoples to the tiny scale of the individual (when the search, say, for self-actualisation is

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significant). One must emphasise that holism is *not* an 'essence'—rather, holism indexes how people and things (indeed, cosmos) are, are not, or are partially put together. And, so, that which constitutes holism varies historically, contextually. Nonetheless, the propensities towards holism in the human condition were and are profound.

Given that holism takes shape and lodges in vastly different scales of human existence, it then has a very broad cachet in the organisation of human existence. One way of thinking on 'religion' is that *it takes everything into itself*, without needing to specify just what 'everything' might be. Potentially, 'religion' is just that, everything. As such, cosmos and 'religion' in the ancient sense are isomorphic to a high degree. And of all forms of organisation invented by human beings throughout history, it is 'religion' that most closely encompasses that which I am calling here holism and that postulates holism as a basic value of the practice of faith. It is questionable whether in ancient times one could separate 'religion' from other domains of existence, apart from doing this as an analytical exercise. The reason for this is that the organisation of religion (as the cosmos, as metaphysically the entirety of what there is) encompassed all other domains of living, and therefore needed no separate name. Among historians of the European Middle Ages, Aaron Gurevich argues powerfully that this period in everyday popular culture was characterised by holism and, so, by the realism of the close presence of God in the daily lives of human beings.[4] Louis Dumont maintains that this holism fragmented with the Enlightenment, the Reformation and the rise of individualism; and that from this breakup of cosmos there emerged distinct native categories and domains of living like 'religion', along with 'economy', 'polity', 'family' and so forth.[5]

This broad cachet enables the search for the presence and power of holism in a variety of phenomena, especially those of the political (the civil, the totalitarian) that have been termed 'religions' by political scientists and others, yet rarely recognising the most powerful quality of all—holism—that these phenomena share with religion. The propensity for holism in human cultures never disappeared. Given the intimate relationship between holism and religion, one can state unequivocally as a rule of thumb that when values of holism are present, religion is close by (even if invisible); and, correspondingly, when a political system is called a 'religion' this implies that the value of holism is paramount. Unsurprisingly, then, values of holism revive relatively easily in relation to various local and global conditions (including those of secularism), whether through nationalisms, civil religions, new religions, trans-local migrations, and on.

Even as Western mindfulness, schooled in the scientific ethos of liberal democracy, seeks to keep politics and religion apart, over and over again to the chagrin of heirs of the Enlightenment, political communities that are themselves submerged and schooled in ideologies of peoplehood and nationhood take on attributes of holism. If we understand the profound affinity between holism and religion—and to a serious degree between holism and modern nationalism—then the entanglement of religion and politics comes into clearer focus. The states that arose in the latter period of the modern era commonly insisted that their nationalisms—often keyed to peoplehood and nation—were holistic; thereby ensuring the ongoing entwinements between holisms of politics, nationhood and religion clashing and converging. Therefore, for religion and nationalism to be strongly related, there is no necessity to argue, for example, that nationalism is the religion of the modern state.[6] Whether or not a 'religion' is an 'invented tradition', a newly created phenomenon with, consequently, little or no historical depth, does not matter in my argument.[7] What matters are values of holism and the ways in which they are embedded, organised and practised in social orders. In this regard one must not overlook that, of the surviving world religions, it is the monotheisms that generally have given especial importance to their own historical depths as validating their significance in the world. Monotheistic holisms insist that (historical) time (both past and future) is integral to their own existence and organisation, thereby encompassing both 'history' and its end-time, the transcendental End Time of linear time-reckoning. The generative connection between monotheism and modern nationalism is clear. As political philosopher John Gray states succinctly, 'Secular thinking is a legacy of Christianity and has no meaning except in a context of monotheism'.[8] Modern secular nationalisms grew from the premise of monotheism that time is evolutionary through processes of perfecting the human (and therefore the significance of historical depth to the monotheisms) together with the monotheistic stress on absolute difference in identity as perhaps *the* criterion of membership, which the modern nation-states and nationalisms utterly naturalised in the mundane world and made their own.[9]

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, nationalisms flourished through a multitude of great and little wars and other conflicts. Values of holism were and are critical to the birth and cohesion of Western nations and nation-states,

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even those that appeared secular. How does this square with my argument that when values of holism are present then religion is nearby? A useful case in point is that of the juridical and political theorist, Carl Schmitt, a highly influential thinker in Germany during the Weimar Republic and Nazi rule. The prominent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has called him, 'arguably the most clear-headed, illusion-free anatomist of the modern state and its in-built totalitarian inclination'.<sup>[10]</sup> Schmitt's thinking demonstrates the synergistic relationship of nationalism and religion in modernity.

## Secular Nationalism and Religious Theology: The Case of Carl Schmitt

Schmitt's concern lay with the sovereignty, indeed the holism, of the German state, that for him was the treasury of being German, of German-ness. Interestingly, Schmitt gave little import to the native German conception of nation, the holistic *volk*, rejecting this as romantic organicism that was incapable of taking action to save the sovereignty of the state-in-crisis.<sup>[11]</sup> Yet in fact he went one better than the *volk* as the basis of national holism by embracing an even more essentialist and very twentieth-century conception, that of race. Schmitt maintained that true Germans share essential qualities of race-as-being, so that the category of race and that of cultural homogeneity were isomorphic, that is, one and the same. Members of the German race shared the same homogeneous, cultural qualities of upbringing (*erziehung*), of character building (*bildung*), of values and perceptions. In order for the national to flourish, these 'natural', cultural particularities that were based in race had to be sovereign. Values of holism were paramount in this racial-cultural formation that was threatened by the 'general political will' on which democratic political processes were based. Therefore, the 'people' had to distinguish between 'friends', those who shared in the natural qualities of the race, and 'enemies', those who were different and therefore divided and threatened the holism of the natural national. Only if enemies were destroyed would national sovereignty true to itself emerge and triumph. Thus, after the Nazi rise to power, Schmitt strongly advocated the ethnic cleansing of Jewish jurists from the German courts because only those jurists who were 'participants in a racially determined type [*artbestimmsten Weise*] of legal community to which they existentially belong' could comprehend a German legal case in the right way.<sup>[12]</sup>

All of this sounds as if Schmitt simply was a straightforward secular racist. Yet religion, Christianity, was deeply embedded in Schmitt's conception of how the holistic, modern, sovereign state had to protect itself, since the inevitable confrontation between friend and enemy had to 'take place at the metaphysical level—the level of one faith against another. For this reason the confrontation is one of "political theology"',<sup>[13]</sup> with its more distant echoes of monotheistic Christian Kingship in Europe. Another scholar of Schmitt goes so far as to argue that Schmitt's vision 'would interpret the present in light of a Christian conception of history'—theistic, salvational, holding off the coming of the Antichrist<sup>[14]</sup>; another instance of religion close by, with values of holism invoked as the bottom line of a state holding itself together. Schmitt's conception of the geopolitics of the elementary friend/enemy confrontation was that the state composed of members sharing essentialist, constitutive qualities (the friends) had to become authoritarian and totalitarian to protect its sovereignty. The state and its rulers become a 'state of exception', one that encompasses the state and that, in turn, cannot be encompassed.<sup>[15]</sup> Schmitt draws a direct line between (political) jurisprudence and the miracle, which he likened to an 'exception': 'The exception in jurisprudence [one that breaks all of its rules] is analogous to the miracle in theology'<sup>[16]</sup> and it is within the space-time of the essentialist exception, the 'miracle': that order made is saved from chaos.

Yet how does the 'miracle of the exception' come about? Schmitt states that he who decides on the exception is sovereign.<sup>[17]</sup> In other words, the sovereign is the one who takes transcendence on himself and in the process encompasses the whole of the state. Yet it is no less the space-time of the exception that itself is transcendent, for Schmitt argues that 'The exception is that which cannot be subsumed; it defies general codification [and is] the [juridical] decision in absolute purity.'<sup>[18]</sup> If the exception cannot be subsumed, then the exception itself is encompassing. And, so, it is the exception in the person of the sovereign that encompasses the entirety of the state. This is the exception and the sovereign as pure miracle.<sup>[19]</sup> This view of political sovereignty powerfully resonates with Christianity, since the sovereign not only occupies the place of God but is no less the miracle of Christ, the God-man who is indeed the exception who orders cosmic chaos and promises salvation.

## Entering the Twenty-First Century

Is there reason to expect any radical shift in the relationship between values of holism in political setups and religion

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in the twenty-first century? All three monotheisms are flexing their faiths in powerful though different ways. As Olivier Roy puts it, we are facing 'the sudden emergence in all Western monotheistic religions of new forms of religiosity, all of them communitarian (but of a purely religious community), exclusive (a clear dividing line separates the saved from the damned), and inclusive (all aspects of life must be placed by the believer under the aegis of religion'.[20] Evangelical and Charismatic Christianity in their numerous strands have become a successful global missionary religion, calling 'upon the faithful to submit to the [holistic] totalising authority of divine agency' and actively competing for converts with Islam.[21] Islam is taking diverging paths, including the eruption of religious movements whose holisms relate to interpretations of the nation of Islam, the *ummah*. Another pathway turns towards 'a radical individuation ... that is ... divorced from modes of collective solidarity and action', yet an individuation that relocates much of 'collective responsibility' within the holistic, ethical obligations of the individual.[22] From this perspective, self-sacrifice and martyrdom may also be understood as a holistic, ethical act through which the individual transcends himself or herself.[23] Israel, a majority of whose citizens define it as the Jewish state, is a latecomer nation-state that takes its shaping from holistic European nationalisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Israel is nurturing religious nationalism that is expansive territorially and culturally, in terms of which state and nation (defined in Judaic religious terms) are vying with one another for supremacy as to which holistically will encompass the other. In this emerging contest, one that may turn into a comprehensive *kulturkampf*, the elephant in the room is Israel's reputed (and virtually certain) stockpiling of nuclear weaponry and the potentiality of its use.

Perhaps one of the great tragedies of modernity (and no less its greatest irony) is that any attempt to put things together, to keep things together in holistic ways, will have intimations of religion which continually challenge any geopolitics based on liberal values or game theoretical premises. The pursuit of holism continues, from that of the 'whole' individual to that of the 'whole' community, the 'whole' nation and the 'whole' state. From the perspective taken here, the bottom line is that if values of holism are here to stay during the foreseeable future (and there is no evidence that they are not) then so is religion. And religions carry their own baggage as to why and how the world is put together ultimately and transcendently and how this impacts on human social orders. The twenty-first century looks to be a more God-fearing time for international geopolitics.

## Notes

[1] Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 279.

[2] Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist, 'Religion, Politics and Globalization: The Long Past Foregrounding the Short Present – Prologue and Introduction', *Religion, Politics and Globalization: Anthropological Approaches* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 20. Parts of this chapter are taken from that essay.

[3] Two kinds of 'holding together' are discussed in Don Handelman, 'Inter-gration and intra-gration in cosmology', in *Framing Cosmologies: The Anthropology of Worlds* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 95-115.

[4] Aaron I. Gurevich, *Categories of Medieval Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); and, Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[5] Louis Dumont, *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

[6] As does, for example, Carleton Hayes in his, *The Historical Evolution of Modern Nationalism* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968); and see the critique of Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 189.

[7] Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[8] John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 191.

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- [9] Keep in mind that of all the world religions, only the three monotheisms demand that membership be only in one faith: absolutely inclusive and exclusive.
- [10] Zygmunt Bauman, 'Seeking in modern Athens: an answer to the ancient Jerusalem question', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 (2009), 76.
- [11]. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), 49.
- [12]. Schmitt, quoted in William E. Scheuerman, 'Down on law: The complicated legacy of the authoritarian jurist Carl Schmitt', *Boston Review*. Accessed at: <http://bostonreview.net/BR26.2/scheuerman.html> (February 2009).
- [13]. Tracy B. Strong, 'Foreword' to, *Political Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), xxviii.
- [14]. Martti Koskeniemi, 'International law as political theology: How to read Nomos der Erde?' *Constellations*, Vol.11, no. 4, 2004, 501.
- [15]. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1985), 12-13. Here I am not going into how Schmitt's theory of the 'exception' should be understood as foundational for today's much better known conception of the 'exception' of Giorgio Agamben.
- [16]. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36, 12.
- [17]. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.
- [18]. Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 13.
- [19]. One must consider that the state of exception can become self-generating, becoming its own grounds for decision-making.
- [20]. Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- [21]. Omri Elisha, 'Faith beyond belief: Evangelical Protestant conceptions of faith and the resonance of anti-humanism', *Social Analysis* 52 (2008), 56; and Mira Z. Amiras, 'Amazaghite, Arab/Islamic hegemony, and the Christian Evangelical challenge', *Religion, Politics and Globalization: Anthropological Approaches* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 209-230.
- [22]. Faisal Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad: Militancy, Morality, Modernity* (London: Hurst, 2005), 42.
- [23]. Devji, *Landscapes of the Jihad*, 120. See, too, Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004), and Don Handelman, 'Self-exploders, Self-sacrifice, and the rhizomic organization of terrorism', *Religion, Politics and Globalization*, 231-262.

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