Religious Politics and the Rise of Illiberal Religion

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SCOTT HIBBARD, NOV 1 2015

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It has been argued that the twenty-first century will be 'God's Century'.[1] By this it is meant that religion—not God, but religion—will remain a central feature of both international and domestic politics for the next several decades. The basis for this claim can be found in the recent past. Over the last twenty-five years, the world has witnessed an increased level of political activism by religious individuals and organisations. This resurgence of religious politics is evident in the violent sectarianism and exclusive religious identities of the contemporary Middle East, the persistent communalism in South Asia and the continued salience of an illiberal religious politics in the United States and elsewhere. Conceptually, the trend is interesting given the assumptions of secularisation theory, which predicted that the influence of traditional belief systems would diminish with the onset of economic and political development. The persistence of religious politics has also given rise to the view that diplomats, politicians and political scientists all need to better understand religion if they are going to understand contemporary international politics.[2]

While there are a variety of explanations for the post-Cold War resurgence of religious politics—and a voluminous literature—what is missing from much of the debate is an understanding of precisely *how* religion relates to modern politics, and, more to the point, *which type* of religion one is in fact talking about. Religion is neither as monolithic nor as undifferentiated as many assume. On the contrary, religion is a multi-faceted phenomenon, which—in its more benign moments—manifests as ethical teachings that counsel peace and reconciliation, while at other moments informs the religious communalisms (i.e. sectarianisms) that are at the heart of so much war and conflict. These different interpretations of religion vie with one another for influence, inform competing visions of social life and frequently define the political fault lines within society.

This chapter will address these issues by asking the question: *Why have conservative renderings of religious tradition remained so politically influential in secular societies as Egypt, India and the US?* This question is the basis of my 2010 publication *Religious Politics and Secular States*.[3] The following pages offer a brief summation of the larger study. The answer to the aforementioned question, which will be elaborated below, is that religion remains relevant to modern politics because it continues to define collective—and particularly national—identities, and, second, because religion is uniquely able to provide a moral framework for political action. As a result, political actors of all stripes invoke religion in pursuit of their various political ends. While these three issues help to explain the continuing relevance of religion to modern politics, the question remains why a conservative or illiberal rendering of religious tradition has been so prominent, and not a more inclusive or liberal interpretation.[4] This last aspect of contemporary religious politics is perhaps the most interesting because it highlights the internal divisions within religion, and captures what Scott Appleby has referred to as religion's fundamental ambiguity: the continuing tension between competing interpretations of a given religious tradition and the pattern of social life that each envisions.[5]

Religion and Politics Reconsidered

One of the defining features of the post-Cold War era has been the resurgence of religious politics. By this we mean the increased politicisation of individuals and groups that are defined by their faith tradition. This trend is surprising,

in part, because it contradicts the widely held assumptions of modernisation theory, and its corollary, the secularisation thesis. Modernisation theory predicted that religion would become less relevant as modern states and market capitalism displaced the church (or other formal religious organisations) as the dominant institutions of public life. It was also assumed that personal belief would decline as religious myths lost their hold on the popular imagination. Just as markets and states marginalised the church, it was believed that science and reason would displace religious belief as a means of explaining the world. Insofar as religion remained, it would be a personal affair and limited to individual matters of conscience. Modernity subsequently came to be defined by a differentiation of social life into a variety of spheres: secular and religious, on the one hand, and public and private on the other.[6]

The proliferation of religious politics in the post-Cold War era has forced a re-evaluation of these assumptions. One explanation for the resurgence of religious politics has focused on the material context, arguing that the rise of religious politics has less to do with religion than with issues such as economic disparity, social justice and political grievances.[7] The issue, in short, is politics, not religion. The basis for this argument is the perceived failure of the modern state to address basic human needs. This failure creates the popular discontent that subsequently finds expression in religious terms. While such political movements may articulate their grievances in a religious and cultural idiom, the underlying impetus is argued to be economic and political. It is a mistake, then, to interpret contemporary activism as 'religious' since the source of grievance lies in a material context. Religious fundamentalisms, then, ought to be seen as a by-product of a rapidly changing economic, social and political environment, not as a 'return' to religion per se.

An alternative perspective views the trend as a genuinely religious phenomenon, reflecting a resurgence of faith traditions in an increasingly atomised and secular world. From this view, the religious politics of recent years embodies a popular rejection of secularism and secular norms. This 'deprivatisation of religion', it is argued, is attributed to a deep desire by religious populations to 're-normativise' the public sphere and otherwise assert themselves within an overtly secular (or atheistic) society.[8] From this perspective, religious mobilisation in the post-Cold War era embodies a rebellion of religious populations against secular elites and pits those who seek to infuse public life with the 'traditional values' of religion against a state that embodies the irreligious values of secular modernity.[9] The revivalism of recent years simply reflects a shift in popular attitudes towards religion, and this is seen as an organic expression of traditional populations who seek to re-shape the political life of their countries.[10] Religion, from this perspective, is the causal variable emanating from the realm of civil society and driving modern politics.

While each of these explanations has their merit, a third approach seeks to integrate the insights of both and argues that the larger trend is *both* religious and political. It is this third alternative that informs the views of this chapter. While the driving impetus for much religious activism may, indeed, be socio-economic and political in nature, it is significant that it is religion to which political actors appeal, and not some other ideological resource. This is indicative of the continued salience of religion in speaking to fundamental questions of human existence: life, death and moral purpose. While science and reason help to explain the mechanical operations of the world, they are less able to address the normative questions faced by both individuals and society. Moreover, religion provides a language to articulate moral purpose, sanction the exercise of power, and otherwise situate contemporary political issues in a wider, normative framework. Hence, even if there is a formal separation of church and state—that is, a separation of religious authority from political authority—religious ideas and beliefs continue to provide a basis for social cohesion and a language for contemporary politics.

It is for these reasons that even ostensibly secular states have invoked religious narratives to sanction their authority. This last point warrants elaboration. A key failing of modernisation theory was the assumption that modern states were invariably hostile to religious belief of all sorts. This assumption was incorrect. While some states tried to eradicate religion—or greatly restrict it—this was by no means universal. More commonly, states sought to control, regulate or otherwise use religion to their own ends. As I discuss in the larger study, religion was (and remains) a central feature of the nationalist project, and nationalist narratives provide a new means by which religion enters the public sphere. As Anthony Marx has argued:

[Within the European context,] religious fanaticism was the basis for popular engagement with—for or

against—centralising state authority … . Nationalism emerged when the masses were invited onto the political stage or invited themselves in. But that invitation did not come inclusively from books, enrichment, or schooling, but rather from sectarian conflicts, enraging sermons and callings. The passions of faith were the stuff of which the passions for the state were built.[11]

Part of the explanation for the contemporary resurgence of religion, then, is that religion never went away. Even if religious *institutions* are less central to modern social life, religious ideas, imagery and symbolism remain enormously influential in the construction and mobilisation of collective identities. Nationalist and sectarian ideologies, for example, commonly draw upon religious motifs and symbols in order to reinforce social solidarity and motivate political action.[12] The religious dimensions of nationalism also offer a narrative within which individual sacrifice is given transcendent meaning, associating it with both a mythic past and an ostensibly better future. Similarly, the moral language inherent within religious tradition is used to legitimise political authority or claims to such authority. By linking human existence to a transcendent realm, religion provides a framework for interpreting political events and articulating moral purpose. Even within a tradition of secular nationalism religion is able to lend a universal, and sacred, quality to what is, in essence, a particular set of political arrangements.[13]

It is for these reasons that religion is so readily invoked for political purposes. Religion is used by opposition groups to critique the status quo (in what is called the 'prophetic' function of religion) and articulate an alternative political program that recognises the opposition as the legitimate authority. Similarly, state elites have never been reluctant to appropriate religion for their own purposes. On the contrary, state actors have long used religion to sanctify political power and imbue relationships of dominance with the aura of natural right. In either instance—prophetic or priestly—the ultimate goal of such instrumental manipulation is to link the narrow political interests of a particular group to that of moral, national and religious purpose.

What is most interesting about the post-Cold War resurgence, however, involves the type of religion with which it is associated. What defined this latter era was not a resurgence of religion, per se, but, rather, a resurgence of *illiberal* visions of religion at the expense of *liberal* ones. In the mid-twentieth century, the type of religion that was dominant in public life was liberal and modernist—i.e. interpretations that eschewed a literalist reading of scripture for metaphorical and emphasised tolerance and ecumenical co-existence. These liberal interpretations of religion were consistent with secular norms of neutrality and informed a vision of society that was (theoretically) inclusive. Modernist religion was also associated with the political left, the promotion of social justice and the eradication of poverty. On the other hand, illiberal religion—i.e. interpretations that held monopolistic claims on truth, placed an emphasis upon scriptural literalism and tended to be intolerant of alternative beliefs—were commonly associated with the political right and traditional patterns of social and political hierarchy.

In the mid-twentieth century, illiberal or 'fundamentalist' forms of religion (and the organisations which espoused them) were politically marginalised and commonly repressed. This marginalisation was perceived as a harbinger of religion's future, and it is this trend that informed the secularisation thesis. However, the relative influence of these competing interpretations of religion began to change in the 1970s and early 1980s. During this latter period, mainstream political actors came to see religious fundamentalisms as a bulwark against socialism and a useful carrier of a patriotic majoritarianism. In the Cold War context, such religious activists gained support on a variety of continents from state actors who had come to see illiberal religious movements as a constituency to be courted, not a threat to be marginalised. It ought not to be surprising, then, that with the end of the Cold War—and the discrediting of the political left—that conservative religious groups would emerge as a forceful presence in these societies.

This trend is evident in each of the case studies examined in *Religious Politics and Secular States*. In all three cases—Egypt, India and the United States—the post-World War II period was defined by a commitment to a secular vision of modernity. State actors throughout the 1950s and 1960s were the articulators of a progressive vision of national development, and sought to embed secular norms in the institutions of nation and state. Government policy during this period was commonly associated with poverty alleviation, state-led economic development, and social justice. An ecumenical (or modernist) understanding of religion was important here because it provided a moral—and non-sectarian—basis to political life. It was this historical moment that informed modernisation theory and the belief that modernity was, by definition, secular and progressive. Secularism in this context did not necessarily entail the

removal of religion from the public sphere (although many advocated this alternative). Rather, secularism in the mid-twentieth century was seen as neutrality in matters of religion and belief, at least in the context of the cases under discussion. Secular norms and identities were thus perceived as an important mechanism for integrating diverse populations into a common political framework. Conservative social forces, on the other hand, and the illiberal religious ideas they espoused, were typically associated with a reactionary past and seen as an obstacle to the kind of economic and political reform promoted by modern states.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the commitment of state elites to social change diminished, and along with it their dedication to a secular vision of national life. State leaders and other mainstream political actors in all three cases abandoned their support for a liberal vision of religion and society in favour of conservative or illiberal religious ideologies. During this latter period, illiberal interpretations of religious traditions were used to counter leftist politics and legitimise hierarchical patterns of social order. Exclusive visions of national identity were also used to heighten communal loyalties, and appeal to a homogenised notion of group identity. This was an important means of diminishing the salience of class in national politics and generating popular support for a conservative political agenda. It was also an important part of the Cold War dynamic. In this context, state elites took either a weak stand against religious communalism—not wishing to oppose conservative cultural forces—or actively sought to co-opt such forces for their own purposes. This changing attitude of state actors towards illiberal religion marked a sharp break from previous practice and reflected a new set of priorities. Rather than serve as an agent of social change, state policy sought to reify existing patterns of social hierarchy. In this new era, state and religion would be used to maintain the status quo, not transform it.

Conclusion

There are several factors, then, that help to explain why exclusive interpretations of religion emerged so forcefully in the post-Cold War era. Despite the common assumption that the contemporary resurgence of religious politics represents a popular rejection of state led secularisation or is the result of a failed modernity project, the aforementioned cases indicate a more nuanced explanation. On the one hand, religion was never removed from the public sphere. Rather, religion was always important in shaping identity, articulating political purpose and legitimating authority. A key variable, though, in explaining the demise of a modernist vision of religion and society—and the corresponding rise of an illiberal vision—is the changing orientation of mainstream political actors who abandoned commitments to an inclusive vision of social order, and chose instead to ‘ride the tiger’ of an exclusive religious politics.[14] This is not to argue that religion does not matter—nor that religion is epiphenomenonal—but it is to argue that fundamentalisms did not emerge autonomously from the realm civil society to reshape modern politics. Rather, the political fortunes of illiberal religious groups and activists changed precipitously when state actors sought to support, not repress them.

The turn towards exclusive interpretations of religion by ostensibly secular state elites raises two important and related questions. First, why was the commitment to secular norms so readily displaced, and, second, why was the attraction of exclusive (as opposed to inclusive) versions of religion so strong? In regard to the first issue, loyalty to liberal ideas—and the relegation of religion to the private sphere—proved less compelling in each of the cases during the 1970s and 1980s than was the compulsion of religious sectarianism. Some would argue that this reflects the limits of loyalty to a public sphere shorn of religious imagery, or the continuing appeal of certitude in a world defined by socio-economic change. These are important and valid points. However, there is more to the answer than just these two issues. Here, the cases are instructive. In each instance, religion was (and is) central to the construction of collective, and particularly national, identities. Hence, religion was invoked to activate or appeal to the ethnic or religious loyalties of key constituencies. In this context, religion was (and is) an important tool in providing a sense of belonging to a larger community and attachment to the institutions that govern society. Perhaps more importantly, religion provides a moral framework for contemporary politics and lends a timeless quality to institutions that are, in reality, modern social constructs. It should not be surprising, then, that both the defence and the critique of the modern state are frequently done in a religious vernacular.

This, then, leads to the second issue. It was not just religion that was being promoted, but exclusive interpretations of religion. Why was this? There are two answers indicated by the cases. One is that the inherent communalism within

the very idea of the nation-state—the tendency towards a 'homogenizing ideology of unity'[15]—more readily conforms with exclusive visions of religion than do their liberal counterparts. In other words, the communalism inherent within exclusive interpretations of religion fit more readily with the ideological requirements of the modern state than does the ambiguity of liberal religion. Very much related to this is the certitude offered by illiberal religion and the utility that such an unquestioning faith can provide for modern political actors. Second, the role of state elites in promoting one vision of religion and society as opposed to the other is crucial. If the first point deals with the inherent tendencies—and tensions—within both religion and society, the second point involves human agency and choice. As the cases illustrate, the embrace of communalism was not pre-ordained, or determined, by the nature of the state. On the contrary, there was an ongoing tension between liberal and illiberal visions of the nation, and this was a defining feature of the politics of all three societies. Moreover, the active role of state elites within the debates over how to define the nation proved critical to the success of liberal renditions of religious politics in the mid-twentieth century and illiberal interpretations in the latter part of the twentieth century. This helps to explain, then, the transition from a benign expression of civil religion to a more assertive religious nationalism and the attendant refashioning of the political realm. Although both visions of society are latent within the idea of the nation-state, the actions of state leaders had an important bearing upon which of the two emerged as dominant at a given point in time.

The cases also indicate that one cannot assume that an exclusive vision of religion and society is somehow more natural, more authentic or ultimately more effective. Nor do the cases argue that the resurgence of religious politics is *simply* a matter of elite manipulation. On the contrary, what the study illustrates is the interactive and the variable nature of this entire process. Religion is a potent force and has been alternately used for both good and ill by political actors. Moreover, religion can provide an inclusive basis to social life, or justify an exclusive (and often violent) chauvinism. Implicit in this variability is an assumption about human nature and the continuing tension between man's better impulses and his/her more aggressive ones. The instrumental manipulation of illiberal visions of religion by political leaders, then, reflects a willingness to pander to the baser instincts of the majority community. Instead of appealing to a more virtuous reading of religion—one that unifies diverse communities instead of dividing them—the appeal to an illiberal rendering of religious tradition had the clear intention of polarising the population along communal lines. The intent was also to promote the interests of one community (or one section of a community) at the expense of all others. The fallout in each of the cases, moreover, has been detrimental to the larger goal of providing a cohesive—and inclusive—basis to political life.

Notes

[1] Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011).

[2] Doug Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] Scott W. Hibbard, *Religious Politics and Secular States: Egypt, India and the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

[4] By illiberal religion I am referring to interpretations of religious tradition that place an emphasis upon scriptural literalism, conservative morality and exclusive claims on religious truth. Liberal or 'modernist' understandings of religion, on the other hand, are defined by their tendency to read scripture as metaphor, employ reason as a guide for interpreting religion, and are more inclined towards religious pluralism

[5] R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (New York; Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), p. 27.

[6] For a more thorough discussion of secularism and the secularization thesis, see Scott Hibbard, 'Religion, Nationalism and the Politics of Secularism', in Scott Appleby and Atalia Omer, eds.,*Oxford Handbook on Religion, Conflict and Peacebuilding* (Oxford University Press, Forthcoming).

[7] See for example Mark Tessler, 'The Origins of Popular Support for Islamist Movements', in John Entelis, ed., *Islam, Democracy and the State in North Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[8] Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 5.

[9] Mark Juergensmeyer, *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al-Qaeda* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

[10] See for example John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009).

[11]Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 197.

[12] See for example Anthony Smith, 'The Sacred Dimension of Nationalism', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 2000. Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 791-814. See also David Little, 'Belief, Ethnicity and Nationalism', in*Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* Vol 1, No. 2, Summer 1995 (London: Frank Cass, 1995).

[13] This is evident in the notion of civil religion. See Robert Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', in*Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditionalist World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[14] The reference is to Zia al-Huq's efforts to co-opt Sunni fundamentalism into the service of the Pakistani state in the 1980's. See Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Islamic Leviathan: Islam and the Making of State Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapter 3.

[15][15] Zoya Hasan, 'Changing Orientation of the State and the Emergence of Majoritarianism in the 1980's', in K.N. Panniker, *Communalism in India: History, Politics and Culture* (Delhi: Manohar, 1991), p. 152.

About the author:

Scott Hibbard is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at DePaul University. He has also taught at the American University of Cairo and at Swarthmore College. Hibbard received his PhD from Johns Hopkins University and holds master's degrees from the London School of Economics and Political Science and Georgetown University.