

The International Politics of Religious Defamation

Written by Peter Henne

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PETER HENNE, OCT 26 2011

With the September 2011 application on the part of the Palestinian Authority for United Nations (UN) statehood, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) has become a focus of attention among policymakers. Yet, this is far from the only controversial measure the UN has dealt with recently. In March of 2011, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) announced at the United Nation's (UN) Human Rights Council meeting that it would change the language of its resolution banning religious defamation to focus primarily on religious intolerance. The OIC first introduced the religious defamation resolutions in Human Rights Council in the late 1990s, and later expanded its efforts to the UNGA. Human rights activists and several governments campaigned strongly against their passage, and saw this change in language as a significant accomplishment.

Whatever their normative implications, the religious defamation resolutions are part of broader debates over the significance of religious freedom. Recent events, like the death sentence against an Iranian pastor for apostasy and blasphemy-related killings in Pakistan, have focused international attention on this issue. And several recent works by scholars and policymakers have emphasized the significance of religious freedom, both for its own sake and for its connection to broader socioeconomic and political conditions (examples include works by Farr; Grim and Finke; Marshall and Shea; and Toft, Philpott and Shah).

The religious defamation resolutions also shed light on the role of religion in international relations, not—as many would expect—in the form of the “Muslim world” rejecting “Western values,” but rather as a manifestation of regimes’ attempts to maintain power through the use of transnational issues like religious defamation.

Religious Defamation and International Relations

Debates have long swirled around the issue of religious defamation (or blasphemy), which refers to insults to a certain religion, or religions in general. Since the 1989 *fatwa* by the Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie, and the more recent Danish Muhammad cartoon protests, religious defamation debates often focus on Islam. Supporters of restrictions on religious defamation point to the potential for violence caused by religious intolerance and the need to defend the integrity of cultures; opponents, in contrast, see them as restraints on religious freedom and freedom of speech.

The UNGA religious defamation resolutions are an extension of this issue into the international sphere. Their proponents present justifications similar to those for domestic defamation laws. Opponents claim this represents a rejection of liberal values by Muslim states, an effort by non-democratic regimes to undermine political freedoms, or an expression of general “Third World solidarity.”

And even though UNGA resolutions are non-binding, there are several reasons to believe that these resolutions might matter for international and domestic politics. Scholars of international relations have argued that international deliberations can lead to changes in the norms that influence state behavior. And some studies suggest international agreements can be used by regimes to justify domestic repression. Moreover, there are indications that religious defamation laws correspond to intensified social hostilities and government restrictions on religious practice.

Explaining Support for the Religious Defamation Resolutions

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The religious defamation resolutions are therefore both theoretically and substantively important. What, then, explains support for them by UN member states? The “Muslim world” explanation is problematic. While the vast majority of Muslim states supported them, almost half of their supporters in recent years have been non-Muslim states; this suggests support for restrictions on religious defamation are not confined to Muslims. Other possible explanations fare better. Support for the resolutions is strongest among non-democratic states, although some democracies did vote for them. And “Third World solidarity” is a strong possible explanation; states that tend to vote on other contentious issues—such as those involving racism, economic development, and other such issues—also voted for the religious defamation resolutions.

This does not necessarily mean that religion had nothing to do with this apparently religious issue. It only requires a nuanced understanding of the means through which religion influences states’ international behavior. Many discussions of religion—especially Islam—advance “essentialist” arguments that view religion directly affecting politics; e.g. Islamic beliefs lead Muslim states to act in line with those beliefs. More recent works on religion, however, discuss religion as a discourse that changes the nature of societal debates and affects state behavior indirectly, by altering the costs and benefits leaders face (for examples, see studies by Nexon, Philpott and Salvatore and Eickelman). Often, it is the institutional conditions surrounding religion, rather than religious beliefs themselves, that determine whether religion influences state behavior.

What this means for the study of religion and international relations is that religion can matter, but only when institutional conditions give leaders an incentive to act on or stir up domestic religious pressure. One such condition is undemocratic regimes with close ties between religion and the state. In these states, the regime rules on the basis of religion, depends on the support of conservative religious groups, and/or restricts religious practices in order to ensure the official religious tradition prevails and its power base is maintained. This can give conservative religious groups influence over state behavior and the state an incentive to champion religious causes.

This dynamic can be seen in numerous states. In Pakistan, ties between the military and Islamist militants and laws favoring a conservative interpretation of Islam have strengthened extreme sentiment in the country and made the regime unwilling to counter powerful religious groups. Meanwhile, in Belarus, the non-democratic regime has established close ties with the Orthodox Church; this has corresponded to both restrictions on religious minorities—namely evangelical missionaries—and general political repression, some of which has been justified as controlling illegal religious activity.

When this situation coincides with a religiously-salient transnational issue, religion can affect states’ international behavior, as it gives leaders an opportunity to increase their domestic standing by championing a religious issue internationally. This is arguably what happened with the religious defamation resolutions. Concerns over religious defamation were present in numerous countries, including some non-Muslim ones; even when the public was not overly concerned about religious defamation, it served as a convenient issue for leaders to stir up, as it can signal championing of religious causes and also serve as an excuse to repress dissent in the name of defending religion. Once the religious defamation resolutions were introduced in the UNGA, non-democratic regimes with close ties to religion had an incentive to support them to strengthen their domestic political situation.

Statistical analysis of UNGA voting on these resolutions supports this explanation. Even when other possible explanations are taken into account, non-democratic states with close ties to religion tended to support the resolutions. Moreover, when just looking at non-democratic states, those with more extensive ties to religion were more likely to support the resolutions than those with greater distance between religion and state. Other factors mattered, notably “Third World solidarity,” indicating that the domestic religious dynamics may have been tied up with transnational “solidarity” issues in UNGA voting on these resolutions.

This can be seen in the specific countries voting for and against the resolution. The vast majority of Muslim states voted in support of the resolutions, but other supporters have included Belarus and Sri Lanka. Both countries have close, often problematic, ties to religious groups, Belarus—as discussed above—with the Orthodox Church and Sri Lanka with Sinhalese Buddhism. It is possible these domestic religious dynamics intersected with the transnational religious and “solidarity” issues to influence the state’s UNGA votes.

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Religion, UN Voting, and International Politics

This can tell us something about the role of religion in international politics. Religion may not have the dramatic transformative effect many expected—either as a “clash of civilizations” or the creation of a global civil society—but it is not irrelevant in state behavior. Instead, religious effects on international relations depend on the same political factors as non-religious motivations: regime type, domestic politics, and leaders’ cost and benefit calculations. What is different about religion is the specific nature of the issues, the intensity of emotions surrounding them, and their tendency to spread beyond the borders of any one state.

Second, it can tell us something about the significance of UNGA votes. Even though these votes are often symbolic, states take them seriously. States’ votes on contentious issues in the UNGA, however, do not always reflect deeply-held normative commitments. Instead, they may be strategic attempts by states to gain domestic and international prestige by taking a stand that would resonate with certain audiences.

The fact that the OIC backed down provides further support for these points. UNGA votes are the result of a cost-benefit calculation; for undemocratic regimes with close ties to religion, the costs of opposing the United States and the human rights community is outweighed by the benefit of supporting a religious cause. In the face of concerted diplomatic pressure, however, those calculations change, and the state may decide taking a stand is no longer worth it. If the religious defamation resolutions were, in contrast, the “Muslim world” rejecting the “West,” their backers may not have given in so easily.

The current focus by scholars and policymakers on the role of religion in international relations is admirable, and welcome. The transnational power of religion can serve as a force for both good or ill by challenging the exclusive authority of states over their citizens, and debates over religious issues cannot be understood without taking religious beliefs into account. Yet we should be careful making arguments such as “Islam caused this” and “Muslims do that” or expecting religion to dramatically alter the international system.

Even though the religious defamation resolutions have been shelved – for the time being – numerous other religiously-salient issues exist, like the treatment of religious minorities, international military operations in Muslim states, and even embryonic stem cells. There is thus ample opportunity for states to manipulate UNGA debates to score domestic political points, and the dynamics behind the international politics of religious defamation may continue.

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