

Religion and International Affairs: From Neglect to Over-Emphasis

Written by Shireen T. Hunter

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SHIREEN T. HUNTER, APR 7 2010

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and especially after the vent of 9/11 there has been increasing talk of the determining role of religion in shaping the pattern of the behavior of states and non-state actors.

The first indication of this new found interest was the publication of Samuel Huntington's article on the coming Clash of Civilizations in which he argued that religion will become the most important marker of identity and the determinant of patterns of international conflicts and amities. This was followed by other books and articles with titles such as Religion the Missing Dimension of International Politics, The Mighty and the Almighty –this one by Madeleine Albright!!—just to name two. With growing interest in the subject major universities in the US began offering courses in Religion and International affairs under a variety of programs and guises, and think tanks began focusing on the topic. Interestingly none of the books and articles and few of courses focused on analysis of the role of religion in international affairs by examining systematically how and in what ways religion affects behavior of international actors or ask the question of has really the role religion become as important as some claim to the point of eclipsing the role of other determinants of state behavior. Or more fundamentally why this new found interest in religion as a force in international relations?

The end of ideologies and the paradigm vacuum

Answering the last question first, the reason for the new interest in religion has been largely due to the fact that with the collapse of the Soviet Union the era of life and death ideological conflicts came to an end. This left many feeling disoriented by the more fluid and complex character of Post-ideological international relations, thus setting them off in search of a new paradigm which could simplify and explicate this new and confusing state of affairs. Sam Huntington's clash of civilization was a direct result of a Soviet era intellectual's effort to recreate the simplicity of Cold War paradigm.

But as Cold War paradigm never either completely determined the character of international relations nor explained its complexities and shifts, the theory of clash of civilizations has proven equally faulty, although it has possibly caused more damage than the cold War paradigm.

How religion affects international relations

Religion affects the character of international relations the same way as do other value systems and ideologies by influencing the behavior of states and increasingly non-state actors. Moreover, although mostly unrecognized, as part of states and other actors value systems religion has always played a role in determining the character of the behavior of various international actors.

In the case of state actors and, depending on the nature of their political systems, the impact of religion has been principally felt in the following ways: activities of religious groups aimed at influencing state behavior in democratic systems and; the proclivities of key political leaders. For example it has been noted that US policy during the Cold War in addition to the ideological animosity between socialism and Liberal capitalism was influenced by the fact that

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US society was quite religious and hence viewed the atheist communists as evil.

The importance of the religious proclivities of key leaders on state behavior needs hardly to be emphasized. It is well known that President Jimmy Carter's approach to the Middle East conflict and issues of human rights was to a great extent determined by his deep Christian faith. Similarly, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair's policies on issues ranging from war on terror to Iraq's invasion were highly influenced by their respective religious beliefs. However, it would be a mistake to believe that it was religious factors that were solely responsible for the decisions on these issues. Rather security concerns, economic interests and the desire to prevent any undermining of the international balance of power played much more important roles in these regards.

What the religious factor –together with other value- based arguments such as spreading democracy—did was to provide an idealistic gloss to decisions made on purely worldly reasons. In other words religion played the same role that ideologies of various kinds have played namely to legitimize policy decisions and garner popular support for them.

In the case some countries such as Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran which are based on different interpretations of Islam, religion is the official ideology and the basis of state legitimacy. As is the case with secular ideologies, both countries believe that the spread of their particular brand of Islam will advance their interests and increase their regional and global influence. However, what is important to point out is that religion, like secular ideologies, plays a purely instrumental role namely that of justifying and legitimizing state policies rather determining them.

The behavior of non-state actors, including those identified as religious, such as HAMAS, Hizbullah, and groups engaged in terrorism such as Al Qaeda, also are determined by a mix of religious and worldly motives. For instance, it is not merely Islam which influences HAMAS' position on the Arab-Israeli conflict but also Palestinian nationalism. To note, the question of Jerusalem is as important to secular Palestinians as HAMAS. Hizbullah also has non-religious motivations for some of its activities. For instance, according to Sheikh Nasrullah, Hizbullah's support for the Palestinian cause is partly to gain legitimacy for the Shias in overwhelmingly Sunni Arab World.

The question which the above observations raise is thus the following: if religion is not the determining factor behind the activities state and non-state actors, what becomes of the arguments recently raised that religion can become a factor for international cooperation and Peace? The answer to this question is that as long as other sources of conflict have not been eliminated and areas of mutually beneficial cooperation have not been identified and pursued mere exhortation that we all should heed the call of the Almighty and treat each other fairly will not succeed. If this were sufficient the world should have been at peace, fairness would have ruled human relationships and there would not have been abuses of power at least for two thousand years.

In sum, state behavior, as individual behavior, is the result of complex set of impulses and motives and cannot be explained by a single factor. Religion, in the past, had influenced the behavior of international actors without determining it, although its role often went unnoticed. This situation, notwithstanding the new found fascination with the impact religion on international affairs, has not changed. Religion is neither the source of conflicts and disputes nor a panacea for global problems.

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