

# Shifting Territorial Orders and Religion

Written by Gertjan Dijkink

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GERTJAN DIJKINK, SEP 14 2015

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### Geopolitics and Human Feelings

For those who follow world news, the statement that religion and geopolitics are narrowly related is quite obvious and perhaps more so than ever. If we define geopolitics as the propensity of states or localised groups to optimise their territorial assets at the expense of other localised actors, there is a lot of contemporary geopolitics that seems to resonate with religion. In view of the violent campaigns in which Islamic groups try to gain control over states in Africa and the Middle East with the explicit aim of constituting a moral regime or new caliphate (Islamic State), the link between geopolitics and religion seems undeniable. Yet we should be aware that systematic analysis of international conflict data covering a long period does not provide statistical evidence of the effect of religious difference on the *outbreak of war* between states or groups.[1] Nor, despite what the 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis would have us believe, could such a thing be proved for the more recent historical period. Nonetheless, a mass of publications report how religious arguments have been used by groups to rationalise their territorial independence and bolster national morale in the prelude to war. The Exodus story from the Bible was used in early modern European (Protestant) states like England and the Dutch Republic to suggest that they had found their promised land like the wandering Israelites or even as descendants of a lost Jewish tribe.[2] Islamic tribes have used their religion in rivalry with other tribes by claiming a special link with the Prophet—even if their main ancestor was only his barber. Such examples impel us to account for the fact that religion is often embedded in a national identity complex (always relevant in international conflict[3]) and that religious difference is difficult to define.

Here I will follow a different approach to the issue of religion and geopolitics by drawing attention to the changing territorial orders that control the geopolitical game. Territorial orders are dominant ways of linking authority to geographic distinctions. One such territorial order is the current process of globalisation while another was the formation of states in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. Such shifts in the geography of power upturn established interests and human feelings of security and therefore demand a legitimating philosophy that might acquire the status of religion. There are of course other options for people faced with a changing territorial order, such as ignorance or violent resistance. In Hirschmann's terms the options are *exit*, *voice* or *loyalty*.[4] In a globalising world *exit* is a characteristic resistance against the ideal of the 'open society'. As Chechen guerrilla fighter Noukhaev once remarked, 'I am against the open society ... because it wants to turn my closed, barbarian, world into a citizen's world.' Such attitudes easily turn into violent resistance, as exemplified by tribal Islam and Al Qaeda.[5] The other option, *voice*, can be associated with attempts to endow the new order with a vision that makes the world meaningful again rather than with changing its structure. This is the more affirmative role of religion, answering to human feelings that are injured by a new power configuration.

### Religion as a Response to Some Major Territorial Events in History

One of the most familiar examples of a religion that may have owed its origin to the mental struggle with an inconvenient territorial order is Christianity. Its message of love, even across ethnic lines, fitted the transnational

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imperial order of Rome better than the Jewish emphasis on one God favouring one (Jewish) people. Of course, the brutal unifying power of Rome had to be balanced by a mighty vision of an all-encompassing Kingdom in Heaven reigning through love or the 'Holy Spirit' rather than war, but the new transnational order and opportunities for mobility could still be saved. The Christian religious innovation was an act of reconstruction rather than deconstruction. Crossan and Reed assert: 'both Jesus and the apostle Paul are not so much trapped in a negation of global imperialism as establishing its positive alternative here upon earth.'<sup>[6]</sup> How much the Roman world order was a reference point in Jesus's message also revealed itself in his designation, 'son of God'. As Showalter remarks, 'Many of those who referred to Jesus as "son of God" knew perfectly well that a Latin form of the phrase was among the most frequent descriptions for Augustus and his successors.'<sup>[7]</sup> Two years after his death in 44 bc, the Roman Senate proclaimed Julius Caesar 'God'. His successor, Augustus, who ruled when Jesus was a youngster, consequently used the title 'son of God' (*divi filius*).

While Christianity more or less embraced an imperial order, the rise of Islam can be attributed to a downright attack on such order. Due to the complex social conditions that offer a breeding ground for religion, we should acknowledge that it is difficult to achieve unequivocal causal explanations. Even if we ignore the particular explanations given by believers there remains a vigorous debate among scholars about the origins of Islam. Nevertheless, widely accepted explanations pointing to social tensions in the Arab heartland due to the rise of trade have been convincingly refuted. Patricia Crone has shown that they were not fundamental enough or sufficiently specific in time and space to explain such a deep shift in people's way of life and outlook.<sup>[8]</sup> She suggested that the only event with sufficient impact in the late sixth and early seventh century was the imperial threat to the Arab world from two sides: the Byzantine Empire from the West and the Persian Sassanid Empire in the East. The power of these giants (versus the Arab tribes) was accentuated by their state-like qualities and monotheistic religion. Where a direct political unification of the Arab tribes was unfeasible, they 'responded' with religious means: a monotheistic belief that matched, so to speak, the power of worldly empires by eliminating multiple and manipulable Arab gods. It helped achieve geopolitical aims, with the Umayyad Caliphate, hardly a century later, ruling over a territory that extended from the Indus to the Atlantic Ocean.

The geopolitical significance of the Reformation in early modern Europe is usually explained as an impetus for territories like the Low Countries to secede from the Catholic Habsburg Empire and for religious wars that haunted the German Länder in the late sixteenth century. Yet there is also a conceivable reverse influence, with the rise of sovereign states pushing the new religious conception. When Europe could still be imagined as a unified Christian Empire governed by a twofold Emperor-Pope, it was also possible to believe in a direct link between 'earthly' governance and the realm of the 'divine'. Actually people were accustomed to see real-world events as direct manifestations of God's presence and intervention. The disunity created by kings that pretended to be 'Emperors in their own realm' seemed to desecrate authority and involve ordinary people in an immoral or Godless pursuit.<sup>[9]</sup> How could so many different rulers pretend to represent the divine? The problem could only be solved by dismissing any claim to represent God on Earth and carry out His aims—even the Pope's. Luther's message did not deny the possibility of a good government ruling in accordance with God's will, but this could only be judged by intimate knowledge of the Scriptures. The distancing between the divine realm and a world ruled by earthly powers that occurred in the sixteenth century has been nicely illustrated in Kirstin Zapalac's study of the paintings that decorated the town hall of Regensburg (Germany) in the sixteenth century.<sup>[10]</sup> In a painting from 1536 on the wall of the council chamber, the Last Judgment is shown as an event happening on Earth. Almost a hundred years later it was replaced by a painting that depicts the virtues of good government in allegorical style, with a small zone in the upper part referring to the Last Judgment, clearly separated from the earthly events.

### Globalisation as a Territorial Impetus for Religious Revival

The age of globalisation has many characteristics, such as time-space compression<sup>[11]</sup> and the erosion of local values (in the wake of a spreading capitalism) that upset people all over the world.<sup>[12]</sup> Here, I conceive of globalisation solely as a changing territorial order, a new geography of authority. This has only recently received the systematic attention that transcends the stock remark that the state is fading away. The observations of authors on this subject mainly concern two transformations of the established international order. First, the emergence of transnational regimes that transcend national sovereignty with rules such as those issued by the WTO, the UN

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Human Rights Council, arbitration in commercial conflict or the issuing of quality certificates for eco-friendly production (MSC, FSC, etc.). The second is the creation of extraterritorial authority by states that create transboundary regimes among neighbouring states or special (industrial or agricultural) zones within states that are withdrawn from national control or democratic supervision. Saskia Sassen has applied herself for more than a decade in explaining that these forms of globalisation are not imposed on states by forces coming from the outside but are a logical consequence of the political and economic dynamics within states. While originally particularly interested in transnational regimes, she has recently shifted attention to the second category of 'the disassembling of national territory'.<sup>[13]</sup> We should acknowledge, however, that discussion persists on the capability of states to withdraw from transnational regimes or carve out special privileges. For example, the certification of eco-friendly practices has been discredited by countries of the (global) South as a neo-colonial Northern strategy and some of them have subsequently introduced their own standards or insisted on involvement in the way such certificates are issued.<sup>[14]</sup> While states are still able to enforce their rules with violent means, the only power that an international regime can wield is exclusion (which may anyway be an effective disciplining force).

All ingredients for a religious revival identified in the historic examples given above are obviously just as present in the current era: the experience of imperial threat (or opportunity) and a change in the spatial configuration of authority. The challenges may be different in the North and the South but they are unlikely to be solved by a nineteenth-century 'belief' in the state as 'saviour' given the corruption that characterises many contemporary authoritarian states (like Russia<sup>[15]</sup>). While political Islam seems to opt for re-establishing the historic caliphates, contemporary Christianity has distanced itself from external authority in its charismatic movements, which emphasise individual ability to cope with the absence of a territorial protective shield. The success of Pentecostal groups in Latin America depends on what Fer has called 'the Pentecostal paradigm of mobility', which gives its members the feeling of upward mobility and self-worth, something fitting a world-city rather than nation-state.<sup>[16]</sup> Conversely, Muslim fundamentalism, propagated by cultural shock<sup>[17]</sup> and territorial shock,<sup>[18]</sup> has elected for the *exit* option—or rather the revolutionary choice to remake the world according to its own image. In attracting people with divergent ethnic and geographic origins it shows itself a truly globalised movement, though lacking a religious 'toolkit' to make the geopolitical reality more palatable.

None of these movements can really be described as religious innovation in the same class as the birth of Christianity or even the Reformation. Change of this sort of magnitude cannot be detected (yet) in our age, although there are many spiritual movements ('New Age' religions) that aim to reinforce individual abilities to cope with a world in which it has become more difficult to feel represented. This aspect of the emerging territorial order is the main driver in a new human search for religious meaning.

## Notes

[1] Errol A. Henderson, 'Not Letting Evidence Get in the Way of Assumptions: Testing the Clash of Civilization Thesis with More Recent Data', *International Studies* 42 (2005) 458-69.

[2] Howard, D. Weinbrot, *Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). John K. Hale, 'England as Israel in Milton's writings', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 2.2 (1996) 3.1-54.

[3] Gertjan Dijkink, *National Identity and Geopolitical Visions: Maps of Pride and Pain* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[4] Albert O. Hirschmann, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard university Press, 1970).

[5] Akbar Ahmed, *The Thistle and the Drone. How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam*. (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2013).

[6] John D. Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul. How Jesus's Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004) 409.

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- [7] Daniel N. Showalter, "Churches in Context: The Jesus Movement in the Roman World" in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 388-419.
- [8] Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
- [9] See Stuart Elden for an extensive discussion on the changes in juridical and political conceptions of territory in this period. Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- [10] Kirstin Zapalac, 'In His Image and Likeness': Political Iconography and Religious Change in Regensburg, 1500-1600 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).
- [11] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
- [12] See Daniel Golebiewski, 'Religion and Globalization: New Possibilities, Furthering Challenges', *E-International Relations* accessed August 1, 2014.
- [13] Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). Saskia Sassen, 'When Territory Deborders Territoriality', *Territory, Politics, Governance* 1 (2013) 21-45. Saskia Sassen, "Land Grabs Today: Feeding the Disassembling of National Territory," *Globalizations* 10 (2013) 25-46.
- [14] Peter Vandergeest, and Anusorn Unno, 'A New Extraterritoriality? Aquaculture Certification, Sovereignty, and Empire', *Political Geography* 31 (2012) 358-67.
- [15] The term corruption insufficiently characterizes the Russian political system which suffers from a structural dissolution of central political authority that is itself an echo of globalization rather than isolation See: Johan Engvall, 'The State as Investment Market: a Framework for Interpreting the Post-Soviet State in Eurasia', *Governance: An International Journal of Policy, Administration and Institutions* (2013), accessed May 20, 2014 doi: 10.1111/gove.12064.
- [16] Yannick Fer , "Pentecôtisme et Modernité Urbaine: Entre Déterritorialisation des Identités et Réinvestissement Symbolique de l'Espace Urbain," *Social Compass* 54 (2007) 201-10.
- [17] Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).
- [18] Ahmed, *The Thistle And the Drone* (2013).