

# The Contemporary Ambiguities of Religions as a Source of Civilisational Identity

Written by Fabio Petito

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FABIO PETITO, SEP 25 2015

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Against the prediction of the theorists of modernisation on the inescapable withering away of religion, it is today beyond any doubts that religions are back at the centre stage of international politics and often this return appears to be antagonistic and does not seem to be for the (common) good. But how can we explain this visible resurgence of religion in world politics in the post-Cold War era? What can we say about the logics—if there is just one—by which religion interact, infuse or even 'sacralise' international politics today? These are questions of great topicality especially in the light of how religion and politics have been recently interacting both in the Islamic and the Western world as well as in their precarious relationship. In this article, my starting point is that the resurgence of religion as a central factor in contemporary international relations is linked to the renewed visibility of the concept of civilization in post-Cold War political discourses. More specifically, drawing on Johann P. Arnason's recent work—and in this regard Samuel Huntington's argument retains part of its validity—I want to argue that the resurgence of religions in world politics has to be read in the context of civilizations, defined in a fundamentally *culturalist* sense, reasserting themselves as *strategic frames of references*, not as direct protagonists, of international politics. This development also has to be read as part of a longer term process of challenge to Western dominance, that has intensified since the Second World War and that Hedley Bull called the 'cultural revolt against the West'.

But does such a 'civilizational' reading of politicised religions necessarily reinforce the influence of the 'culture talk' approach, with its essentialised and polarised tendencies? Or can this interpretation actually help to problematize the predominant reading of religion in IR as the ultimate threat to international order and stability (especially, in the forms of the identity politics of the 'new wars', the terrorist attacks of religious fundamentalists or the clash of civilizations thesis)? What does such a civilizational reading tells us about the status of the relationship between religion and politics both in the Islamic and the Western world as well as in their precarious relationship?

### The Post-Cold War and the Global Resurgence of Religion

For the predominant academic and public discourse following the end of the Cold War, the return of religion in international politics has primarily come in the form of a militant and violent-prone form of politics, almost as a God-sent plague or punishment on the earth, or 'the revenge of God', as the title of one of the first books that focussed on this resurgence seemed to evoke (G. Kepel). The examples are many: the conflicts in Bosnia, Algeria, Kashmir, Palestine, Sudan; but also the rise of world-wide Islamism and Hindu Nationalism or the growing role of the Christian Right on America foreign policy or of Orthodoxy on the Russian state; and of course, the events of September 11 came as a seal to unequivocally confirm such a worrying and destabilising trend. More generally, I think that there are three, possibly four, ways in which this resurgence of religion in international politics has been apprehended/read by the discipline of International Relations: 1) in the context of the so-called 'new wars' where political violence is often manifested within 'failed' states and driven by a politics of identity and irregular warfare designed along religious lines; 2) in the context of religious fundamentalism and international terrorism; 3) within the context and fears of a

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forthcoming 'clash of civilizations'; and 4) possibly, in the context of the growing attention to the role of religious domestic interests and agendas in the more assertive foreign policies of some states.[1]

Unfortunately, when the resurgence and relevance of religious identities in post-Cold War international relations has been acknowledged, in one of the above-mentioned four modalities, it has been detected and interpreted within the framework of what Scott Thomas has called the 'Westphalian presumption', that is, the notion that religious (and cultural) pluralism cannot be accommodated in international society but must be privatised or overcome by a cosmopolitan ethics, if there is to be international order.[2] In other words, according to this view, politics with reference to religious identity comes to the fore only *qua* ultimate threat to order, security, and civility, and its politicization is always an inescapable threat to security, inimical to 'modernity' and to the resolution of conflicts, as the 'new wars' driven by the politics of identity and the terrorist attacks of religious fundamentalists would show, for example.

## Religion and IR: The Biases of the Predominant Understanding

This view, which is very strong in western academia and political circles, is based on the assumption that politicised religion is always about political instability, a disordered state of international affairs, fundamentalist politics and terrorism and, as a result, it overlooks the positive role politicised religion (in a qualified way) can play to the modernisation, democratisation and even peace-building in several countries of the so-called Western and non-Western world as well as to the construction of a new normative structure adequate for a more *pluralist* and multicultural future world order. There are two reasons which can explain this biased approach of the predominant political analysis: the first has to do with the way we have traditionally thought about international politics, and its European experience and what, as I mentioned, could be called the 'Westphalian presumption'; the second has to do with the implicit bias of the social sciences against religion rooted in the Enlightenment's and Positivism's self-understanding vis-à-vis religion.

This is why I have argued that the rejection of religion seems inscribed in the genetic code of the discipline of IR.[3] Arguably, this is because the main constitutive elements of the practice of international relations were purposely established in early modern Europe to end the Wars of Religion. At that point in history—paraphrasing the powerful words of Thomas Hobbes—God made space for the great Leviathan (the sovereign state), that mortal god to which the *new modern man* owes his peace and security; religion was privatized, and through the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* (the ruler determines the religion of his realm), pluralism among states and noninterference were born and worshipped as the new sacred principles of the emerging Westphalian order. As a consequence, politics with reference to religion becomes the ultimate threat to order, security, and civility, and, must not inhabit the practice of international relations or, subsequently, the discipline of IR.

The second 'bias' lies, it seems to me, in International Relations' self-understanding as a party to the Enlightenment project, and in its self-conception as a social science that holds a privileged access to knowledge of social phenomena. Firstly, and more broadly, it should not come as a big revelation that religion and the Enlightenment have not always been on 'very good terms' either theoretically or politically. Rather, the Enlightenment project envisages as its central mission the supersession of those traditional religious-based *worlds* into a universal individually-based and rationally-justified *modern world*. [4] Secondly, and more specifically, we have to remember that modern international law, arguably the predecessor of the discipline of International Relations, was born under the auspices of Alberico Gentili's celebrated cry, '*silete theologi in munere alieno!*'—let theologians keep silent about matters outside their province!—which symbolically marked the end of the scholastic world and the advent of a new epoch, the Westphalian era, in which international politics would be examined from a secular rather than a theological standpoint.

## An Alternative Reading: Religions and Civilizations in Post-Western World

This problematic and biased assumption/presumption precludes a different understanding of the resurgence of religions in world politics. I want to argue that if many philosophers and sociologists have interpreted this return as 'the end of modernity' or the 'de-secularisation of the world', what is more relevant from the perspective of politics

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and international relations is that in the post-Cold War era religion has become a critical source of civilizational identity in a context where civilizations, defined in a fundamentally *culturalist* sense, are reasserting themselves as *strategic frames of references*, not as direct protagonists, of international politics.

This development is in a sense a typical post-Cold War fact to the extent that as Arnason has pointed out 'civilizational claims and references now play a more important role in the global ideological context than they did when the rival universalisms of the cold War era dominated the scene'.<sup>[5]</sup> It has, however, also be read as part of a longer term process of challenge to Western dominance, intensified from Second World War and that Hedley Bull called the 'revolt against the West'. According to Bull, the revolt against Western dominance comprised, five waves: firstly what he calls the struggle for equal sovereignty; secondly the anti-colonial revolution; thirdly, the struggle for racial equality; fourthly, the struggle for economic justice; finally, the struggle for what he calls the cultural liberation.<sup>[6]</sup> This last stage of the revolt against the West, what is also often referred to as the search for cultural authenticity of the non-Western world or the fight against its cultural neo-imperialism, had its most politically visible example in the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 and the worldwide emergence of political Islam but also the new assertiveness of Asian countries in the name of the so-called 'Asian values'.<sup>[7]</sup> It is my contention that we are today living in large part still within this process of cultural revolt, which it has arguably intensified since the end of the Cold War implied the political necessity of a common (political, economic, and social) liberal and western model for all the planet. Religion in this new context has become one of the major voices of resistance and provided the frame for a radical critique against the globalisation of a Western-centric and Liberal order. To use the effective words of Regis Debray 'religion turns out after all not to be the opium of the people, but the vitamin of the weak'<sup>[8]</sup> and becomes one of the key vectors of the political resistance and struggle in the name of the social ethics of 'really existing communities' and of arguments which resonate in the everyday life of people. This process of the cultural revolt against the West, it seems to me, is relevant to understand the new centrality of civilizational politics in the post-Cold War era – and in this regard Samuel Huntington's argument retains part of its validity.

Finally, this development is made in my view even more clear and pressing by the new centrality acquired by the issue of democracy and democratisation in the post-Cold War international agenda and in particular in the post-9/11 context. Contrary to what many supporters of democracy-promotion have been arguing, the spreading of democracy will not necessarily reduce the growing contestation of the Western-dominated nature of contemporary international society, but it could rather reinforce it as there seems to be growing evidence that the most recent successful cases of democratisation in the non-Western world are the ones driven by the indigenisation and cultural re-interpretation of democracy.<sup>[9]</sup> This process, which, borrowing from a notion developed in Christian theology, I call 'democratic inculturation',<sup>[10]</sup> seems to be the most appropriate way to root democratic institutions and forms of political participation into stable and lasting regimes—and definitively more likely to succeed than an externally-promoted (if not coercively imposed) strategy of liberal-democracy promotion. Such processes of 'democratic inculturation', which can be thought of as examples of the 'multiple modernities' paradigm, would arguably reveal even more clearly the political bias of contemporary international society by removing the criticism of the concrete impossibility of merging 'modern' political values and practices with 'traditional' cultures and ways of living.

## Civilizational Politics in a Postsecular World: An Epoch-Making Transformation of the International Society

In conclusion, our hypothesis is that the post-Cold War resurgence of religion in world politics is taking place through the reassertion of civilization, defined in a fundamentally *culturalist* (and therefore religious) sense, as strategic frame for world politics. What is at stake in this context is neither what the most theoretically appropriate definition of civilization is nor how we can better develop a civilizational analytical framework; it is rather the recognition—which Huntington has wrongly transferred into the realm of the academic debate on the definition of civilization—that the current political understanding of civilizations is significantly shaped by religious traditions. In other words, the predominant contemporary political understanding of civilization has naturalised the still important academic thesis that see in 'religious cores the most constitutive elements of whole civilizations'<sup>[11]</sup> which is based on the insight that '[t]he moral and spiritual architecture of every civilization is grounded, more than any other factor, in religious commitments that point to a source of normative meaning beyond the political, economic, and cultural structure themselves'.<sup>[12]</sup>

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Civilizational politics is the way in which religion infuses or even 'sacralises' international politics today. Civilizational politics is neither new nor unchanging. However, the contemporary civilizational politics seems to have very clear culturalist/religious connotations, which were less relevant for example, during the Cold War where civilizational politics was defined in a fundamentally ideological/political way. It is enough to think of the political transformation that the notion of the West has gone through, from the political community of the Free World which included, for example Japan and Turkey, to the culturalist-religious notion of a Judeo-Christian legacy which in the post-89 context makes it much more difficult to refer to Japan and Turkey as part of West, even if the old strategic and security alliances still.

Of course, other definitions of civilizations are possible and therefore different kinds of civilizational politics can be imagined: for example, we can think of civilizations as material cultures as Fernand Braudel has done with the Mediterranean; as a result, for example civilizations, defined as material cultures, could become strategic frame of reference for a civilizational politics of regional integration as it has been modestly attempted by a number of political justifications for a Mediterranean-centred regional political.

Today, the international society is experiencing an epoch-making process of transformation: the economic shift towards the East, the emergence of the BRICS countries, the further spreading of democracy. The global resurgence of religion is not unrelated to these structural changes. We need the pragmatism to recognize the emergence of a new multipolar world of 'multiple modernities', whereby the merging of 'modern' political values and practices with traditional local references and ways of living, often rooted in religious traditions, will be the rule rather than the exception. I have also called these developments a movement towards a post-secular international politics.[13] This is not only the result of how Western and non-Western societies alike are living through times of social transformation and political crisis, in which the established ways of conceiving the role of religion in politics and in the secular public sphere are being criticised and challenged; but also of the broader epoch-making process of slow, but ineluctable, transformation of the normative structure of international society beyond its Eurocentric civilizational origin and liberal ideological configuration. In this context, we need an intellectual move towards a post-secular international thinking, which is not only a self-conscious reflexive thematisation of these momentous challenges but also an attempt to chart a viable path towards the construction of global peace and justice.

## Notes

[1] Examples of this approach are Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000) and Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organised Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999). For a very insightful research that problematises some of the predominant views on 'religious fundamentalism' see, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *The Fundamentalism Project*, vols. 1-5 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991-1995).

[2] Scott Thomas, "Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously: The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Society", in Petito Fabio and Pavlos Hatzopoulos (2003), eds., *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, eds. (New York: Palgrave), 21-53.

[3] Petito Fabio and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, "The Return from Exile: An Introduction", in Petito Fabio and Pavlos Hatzopoulos (2003), eds., *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, (New York: Palgrave), 1.

[4] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), see in particular ch. XVII entitled 'Liberalism Transformed into a Tradition'

[5] Arnason, *Civilisations in Dispute*, 6.

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[6] Hedley Bull, "The Revolt Against the West", in *The Expansion of International Society*, 220-24. See also Andrew Linklater, "Rationalism", in *Theories of International Relations*, 2nd ed., ed. Scott Burchill et al. (Palgrave, 2001), 103-28 and Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. ch. 4.

[7] See for example, Robert Lee, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997). For the so-called 'Asian values' debate, see Fareed Zakaria, "Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew", *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1994): 109-26 and Daniel A. Bell, *East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[8] Debray, Régis (2008) "God and the Political Planet", *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4: 33-350

[9] As a telling example since Islam is often represented as incompatible with democracy, I want to point to the growing role that mainstream Political Islamic parties have been playing in advancing the cause of democracy in countries such as Turkey, Jordan and Indonesia, see for example John L. Esposito and John Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan: 2006).

[10] The term 'inculturation' is used in Christian theology to refer to the adaptation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church. The term was popularized by the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* of Pope John Paul II (1990), but predates that encyclical. See Peter Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990) and Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988). In *Redemptoris Missio* Pope John Paul II consistently talks of inculturation as a bi-directional dialogical process, the on-going dialogue between faith and culture. Such an idea, it seems to me, could also be productively applied to our contemporary understanding of democracy which could well be enriched by contributions of non-western cultures. For *Redemptoris Missio*, see [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_07121990\\_redemptoris-missio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html) accessed on 15/1/2007.

[11] Arnason, *Civilisations in Dispute*, 233. Of course here the locus classicus is Max Weber's analysis of the religious pre-conditions for Western modernity and capitalism, see *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London, Unwin, 1968)

[12] Max L. Stackhouse, 'Introduction', *God and Globalization*, vol. 3, eds. Max L. Stackhouse and Diane B. Obenchain (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 11.

[13] Petito Fabio and Luca Mavelli, (2014) eds., *Towards a Postsecular International Politics: new forms of community, identity, and power* (New York: Palgrave)

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## About the author:

**Fabio Petito** is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the Department of International Relations at the University of Sussex. He joined the Department of International Relations in 2007, having previously taught at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. He has also taught in recent years at the ESCP-EAP in Paris and at 'L'Orientale' University in Naples. Fabio holds a *Laurea* in Economic and Social Disciplines (DES) (*magna cum laude*) from Bocconi University, Milan, Italy and he undertook his MScEcon in International Politics at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth and his PhD in the department of International Relations at the LSE, where he was also editor of *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*.