What's God Got to Do with It? Violence, Hostility and Religion Today

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While religion might have been largely ignored by a western-centric international relations (IR) discipline throughout the twentieth century, in the third millennium of the Common Era religion occupies centre stage as one of the key issues in global politics today. The return of God to the international arena coincided with an era marked by globalisation and the end of the Cold War. The challenge of cosmopolitan ideals, universal values and market forces on communitarian societies contributed to the emergence of identity politics in which ethnicity and religion became increasingly important signifiers. The transformation of the Manhattan skyline in September 2001 brought the attention of IR scholars to political actions motivated not by political ideology but religion, and particularistic interpretations of religious belief legitimating violence to achieve religio-political ends. Today, the IR community has finally caught up with the reality that for most of the world, most of the time, religion plays a vital role in lives and politics. Open any newspaper or news programme and you are sure to be assailed by a story which has a religious element to it, whether it be the progress of Islamic State between Iraq and Syria, the Iranian nuclear programme, conflict between Israel and Hamas, the immolation of Tibetan monks, war between Christians and Muslims in the Central African Republic, the kidnapping of school children in Nigeria or Buddhist attacks on Muslims in Myanmar. In seeking to address issues of violence and hostility in the name of religion, policy makers have sought to engage and partner with religious actors, develop religious literacy and welcome religious actors into the public sphere. In this chapter we consider the current state of religious hostility in the world before examining the religious dilemma where religion is both a cause of violence, intolerance and hostility and also a potential solution to conflict. In analysing the casual influence of religion on violence the chapter considers the claims of religious actors themselves and how policy makers have sought to work with alternative religious actors in the battle for hearts and minds in a conflictual international order.

Religious Hostility in the World Today

Religious hostility and intolerance of other people's religious beliefs is endemic across much of the world and has significantly increased over the last few years. This hostility and intolerance is enshrined in government legislation and in the levels of social hostility experienced by people of other faiths and those of no faith. A recent Pew Research Center survey[1] on religious hostilities indicates that social hostilities involving religion reached a six-year peak in 2012, with high or very high levels of hostility rising from 20 per cent of countries in 2007 to 74 per cent in 2012. These social hostilities include crimes, malicious acts and violence motivated by religious bias or hatred and were prevalent in 151 countries (over three-quarters of countries in the world) in 2012. The increase in social hostilities involving religion is reflected across all the Middle East and North Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. Deaths related to mob violence related to religion occurred in 21 countries, with sectarian or communal violence taking place in 36 countries. Religion-related terrorist groups were active in 73 countries, with deaths or injuries occurring in 40 of these. Fifteen per cent of countries experienced religion-related war or armed conflict in 2012. In 91 countries, organised groups attempted to dominate public life by using force or coercion to advance their

religious perspective while preventing some other religious groups from operating. Seventy-eight countries have experienced violence or the threat of violence, including 'honour killings' in order to enforce religious norms. In almost half the countries of the world people have been displaced from their homes for taking part in religious activity disapproved of by the majority faith. Women have been harassed for violating religious dress codes in 63 countries a significant increase from 2007 when only 14 harassed women in this way. When it comes to converting from one religion to another, this led to hostility in 53 countries, including physical violence in 32 of those.

Brian Grim and his team at the Pew Research Center have produced the most comprehensive account of religious hostilities to date and present a picture of a world where religious intolerance is increasing at both societal and governmental level. The campaigns of Islamic State or Al Qaeda may attract news headlines but what the report reveals is a world in which governments are increasingly seeking to restrict and control religious belief and activity and citizens taking it into their own hands to intimidate and harass those of different faiths. In 61 countries the government generally does not respect religious freedom and in 147 countries interferes with worship or other religious practices. Seventy-five countries restrict public preaching, while 45 limit conversion from one religion to another. Government regulates the wearing of religious symbols, including head coverings and facial hair, in 54 countries. Forty-six countries formally ban some religious groups and 27 have attempted to eliminate an entire religious group's presence in 2012. The survey demonstrates a correlation between government restrictions on religion and the propensity for social hostility. The exceptions to this are harassment of Jews and folk religions: governmental harassment of Jews in 2012 occurred in 28 countries while social hostility towards the group occurred in 66; with folk religions the number of countries was 11 and 18 respectively. All religions have both experienced and perpetrated an increased level of harassment across the world compared to the preceding five years. Muslims were harassed in 88 countries, Christians in 83, Hindus in nine and Buddhists in seven in 2012.

Proponents of the Clash of Civilizations thesis[2] correctly identified religion as becoming a source of conflict after the Cold War but underestimated the propensity for clashes to occur not only between civilisations but within civilisations. In particular, conflict between Sunni and Shia within Islam in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan and intra-Sunni conflict between 'true believers' and 'apostates', Islamists and moderate Muslims kills far more people than any Islamic clash with African, Slavic/Orthodox, western (Judeo-Christian), Hindu or Sinic civilisations. While political-security considerations may trump religious motivations for Israel's attacks on Gaza or the Sri Lankan's government's destruction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, religious differences clearly play a role in how the other side is perceived and the value placed on the life of the other. A recent 11-country survey examining Muslim attitudes to Islamic extremism revealed that the overwhelming majority of the respondents expressed their concerns about such extremism. However, in all the Muslim majority countries surveyed, those unconcerned ranged from just 18 per cent in Malaysia and Pakistan to 51 per cent in Turkey. Over a quarter of the respondents in Egypt, Malaysia, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories felt that suicide bombing can be justified, while an average of 13 per cent had a positive view of Al Qaeda.[3] Religious designation, far from encouraging peace and reconciliation, appears to foster significant numbers of believers who express and demonstrate intolerance towards those who hold different views.

The most visible expression of religious hostility today can be found in the campaign of Islamic State to establish a caliphate under Abu Bakhr al-Baghdhadi in the Levant. Islamic State has called upon all Muslims to recognise and support the caliphate and has attracted up to five hundred British Muslims and many more French and Belgian ostensibly to fight the Assad regime in Syria but more particularly to establish an Islamic state through the introduction and implementation of Sharia law and the extermination of non-believers including Shia, Christians and Yazidis. The British executioner of journalist Jim Foley justified his actions on the same basis as Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups in terms of western attacks on Muslim lands:

Today your military air force is attacking us daily in Iraq. Your strikes have caused casualties amongst Muslims. You are no longer fighting an insurgency. We are an Islamic army and a state that has been accepted by a large number of Muslims worldwide.[4]

Faced then with increasing religious intolerance, hostility and violence across the world, how have governments sought to address these problems?

Faith-based Solutions to Faith-based Problems

Western governments have become increasingly sympathetic to the view that religious problems can have religious solutions. Rather than maintaining a secular polity, western governments have sought to engage religious actors in diplomatic, counter-terrorism and counter-radicalisation policies. This presents us with the religion dilemma where religion as well as being a source of violence is also a potential source of conflict resolution. Despite their claims to be peaceful, no mainstream religion is inherently peaceful: their sacred texts espouse violence in the name of god. Moderate and liberal versions of mainstream faiths have been able to contextualise violence as time specific or metaphorical but fundamentalist interpretations of the faith have been able to use examples of sacred violence and notions of exclusivity to legitimate hostility and intolerance towards those of other persuasions. And so it is to those moderate and liberal versions of faith that governments turn in order to secure their national interests and security objectives. The neglect of religion by academics, until recently, is replicated in policy circles. In a western secular polity, decision makers have traditionally argued that religious actors should confine their religious beliefs to the private sphere and present their case on the basis of rational argument in the public sphere, unencumbered by the irrationality of religiosity. Jurgen Habermas, whose seminal work on the public sphere[5] failed to mention religion at all, has led the academic re-engagement with religion in what is now a post-secular age.[6] Habermas argues that religious actors should be welcomed into the public sphere as people of faith and are to be respected by their secular counterparts, and in return they should argue their case on the basis of rational argument.[7] This call has been answered by policy makers encouraging greater religious literacy among diplomats, the military and development and law enforcement agencies.

Religious engagement began during the Clinton administration when the State Department established the Office for International Religious Freedom in 1998 at the request of Congress and started producing annual reports on religious persecution around the world. The annual reports examined religious hostility rather than engaging with religious actors, but this soon changed. One of the first acts of the George W. Bush presidency was to introduce the Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives to encourage faith-based organisations to bid for funding nationally and to deliver overseas aid projects. Often working with local faith-based partners to circumvent government corruption and deliver assistance effectively, this policy has proved effective and has been continued by the Obama administration. The Obama administration also introduced a Religious Advisory Board to advise on key domestic and foreign policies. Under Obama military chaplains have become the first point of contact with indigenous populations and religious literacy has been introduced as part of the training of the armed forces with an Inter-faith Center established at West Point military academy.

In 2009 Judd Birdsall set up a discussion group called the Forum on Religion and Global Affairs at the State Department with the specific intention of engaging religious actors to try and overcome the department's reticence in discussing or engaging with religious issues. The discussion group eventually merged into the Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society, which sought to engage with non-traditional partners to improve US standing in the world. Dialogue was established with faith-based actors in six areas, including religion and foreign policy a significant shift in US diplomacy.[8] The new desire to engage constructively with people of faith arises out of the war on terror and the radicalisation of Muslims, in particular, against the west and western-backed authoritarian governments throughout the Muslim majority world. Where opponents claim to be acting in the name of their religion it behoves western policy makers to understand the basis of such claims and work with co-religionists to counter such claims. This has been especially important as part of counter-radicalisation initiatives domestically.

Radicalisation, de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation are inherently contested in terms of definition and operationally.[9] In the war on terror such terms became synonymous with tackling Islamist extremism and resulted in governments engaging with those purporting to represent or understand such communities and the threat posed to and by young Muslim men supposedly at danger of radicalisation:

As US and European governments have focussed on stemming 'home grown' Islamist political violence, the concept of radicalisation has become the master signifier of the late 'war on terror' and provided a new lens through which to view Muslim minorities. The introduction of policies designed to 'counter-radicalise' has been accompanied by the emergence of a government-funded industry of advisors, analysts, scholars, entrepreneurs and self-appointed

community representatives who claim that their knowledge of a theological or psychological radicalisation process enables them to propose interventions in Muslim communities to prevent extremism.[10]

In Britain this led to the Prevent Strategy to combat violent extremism lumping together Islamists, far right, Northern Irish and animal and environmental activists. However, the main focus is clearly on Islamist extremism and engagement with a smorgasbord of academic, political, security and religious actors spearheading a policy which seeks to challenge the ideology that supports terrorism and those who promote it. It aims to further protect vulnerable people and support sectors and institutions where there are risks of radicalisation.[11] In practice this has led to government engaging with other extremists, particularly under New Labour, and also legitimating male religious leaders as the key representatives of their communities to the detriment of women and non-believers within those communities.[12] Rather than contemplate the extent to which government policy contributes to radicalisation, Muslim communities are co-opted to challenge and condemn Islamist extremism and to inform on suspect activity, including those intending to join Britons fighting in Somalia, Syria and Iraq. The difficulty for western governmental policy engaging with religious actors is that the influence of non-sectarian religious actors is increasing in policy-making circles while at the same time declining among those who practice their faith. Engagement with more radical religious actors who might have more influence on potential extremists is also fraught with difficulty:

Some of the government's chosen collaborators in "addressing grievances" of angry young Muslims are themselves at the forefront of stoking those grievances against British foreign policy; western social values; and alleged state-sanctioned 'Islamophobia'. PVE [Preventing Violent Extremism] is thus underwriting the very Islamist ideology which spawns an illiberal, intolerant and anti-western world view.[13]

In supplanting a secular discourse with a religious discourse, religious actors are engaged on the basis of their faith and as representatives of a perceived religious community. This representation, by definition, identifies religion as the main signifier of group identity, thereby reinforcing division and suspicion between the group and wider society.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to highlight the religious dilemma whereby western governments are increasingly abandoning secular approaches to religiously inspired violence and hostility in favour of engaging with religious actors as part of a counter-radicalisation strategy. The chapter has demonstrated that religious conflict and hostility is increasing and that western government's engagement with religious moderates and extremists is equally problematic. In the former case, non-sectarian approaches to religion are losing ground to sectarian and extreme positions, and in the latter case, engaging with alternative extremist groups can exacerbate the problem of radicalisation. Recognising largely male religious leadership of sections of society as representatives of the community provides them with legitimation at the expense of women and non-believers within these communities while simultaneously reinforcing separation and division from the rest of society. This chapter has highlighted difficulties without offering specific solutions and further research would throw greater light on the efficacy of faith-based solutions to religion-inspired violence and hostility.

Notes

[1] Pew Forum, 'Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High' (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2014).

[2] Samuel Huntington, 'The Clash of Civilizations?' *Foreign Affairs*, June (1993), [accessed 22 August 2014]; Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996); and Bernard Lewis, 'The Roots of Muslim Rage', *The Atlantic Monthly*, September (1990), [accessed 20 August 2014]

[3] Pew Forum, 'Muslim Publics Share Concerns about Extremist Groups' (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2013)

[4] Alexander Dziadosz and Steve Holland 'Obama condemns killing of reporter, US hits militants in Iraq', *Reuters* 21

August (2014), [accessed 23 August 2014].

[5] Jurgen Habermas), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

[6] Jurgen Habermas 'A "post-secular" society – what does that mean?' ResetDOC, 16 September (2008), [accessed 23 August 2014].

[7] Judith Butler, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); and Jurgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco : Ignatius Press, 2007).

[8] Amy Frykholme 'Under Hillary Clinton, the State Department Pursued Greater Religious Engagement', Religion and Politics, 8 May (2013), [accessed 23 August 2014].

[9] Alex Schmid, 'Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review', ICCT Discussion Paper, (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, March 2013).

[10] Arun Kundnani, 'Radicalisation: the journey of a concept', *Race & Class*, Vol 54, No 2 (2012): 3-25

[11] HM Government, Prevent Strategy, (London: The Stationary Office, 2011).

[12] Sukhwant Dhaliwal and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Women Against Fundamentalism: Stories of Dissent and Solidarity*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2014).

[13] Lorenzo Vidino, *Countering Radicalization in America: Lessons from Europe*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, Special report No, 262, 2010).

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