

## Peace, Conflict and the Resurgence of Religion in World Politics



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**ABSTRACT:** Religion has become an issue that not only affects domestic politics but also international security and world peace. There is a debate among scholars on how to interpret this resurgence of religious identity in international politics. There are scholars who regard the resurgence of religion as the reflection of the undeniable importance of religion to human beings who find meaning in life through religion. On the other hand, this phenomenon can be understood as a manifestation of the importance that identity politics, based on factors like race, religion and ethnicity has gained in international politics in the global age. There are interpretations that emphasize that the resurgence of identities in the global age is a result of the competition for power and resources. This has important implications for understanding the principles which can be used to resolve the conflicts associated with the resurgence of religion internationally as well as at the domestic level. Hence, this paper reviews some of these arguments and attempts to probe the factors behind the resurgence of identity politics across the globe in the post-cold war era. The paper also tries to understand the ways of conflict transformation, thereby emphasizing the role of peace education in the process.

**KEYWORDS:** conflict transformation, conflict, IR, peace education, religion

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have observed the increasing salience of religion in world politics in the post-cold war world and have tried to interpret it in different ways. A lot of scholarship has come out recently on the importance that religion suddenly seems to have acquired in international politics. It was Samuel Huntington who in his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article had warned that instead of ideological or economic conflicts, the world would see a proliferation of conflicts along cultural lines (Huntington, 1993, p. 22). Huntington's focus was on the impending clashes between civilizations divided along religious or cultural lines. This proposal of Huntington was criticised and dismissed by a number of scholars like Hugh Gusterson (2005), but it aroused a controversy that refused to settle and the legacy of the civilizational and religious explanations posited by this article remained in IR. Thereafter, many commentators continued to underscore that the 9/11 attacks had vindicated Huntington's hypothesis.

Further, a strong statement of the increasing importance of religious factors in IR came from Scott Thomas in his book *The Global Resurgence of Religion and Transformation of International Relations*. According to Thomas, this global "resurgence" of religion can be seen as "one of the 'megatrends' of the twenty-first century" (Thomas, 2005, p. 29). The point has been made by many other scholars through several captivating titles like *Bringing Religion into International Relations* (Fox & Sandler, 2004) and *Religion and International Relations: The Return from Exile* (Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003). Scholars like Gilles Kepel, focusing on the "resurgence" of Islam, Christianity and Judaism called this "the revenge of God" and a reprisal to modernity (Kepel, 1994). Thus, in this view, twentieth century becomes the "last modern century" (cited in Thomas, 2005, p. 45), pronouncing the end of the era dominated by the belief in the ultimate triumph of Western liberal modernity.

### 2. THE PHENOMENON OF RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE AT A GLANCE

Scott Thomas (2005) shows how in the present century religion has acquired undeniable importance for international politics. Thomas enumerates the various dimensions of this resurgence showing the importance gained by religion not only in socio-political affairs but also personal lives. He begins with a discussion on the Islamic revolution in Iran and goes on to elaborate on the role of religion in the demise of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. He then discusses the September 11 attacks on the US and the spurt of terrorism in the world. Furthermore, Thomas comments on the massive influence of religious diasporas in various countries and the spread of religions like Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism from the Global South to North, "promoting America's and Europe's re-evangelization" (Thomas, 2005, p. 31). The author notes the importance which religious leaders like Ayatollaha Khomeini, Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama or Desmond Tutu acquired in international politics and also how the world is witnessing the rise of various religious sects and movements which are influencing politics like the Falun Gong in China or the spread of Pentecostalism in the South East Asian countries like China, Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.

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Besides these manifestations discussed above, one might note the increasing importance of “faith-based diplomacy”, i.e. the participation of religious groups like the Christian Right (CR) in the United Nations or international peace initiatives, “U.S. Catholic, Mormon, and Protestant conservative organizations are combining forces to bring what they call a ‘faith perspective’ to the work of the United Nations” (Buss, 2004, p. 57). Buss argues that their agenda comprising issues of gender and population policies has influenced the policy of the United Nations.

And finally, this brings one to a deep underlying trend in most of the liberal democracies of the world. The focus of IR scholars studying religious resurgence has been predominantly on Islamic resurgence, but one of the most powerful trends in contemporary IR is the weakening of secularism in the liberal democratic states themselves. This is reflected in the pattern of international alignments as well. It has been noted that the European Union has a strong Christian identity and it is significant to note what Huntington comments on this, “... economic regionalism may succeed only when it is rooted in a common civilization. The European Community rests on the shared foundation of European culture and Western Christianity” (Huntington, 1993, p. 27).

### 3. IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY

An influential volume on the issue of religious resurgence declared that the rise of religion in the world has posed one of the most formidable challenges to the international relations theory (Hatzopoulos & Petit, 2003, p. 3). This contention has to be seen in light of the fact that traditional theories in IR, whether realist or liberal, do not assign any causality to cultural or religious factors in world affairs – they hint at anarchy or material interests as causal factors in their respective theories. However, recently many theorists have asserted that these theories, emphasizing material factors like power or economy, have failed to explain the importance gained by ideational factors like religion in world politics (Thomas, 2005, p. 74). Therefore, scholars point towards the role of ideational factors – ideas and values – in affecting the course of world affairs.

Another school avers that when identity becomes a means of getting access to certain resources or protesting against the denial of these, then politics of identity assumes importance. The same is true for religious identity. Identities become conflictual when they become a medium for contending for resources (see Gurr, 2015) – these can be conflicts between nations or within nations. These can be imperialistic ventures for resource grabbing as well. For instance, Achin Vanaik comments in his edited book *Masks of Empire* on demonization of Islam, “... we need to expose the US manipulation of the discourse on terrorism in order to serve its own Empire building project” (Vanaik, 2007, p. 120).

Further, one can discuss how inequalities have been exacerbated in the era of globalization and hence contention for resources has increased. However, identities are often also not only about the denial of access to resources but also about the politics underlying the abundance of resources (see Collier & Hoeffler, 2001). In many countries there were interests which coveted the mineral resources within these countries (see for instance report on Congo and Sierra Leone by De Koning, 2008) and ethnicity or religion became the tool for mobilizing support for gaining control over these resources. This perspective asserts that at both international and domestic levels, the world is witnessing a clash of economic interests in the garb of religious conflicts, exacerbated by the globalization of capitalism. Thus, both ideational and material factors have been attributed to the resurgence of religion in IR and a debate continues between the two schools of thought.

### 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR WORLD PEACE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The modern period in the West saw the salience of the concept of keeping religion distant from the state and keeping it confined to the private domain. The perspective asserted that the state must be neutral on religious matters. This approach was also adopted by many newly emerging multicultural states that gained independence from foreign powers. After decolonization they were faced with the question as to how a state, which does not stand apart from religion, is to manage the conflicting claims of different religions. If religion is allowed in the public domain, and irreconcilable religious beliefs clash over laws, policies and programmes then it poses vital problems for conflict resolution. Thus, secularism was also a recognition of the idea that the multicultural societies can resolve conflicts by acknowledging that religion is to be limited to the private domain and is not to be brought out in the public domain.

In contrast, many scholars have pointed out that how, in South Asia, deeply religious publics cannot be suddenly convinced of the secular logic. They note that religion is so deeply engrained in the minds of the people that it is difficult to deter people from religious observances in the public sphere (see Kaviraj, 1997). However, the pitfall of allowing religion in the public sphere is that it leaves ample room for political mobilization on religious lines which opens the way for polarization and violent conflicts. Thus, it might be noted that secularism stands above religions but fails in conflict resolution as it fails to attract the deeply religious. And religious conflict resolution, based on religious beliefs, falters because it often fails to stand above hardened religious positions in practice, and tolerance as a principal is left to theory.

The dilemma and tension between the role of enlightenment ideas and the religious ideas is reflected in Mark Juergensmeyer’s work *Terror in the Mind of God*. He tries to strike a balance between religion and enlightenment ideas for resolving the problem of religious violence. He emphasizes,

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Religion gives spirit to public life and provides a beacon for moral order. At the same time it needs the temper of rationality and fair play that Enlightenment values give to civil society. Thus religious violence cannot end until some accommodation can be forged between the two – some assertion of moderation in religion's passion, and some acknowledgment of religion in elevating the spiritual and moral values of public life, in a curious way, then, the cure for religious violence may ultimately lie in a renewed appreciation for religion itself. (Juergensmeyer, 2000, p. 243)

However, instead of adopting this sceptical acceptance of the role of religion, an influential scholarship today argues that religion can be a force for good in the world and can play a prominent role in conflict resolution and world peace. This was most forcefully brought to scholarly attention with the efforts of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa for bringing about reconciliation in a society torn apart by racial hatred and violence through the healing touch of religion by bringing to the centre values like compassion, forgiveness and confession of wrong deeds. For instance, Richard Falk talks about the importance of religion in building a global civil society, "It is my contention that this effort to construct a democratic global civil society is informed by religious and spiritual inspiration" (Falk, 2003, p.194)

The debate between the two different ways of conflict resolution, one which emphasizes secularism and the other which emphasizes religion mediated peace has continued between scholars. To state the dilemma precisely –the importance of religion in public life has to be acknowledged but politics cannot be allowed to take partisan position in today's multicultural nations. Therefore, instead of rejecting the salience of religion in societies, an approach which refuses to get partisan in matters of religion is required. This balanced approach might build cultures of peace and tolerance from the bottom up by enabling people to appreciate the common humanity in all people. This could be the first step towards building a plural and tolerant ethos.

### 5. CONCLUSION – HOW IS CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION POSSIBLE?

This paper emphasizes that the key to conflict transformation is transforming relations between people through the initiatives of civil society. There is need to develop people's initiatives for peace at the local, national and international levels in such a way that transformative dialogues are initiated between different communities. This paper suggests that transformation of the society begins with education: peace education can play a key role in this exercise – initiating an interreligious understanding between students, ensuring diversity in classrooms and encouraging extension activities aimed at healing initiatives. Art, music and culture can play a prominent role in this process. Societies which are built on the foundation of a creative pedagogy (see Groarke & Welty, 2019, for understanding the various creative ways of teaching ideas on peace and justice) can find creative ways of conflict transformation and can strive for a saner politics which helps maintain peace at the national and international levels.

Thus, for a world which is reeling under the impact of religious conflicts, this paper suggests a grassroots approach to building peace. The approach is built on the idea of promoting peace education by educationists and concerned civil society groups. The paper argues that the resurgence of religion in the world and the ensuing conflicts have to be understood as an outcome of the socio-political structures which direct religious affiliations of people towards certain political agendas. Therefore, the way out seems to be through a transformation of the relations between people in a creative direction through peace education.

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