

Religion in Contemporary International Relations

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Religion plays an increasingly explicit role in contemporary international politics, and the process of globalization serves to amplify its impact on international relations and domestic politics of many countries. Ever since the end of the Cold War one has seen more or less religious background against and dynamics underlying virtually all major international events, such as on-and-off Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, international counter-terrorism, the Kosovo Conflict, etc. There is a view that religion is coming back to the center of the international arena from the so-called Westphalian exile. Some scholars of international relations even argue that one cannot correctly understand international relations if he or she overlooks the role of religion.

Religion has even become kind of a resource for rivalry among international actors to be used for some most conspicuous contemporary political campaigns or for gaining leverage in a major global political conflict, or for countering the threat from a foreign foe, or for acquiring a better position in international politics. It can also be said that the field of religion has become a “new frontier” in the study of contemporary international relations.

I

Since the 1960s, and especially the end of the Cold War, the role of religion has been growing rapidly around the world. There was widespread revival of most religions in most regions of the world,

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and especially that of the Christian Church (particularly the Pentecostal Church), Islamism and folk religions while Christian and Islamic conservatives are growing in strength and political awakening. These are two major trends that were most striking and gained momentum during the latter half of the last century. Globalization has given rise to and exacerbated transnational religious phenomena such as religious fundamentalism, political Islam, ethnical and religious diaspora communities, missionary movements, religious NGOs, religious terrorism and religious human rights campaigns and has greatly changed world religious pattern, thus posing a challenge to the contemporary system of international relations based on nation states being the lead actors, the norm of national sovereignty guiding international relations and the secularization of world politics as its bedrock. In view of the global trend of religious revival and its accompanying trend of linking the worship of Gods with given cultures, nation states and civilizations, some scholars even conclude that struggle for the soul of a new world order has already begun and that proper handling of cultural and religious pluralism is becoming one of the most challenging foreign policy issues in the 21st Century.

One of the most striking features of global religious revival is the resurgence and expansion of missionary movements of Christianity and Islam and the interweaving of the southward movement of Occidental religions and the northward movement of Oriental religions, thus further facilitating transnational religious movements and rewriting and expanding the global religious roster. For example, the Christian missionary movement has not only come out of a period of relative stagnation after the so-called “great century” of Christian missionary movement as described by Prof. Kenneth S. Latourette of Yale University and ushered in an even “greater century,” but also brought about a shift of center of gravity for Christianity from the global north to global south. By the end of the last century, a typical Christian was no longer a European, but rather a Latino, or an African woman. “The rise of the Third Church”, “reverse missionary

movements”, “a black general leads white soldiers”, the coming of “the next Christendom”, etc. have reflected “the new face” of the Christian world missions. With a century-long accumulation of strength, Pentecostalism has now become the third largest force of the contemporary Christian Church characterized by its effort for localization, spontaneity, integration, grassroots expansion, transnationalization and multi-centralism, as the total number of its followers around the world has estimably increased to no less than 200 million. According to David Martin, a well-known British sociologist of religion, Pentecostalism “marks the end of the missionary era, not a new chapter”. The above-mentioned new Christian missionary movement has, to a great extent, changed the traditional image of missionary movement and missionaries and poses a new challenge to the impact of missionary movement on domestic politics and international relations as was traditionally understood. As a consequence of the southward shift of Christians, Christianity as a religious belief of Western colonialists has become “a thing of the past” and Christians around the world have gradually become so-called “victims” to religious persecution rather than the victimizers. This has greatly spurred so-called international religious freedom campaigns initiated by Western countries, and particularly the United States.

If it is true that globalization has boosted the transnational movement of religion, then the internet has brought about another significant conjunction of media and religion since the Reformation. Hence the changes that brought about online religious activities sometimes are even defined as “the Second Reformation.” Unlike broadcasting and television, online media has such features as “three most’s” (most rapid, most widespread and most proximate), “three no’s” (no binding law, no borders and no regulatory rules), as well as low thresholds, low costs and in real time. As a result, religious organizations have greatly raised their ability to mobilize the masses at the grassroots, influence the domestic political processes and involve themselves in world affairs. Internet may quickly turn a religious issue in any part of the world as a transparent political issue of global concern, and at

the same time provide opportunities for the growth of emerging religious groups or sects, which would challenge the established churches. The fact that internet has no national bounds facilitates the formation of trans-denominational and transnational identities of religious groups. This is a prerequisite for them to participate in global mass mobilization for global agenda. Like other media websites, religious websites, as an information “simplifier” or “amplifier”, would also help accelerate the spread of negative religious information and give rise to a biased perception of religion in international media and be used by certain countries to accuse other countries of human rights abuse or tarnish their international image, or become an instrument of religious terrorism under certain circumstances.

In international relations, religion never exists and acts in isolation. As both religion and nationality are transnational by nature, religion is of underlying importance to the ethnical problems of most nations in the world. Globalization tends to exacerbate the formation of diaspora communities of different religious and ethnic groups spread, intermingled and imbedded in larger societies, which has given rise to dual or multiple identities. This had a profound impact on the traditional patterns of religious and ethnic integration in all countries, and especially those Western countries that admit immigrants such as the UK, France and Germany. The exodus of immigrants and the worldwide communal fragmentation help bring religious and ethnic conflicts into the heartlands of the Western world. As a consequence, the “Islamic phobia” is fast proliferating across Europe and is a tough issue to be addressed in East-West relations today. Moreover, combination of violent religious extremism with nationalism, and particularly with ethnic separatism, provides a breeding ground for terrorist groups of all descriptions. Close relationship between transnational religious disputes and national territorial disputes, interlocking of religious and political boundaries, overlapping propositions of ownership of religious sacred places, hostility arising from religious issues between neighboring countries, etc. may serve to provoke more regional or

even international conflicts of greater intensity. The emerging phenomena such as “spin-off of domestic religious conflicts” and “strong religion vs. weak state” are presenting a new landscape characterizing many developing countries and contemporary international relations. After the end of the Cold War, domestic conflicts in many countries around the world tended to be internationalized. Though such conflicts are not just confined to religion, religious conflicts, transnational by nature, may evolve into international conflicts more easily. Religious and religion-related conflicts have replaced ideological conflicts as a major driver of international conflicts in today’s world. .

Another tendency related to international conflicts is a worldwide phenomenon of politicization of religion and religionization of politics. The manifestations of such a tendency are as follows:

First, religious extremism and fundamentalism (the so-called “strong religion”) are being universalized and politicized. Some scholars have induced the tensions between religious fundamentalism and the outside world in four modes, i.e. defining “strong religions” as conquerors, transformers, creators and renouncers in relation to the outside world, or in the same way they describe the radical behavior and militancy of religious fundamentalist groups by using five terms all beginning with the word “fight” (namely, fight back, fight for, fight with, fight against and fight under).

Second, religious organizations are very much involved in domestic politics and, above all, foreign policies in some countries. For instance, the so-called “political awakening,” or “political rise,” of religious conservatives in the United States is generally regarded as one of the most outstanding events in the U.S. political scene over the past three decades. Some people even describe this phenomenon as the U.S.-type “theocracy” that reflects the come-back dominance of religious forces, or a “cultural war” that determines the direction of American society and culture. Under the impact of religious organizations, both Left and Right, in the United States, religion has a growing

influence on the country's foreign policy. At present, the impact of religion on the U.S. foreign policy is characterized by such features and tendencies as intensified lobbying activities in Congress, institutionalizing, grassroots mobilization, alliance building, greater media efforts as well as treating religion as a top national security issue.

Third, religion-based or faith-based nongovernment organizations (NGOs) play an increasingly important role in the international political arena. On top of it, NGOs, religious or secular, whose work agenda is focused on human rights and religious issues, often act as informal executors of the foreign policies of certain countries. In other words, such organizations have become principal organizers of international religious freedom campaigns or new human rights campaigns that reach out to the local communities in Western countries and help build transnational networks of religious advocacy groups and faith-based international human rights regimes. Interplay between international religious NGOs on one side and sovereign states, international governmental organizations and the NGOs of different natures on the other constitutes a dynamic factor that affects global governance and contemporary world politics.

Fourth, the emerging "fourth wave of international terrorism" has accelerated the development of religious issues into a question of "regime survival" or "homeland security" that confronts many countries. Meanwhile, religious security is becoming a national security issue or part of the effort to counter terrorism by military means in the countries concerned. At present, religious terrorism has become the primary form of international terrorism, and expected combination of radical religious groups and weapons of mass destruction is perceived as "the greatest threat facing the world today" by some in the West.

Just as religion is not synonymic to ethics or morality, it is also absolutely not identical with terrorism. In the field of international relations, religion is both a "source of turmoil" and a "peacemaker." In common sense, religion has a salient dual character by playing both positive and negative roles in worldwide

efforts such as poverty reduction and mediation over international and regional conflicts as well as in the multi-track or “Seventh Track” diplomacy. They are also active in their own way with ethical propositions at international forums and joint efforts in response to global environmental problems. All this displays the contribution of religion to promoting the cause of world peace, progress and justice.

Consequently, on the one hand, there are arguments in the academic community that religious conflicts and identity politics will replace the ideology-based conflicts and politics in the Cold War as elaborated in books like *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (published in 1993), *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995), *Clash of Civilization and Remaking of World Order* (1996); on the other hand, there are also academic works such as *The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (1994) and *Faith-Based Diplomacy: Trumping Realpolitik* (2003) in which the authors argue that religion is one of the most effective instruments for preventing and resolving international conflicts. Involvement of religion in international affairs has greatly increased popular engagement and representation. Due to its moral authority, impartiality, international connection, abundant experience and capacity of mass mobilization, religious involvement is regarded as an effective means of handling international disputes. Its role in the foreign policies of some countries is rediscovered and activated. As is distinct from the decision-making of rational actors, the “faith-based diplomacy”, or “New Diplomacy”, is becoming increasingly operable and provides an effective alternative to traditional diplomacy.

II

In a nutshell, the role of religion in international relations may well be defined as “unprecedented”. However, in social science theories, the neglect of religion finds its root in the Enlightenment and it has for long been regarded as a dispensable, collateral social phenomenon. One finds the “Westphalian exile” of religion

not only in the system of international relations dominated by Western powers, but also in the social science theories of the West. Today, the mainstream schools of thought in the study of IR like neo-realism, neo-liberalism and constructionism, all neglect, to varying degrees, the role of religion in IR, and the rejection of religion seems to be kept in the genetic code of the discipline. Therefore, the author has remarked jokingly that study of IR is a “disaster area” hit by religious illiteracy. The resurgence of religion on a global scale, and especially the impact of the three major religious movements (rising political Islam, “political awakening” of the Religious Rights in the United States and development of the Liberation Theology in Latin America) in the contemporary international relations and the outbreak of three highly religious events (the Iranian Revolution, the regime change in Poland with ensuing regime changes across East Europe and the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States that shocked the world) have dealt a telling blow to IR theories that neglect the role of religion. As a result, the modernization or secularization theory according to which religion would gradually be individualized and marginalized, has also collapsed. Soon, views and comments such as “global revival of religion”, “enchantment of the world”, “transnational religion and fading states”, “religious nationalism confronts secular states”, “religious conflicts have replaced ideological divide”, etc. abounded in news reports and academic publications around the world and replaced the assertions of “decline of Christendom”, “God is dead”, “the advent of post-Christian or post-religious era”, etc. which had been prevalent prior to the 1960s as epochal labels. All kinds of theses on de-secularization or sanctification of the world politics have become major subjects of religious studies in academic communities of many countries.

In the context of religion coming back to the center stage of international relations from “the exile”, IR scholars in the Western world began to discard their distorted views and tinted spectacles and squarely look at the role of religion in international relations. In Europe and the United States, news media are paying growing

attention to religious issues; colleges and universities are competing with one another in giving new courses on religion and foreign policy, or religion in IR for graduate students; research institutions often sponsor international academic conferences on the subject; and books, publications and doctoral dissertations on this subject abound. It appears that there is kind of a “religious awakening”, or “religious reflection”, in the field of IR studies and teaching in the West with new efforts to bring religion into the study of IR, thereby broadening the connotation and scope of IR theories. Some Western scholars have even proposed to introduce international political theology in IR as they conclude that the introduction of international political economy is designed to rectify the negligence of economic factors in the discipline while the introduction of international political theology is aimed to rectify the systemic negligence of religion, culture, ideas or ideology in IR as a “social science”. Despite the fact that it is still debatable as to the possibility of adding religion to the study of IR, that religious studies still have a fairly limited impact on the discipline and that it even takes a far longer time before a “paradigmatic shift” or a “religious turn” would ever take place in the study of IR, the challenge of religion to the existing IR theories, its impact on rectifying or even transforming the discipline have definitely been enlisted on the research agenda of IR.

On the role of religion in contemporary international relations, the views and analyses of Western scholars, and especially those of IR are similar though they are somewhat different. The connection between religion and international relations is attributive to religion as worldviews, identity and legitimate sources and that religious groups act as mass campaigns and their formal organizing bodies. The conventional view among scholars is that religion impacts international relations in the ways as follows:

First, religious ideas and tenets have a leverage over a country’s foreign policy by way of influencing the views of decision makers, public opinion leaders and the common people. This is the most important way in which religion impacts international relations and international systems.

Second, religion is one of the legitimate sources that can be used by all actors in international systems. For instance, the “Holy War” serves to legitimize acts of war while the idea of “just war” and the concept of “humanitarian intervention” also have their religious and theological origins.

Third, state-related religious actors and non-state ones get themselves involved in world affairs directly or indirectly, and at the same time certain religious leaders are highly influential in the international political arena.

Fourth, religion is one of the most important means for transnational groups to construct their identities. In many cases, religious identity is more important and extensive than ethnic, class and gender identities.

Fifth, religion has now become part of “soft power” as relative to “hard power” such as military power or economic strength in IR. Religious values and norms influence world public opinion and international regimes in different ways, and using the “soft power” is one of the most important ways by which religious institutions influence the foreign policy of their own country.

Sixth, religion can influence international relations and international security through transnational and cross-border religious phenomena and movements such as religious conflicts, missionary movements or religious terrorism as well as religion-related issues such as human rights issues, population growth and abortion. In reference to the aforesaid inter-connection between religion and international relations, as a British scholar noted, that religious actors used to be regarded only as irrelevant through “interesting” phenomena in world affairs. But now “it is widely accepted that various religious actors can not only directly affect the internal politics of states and thus qualify state power, but also have significant ramifications for international relations”.

III

In China, in the three decades between October 1949 when the People’s Republic was born through the end of the “Cultural

Revolution” in the late 1970s, religious studies had virtually been paralyzed. Given that there was only detraction of religion without any serious studies at the time, ideological expositions of religious policies took a lion’s share in the contents of publications on religious issues. As of the late 1970s or the early 1980s, religious studies in China have gradually been reinvigorated in a fairly robust fashion and also in a clear academic reorientation. Nevertheless, compared with progress in other disciplines such as philosophy, history and sociology, studies undertaken by IR scholars within China on international religious issues were relatively sluggish. It was not until the early 2000s that one had seen comprehensive reviews of international religious issues, some of which were not contributed by IR scholars. As IR scholars in the West began to pay more attention to religion, and especially to non-traditional security issues including religious ones, those in China also began to take up research on religious issues. Consequently, research institutions and research projects on non-traditional security issues were developed, religion and culture were enlisted as non-traditional security issues in research programs and a considerable number of books and articles were published. The academic community in China is attaching greater importance to the role and impact of culture and religion in the formation of the national security strategy. A great many research projects on cultural and religious issues are funded by the National Social Sciences Endowment and relevant central, provincial or municipal government agencies, or undertaken by Ph.D. students for their dissertations. Efforts by the above-mentioned research institutions, commissioned research projects and research findings are combined to usher in a new phase of academic discussions about the role played by religion in international relations and world politics in China. Such discussions seem to display the following features as well as noteworthy problems:

First, efforts are focused more on cultural issues to the neglect of religious ones, which is manifested in that religious phenomena are usually treated as part of culture. True, it reflects the

fact that religious studies in China, and especially studies of international religious issues are lagging behind those in some other countries; it also indicates that under the current circumstances Chinese scholars are still fairly reserved and overcautious with misgivings in their research on general religious issues.

Second, a significant number of scholars are engaged in research topics on all forms of religious extremism, ethnic secessionism, and especially specific issues pertaining to Islamic terrorism, religious conflicts and ethnic religions. This, of course, attributes to the perceived national security threats facing China. However, it is also the case with the academic communities in some Western countries. The present-day grave concern over religion as possible security threats and/or the fact that studies of religious issues tend to be more “security-oriented” make one worry that research findings about religion and its impact on international relations would appear as “short-and-pithy” news reports and comments, especially in this country.

Third, there are more research findings that just recount current events than those that are based on substantial and comparative studies; there is not much involvement of other disciplines like sociology and political science; and there is lack of a large data base and a systematic structure of theoretical analysis. All these drawbacks are yet to be mitigated. Primary indicators of the maturity of any discipline or its research priorities are the formation of its research paradigms and the quantity and quality of treatises and programs. There have not been many scholarly findings about religion-IR nexus in China in recent years, not to mention landmark reports or papers.

Fourth, Chinese scholars are not closely following the latest developments of research work in related areas in other countries. Nor have they established an integrated mechanism of introducing, translating and critiquing research findings of their counterparts abroad. Such mechanisms are functioning fairly well in other disciplines such as IR in this country.

Fifth, the study of religion in international relations and related issues call for combined effort by scholars of IR and religious

studies. But in this country, it is common that IR scholars do not have adequate knowledge of religion whereas those of religious studies do not fully grasp international relations, and disciplines of IR and religious studies are separated from one another. It is an irony that international relations and religion are two extremely popular subjects of study in China now. By and large, therefore, except for China-related subjects, studies of international religious issues in China are still at a preliminary stage for outreach and accumulation of research findings, being vulnerable in academic competition with those in other countries, and especially in terms of data processing, quantitative analysis and transnational field studies. Nevertheless, it is still possible for Chinese scholars to make innovative contributions to the academic progress in this field by way of drawing on experiences other disciplines such political science, IR theories and sociology, etc., and conducting case studies, especially those case studies on religious factors in China's foreign policy and international relations. There is a positive sign that displays integration and interconnection of studies of religion and IR, and rapid progress will be made over time.

Of course, envelope of the security theory in the study of IR is undoubtedly a major driving force that is facilitating in-depth discussions and academic reorientation of the research on religion in IR in China. In terms of the study on international religious issues, there is a sub-division between "primary subjects" and "collateral subjects." Making such a distinction is somewhat arbitrary, for in actual research work these two types of research are not only closely interrelated, but complementary in terms of methodology, subject matter and purpose. The author endorses the idea of combining both approaches. However, making such a distinction helps one better understand the current status and prospects of research on religion in international relations in China. Generally speaking, such studies in the narrow sense began rather late both in China and in the world as a whole. This began to change only at the end of the last century, and especially after the September 11 terrorist attacks. As for

such studies in the broad sense, they had begun earlier and were fairly popular in China, which attributed to academic pursuits in theology, philosophy, religious studies, sociology, history and the study of diplomacy. In the West, such studies both in the narrow and broad sense are fairly evenly conducted today, and many publications in this area are research findings on both counts. Scholars in China have undertaken a great deal of basic research on world religions, Western theology and philosophy, and many of them have actively participated in discussions of international religious issues in recent years. Chinese IR scholars are also increasingly concerned about religious issues, being no longer totally negligent as they have been in the past, and the two kinds of approaches mentioned above tend to develop in a somewhat even manner.

In view of the above, in-depth research on religion in IR or international religious issues undertaken by Chinese scholars seem to hinge on whether or not religion will become a “mainstream” subject in IR or political science. Though the study of IR and world politics cannot totally encompass the study of international religious issues, it will become an indispensable and more powerful tool of analysis especially with regard to the aforesaid “primary subjects.” Given that religion is playing an increasingly prominent role in contemporary international relations and that traditional and non-traditional security threats are more and more intertwined, it calls for IR scholars in China to undertake the study of religious issues seriously. Religious studies and IR studies are both low-threshold domains in which other disciplines may be involved, as in the case of research on religion in IR. As things stand now in this field of research in China and abroad, it appears that comparative transnational case studies and the establishment, on the basis of these descriptive cases studies, of a proper theoretical framework in which religion affects international affairs both as an independent variable and dependent variable points to the direction of interdisciplinary studies of religion and international relations in future. 