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A Post-Secular World?

Cesare Merlini

The past two decades appear to have been marked by a return or revival of religion on the international scene. Christians in the United States are wielding powerful and visible, sometimes decisive, influence in the political sphere. More Muslim women are taking up the headscarf to mark their identity in their native or adopted countries. Israel seems increasingly to be becoming a Jewish state. And since it is always tempting to read such phenomena as trends and extrapolate them into the future, a picture has emerged of a world turning post-secular, as it is becoming post-Western.¹ Several authors link the growing activism and visibility of private religious or ecclesiastic organisations with the rise of religious fundamentalism and the related attempt to impose a chosen reading of basic scriptures on the conduct of public affairs.² The two developments do seem to be taking place at the same time, but a closer look suggests that they are often distinct and occasionally contradictory, at least as far as the three major monotheistic faiths are concerned.

Christian metamorphosis

Christianity is undergoing a profound transformation. The traditional European churches, both Catholic and Protestant, appear to be approaching

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their twilight hour, despite the spiritual richness of certain circles. There are, to be sure, occasional high-profile and successful media events, but ordinary worship services are increasingly deserted and pollsters who ask about faith are receiving fewer and fewer positive answers.³ The paedophilia scandal, affecting the Catholic Church in particular, has been another downward step in an already adverse trend. The Vatican may continue to enjoy some political influence, mainly in Italy, but the original Christian connotations of many centrist parties in Western Europe have to a large extent faded. The cases of the Orthodox churches may differ for local reasons, but their roles

The American way of proselytism has spread worldwide

have been relatively marginal in the fate of Christianity as a whole. The decline of traditional European Christianity, moreover, inevitably reduces proselytism abroad, raising questions about the fate of its past missionary vocation.

This decline has been paralleled over the last few decades by the rise of neo-Protestant confessions – Evangelists, Pentecostalists and others – which have displayed an impressive capacity to reach people and raise funds. These groups epitomise the Christian contribution to the global religious revival. They are successful in Latin America, Africa and East Asia, but their cradle was, and their driving force remains, in North America, especially the United States. While the American constitution famously provides for the separation of state and church, the political influence of neo-Protestant organisations grew substantially during the last quarter of the twentieth century, first domestically under the influence of popular TV preachers, and then internationally. The trend continued through the first decade of the present century.⁴ The American way of proselytism has spread worldwide, promising God’s help for earthly wealth and health and making ample use of the media, commercial slogans and private funds. The triumphant mega-church model is now being introduced to emerging Brazil and poor Nigeria; while it has been flourishing for some time in industrialised South Korea. Thus, although some depict this Christian transformation as a shift of its main focus and influence from the northern hemisphere to the southern, following demographic dynamics and in parallel with the decline of the West, it has in fact

not been so much a transfer southward as a shift westward, from Europe to America.⁵

This emerging movement is not the same as Christian fundamentalism. Traces of the latter can be found on the old continent; the unrepentant Catholic sect founded by arch-conservative Bishop Lefebvre in 1970 following Vatican II has been readmitted into the Church by the current Pontiff. And while those who oppose the teaching of evolutionary science in schools, for example, belong mostly to American neo-Protestant organisations, it would be wrong to call all such groups fundamentalist, despite their common and frequent tendency to cite from the Scriptures with limited respect for the translation, exegesis and history of the texts.

The impact of all these changes on foreign policy and international relations is mixed. The struggle against abortion and birth control in developing countries finds conservative neo-Protestant organisations in the United States occasionally allied with Muslim hardliners as well as with the Roman church. At the same time, their combative anti-Islamic rhetoric, especially after 9/11, was a matter of concern even for President George W. Bush, a self-proclaimed born-again Christian. American 'Christian Zionists' support and heavily fund Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the main stumbling block in the way of peace in the Middle East. Many believe the return of the Israelites' children to the Holy Land is a precondition for the Second Coming of Christ, to restore the Kingdom over the Judeans, who are guilty of deicide – a belief reminiscent of the Shia Muslim expectation of the return of the Hidden Imam.

Two Islams?

The Western perception of Islam is coloured predominantly by the forms and practices found in the Greater Middle East. For Europeans this is principally due to history, proximity and immigration, and for Americans there is the question of Israel. Security of oil supply and, most recently, terrorism, are shared concerns. It is also in this part of the Muslim world that the rhetoric of resentment is most widespread. The failure of most attempts to make particular states more democratic and secular, under the influence of Western socialist or capitalist models, has amplified the sense of frustra-

tion. Thus Muslim elites have, as Georgetown Professor John L. Esposito put it, 'retreat[ed] from the secular path'.⁶ In fact, the weakness of reformist and lay circles strengthens alternative religious identities, which become imbued with an anti-Western flavour, to the point of being termed 'resistance', a word Europeans link with their own past struggle against fascism. The unexpected popular uprising in Tunisia beginning in December 2010 raised, for many in the West, twin spectres of a domino effect and an Islamist threat. The former quickly materialised in Egypt and other Muslim countries, but the consequences for religious revival appeared to be mixed. On the one hand, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Muslim parties or organisations that had been kept down at a high cost for the democratic

Muslim parties have returned to the political stage

credentials of the governments concerned, and embarrassment for the West, have returned to the political stage. On the other hand, the demonstrations have focused on the political empowerment of domestic civil society rather than on bashing Christianity, the West or Israel. As of the end of February, public displays of prayer by protesters had not had the quality of religious fanaticism, let alone inclination to terrorism.

Islam in the rest of Asia is a different story. Most states, whether majority or minority Muslim, have developed greater effectiveness and legitimacy than those in the Middle East. Identity and ethnic problems are often dominated by relations other than those with the West (between Muslims and Hindus in India, for example) and the interplay between Islam and secular institutions is less confrontational. It would be a false symmetry to draw a parallel between an eastward transfer of Islam with the westward trend in Christianity, but Asian Muslims (along with their non-Muslim countrymen) seem better equipped to face the challenges of science, globalisation and their secularising impact than their co-religionists in the Middle East.

Islamic fundamentalism, defined as the attempt to impose sharia law on the conduct of domestic and international affairs, cannot be identified with the quest for or defence of identity through religion. Opinion polls of Muslims, including those in the Middle East, reveal large majorities who

see religion as a source of identity and moral inspiration but are in favour of democracy and the rule of law.⁷ While critical of Western, particularly American, foreign policies and ways of life, they increasingly value freedom and see fundamentalism as a reflection of backwardness and isolation.

Judaism and the return of Israel

One of the few sentiments shared by most Muslims everywhere is an aversion for the Israeli state. But the memory of the Holocaust and the defence of the homeland given back by history have been inseparable identity factors for most contemporary Jews. In the Diaspora, revival of religion manifests itself through the display of symbols, such as the kippah or yarmulke, and participation in communal rites that often go beyond personal religious beliefs. In Israel there has been a steady drift towards confessionalism of the state, manifesting, for example, in proposals for a required oath of loyalty to a Jewish state. This is at odds with the original secular concepts of many of Israel's founding fathers, and a source of deepening divorce from most of the cultural elite.

The idea of a Jewish metamorphosis is self-evident. After nearly 20 centuries of dispersion among nations, of unrivalled persecution and, at the same time, extraordinary cultural interaction with host countries, the return of Israel to the land of David was bound to have a profound transformative impact on Jewish culture, of which we are probably seeing only the beginning.

Jewish fundamentalism, in its religious sense, is embodied by the orthodox and ultra-orthodox branches, which are active in various forms both in Israel and in the Diaspora. It does not coincide with unconditional support of the Israeli government; some Orthodox denominations opposed the Zionist movement, and still disown its product. There is, to be sure, a sort of political fundamentalism that claims critical dissent with regard to any decision of the government that threatens the survival of the Israeli state and is a de facto expression of anti-Semitism. This is not a majority view, but those who hold it have power and influence, especially in the United States. It is this debate around political fundamentalism, and not religious orthodoxy, that will shape the Jewish metamorphosis.

The fate of the Westphalian state

If religion is returning as a decisive actor on the international stage, where is it returning from? Religion was in theory consigned to a marginal role by the political system of sovereign, secular states enjoying exclusive prerogative over the use of force and non-interference from outside, including churches, that came out of the 1648 Peace of Westphalia. In fact it continued to play an important role, at least until 1945, which many consider the birthday of Western secularism. The European state system has, meanwhile, been adopted globally, warts and all, and today the world is divided into some 200 state entities which formally claim exclusive and legal sovereignty and independence from external meddling, whatever the typology of their internal regimes.

Yet there is a widespread perception that the Westphalian state model is being increasingly undermined. Three symptoms are frequently cited. Firstly, independent sovereignty is being eroded, not so much by subordination to hegemonic powers as in the past or by the intrinsic weakness of today's failed or failing states, but by a growing interdependence, above all economic, among nations and a mounting concern about global challenges. Secondly, the nature of global conflict is changing. While strictly inter-state wars, a common feature of the Westphalian order, have become rare, the number of conflicts involving sub-state or non-state actors is on the rise. In almost all such conflicts, moreover, at least one of the actors self-identifies on religious grounds. There is a widespread sense of insecurity, which cool assessment of historically low casualty figures despite a growing global population is apparently unable to dispel.⁸ The fact that the civilian share of casualties is high, perhaps unprecedentedly, contributes to that feeling. Thirdly, while violations of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs by dominant powers may be less common than in the past, that principle is coming under increasing pressure when national action threatens the environment or security of a larger community of states, as in the case of nuclear proliferation, or when egregious violations of human rights are not dealt with domestically, especially when that happens in weak or failing states.

Since the mid-twentieth century, a large number of treaty-based international institutions have been established and have grown, or at least survived

after birth, and there has been a recent proliferation of functional (as opposed to institutional) multilateral bodies, such as the various 'G' groupings, with ambitions of global governance. But there is another feature of the new world order to be taken into account: a growing inter-society dimension joining, and to a degree overshadowing, the basic inter-state structure of international relations. Civil societies, while undergoing profound transformations in almost every nation, increasingly communicate with, confront and occasionally fight one other. This development has translated into a proliferation of transnational groups, spontaneous associations and non-governmental organisations, not to mention virtual gatherings on the Internet. Only a small fraction have a religious nature, but they are not insignificant.

The return of religion, then, is only part of the post-Westphalian order in the sense that it is not a restoration of Church influence within and between nations but a renewal of the influence of confessions and sects on the secular polity. However, as political scientist Olivier Roy put it, if 'there is a close link between secularization and religious revivalism, [the latter] is not a reaction against [the former], but a product of it'.⁹ The increased activism of confessional bodies worldwide can also be seen as a consequence of the emergence of a new international system, which in turn is a product of the secular approach that prevailed during the second half of the twentieth century. That epoch was marked to a significant extent by rationality and relativism rather than by the absolutist rhetoric patriotism and ideology had borrowed from religion during the nineteenth century, and by the war-prone nationalism that devastated the first half of the twentieth. The rational secular approach was at the foundation of the defeat of the Soviet empire without resorting to 'hot war', the success of nuclear deterrence over four decades of imminent nuclear holocaust, which there is a tendency to forget, and the process of European integration, which has buried a long history of bloody rivalries and has become the most advanced experiment of shared sovereignty on Earth, even in its current hybrid and unfinished state. In these cases the contribution of leaders of good will, inspired by a belief in God, human fraternity and the commandment of peace was significant, to be sure, but it is noteworthy that most of them belonged to the more secular streams of their respective confessions.

Two scenarios

Two neatly opposed scenarios for the future of the world order illustrate the range of possibilities, albeit at the risk of oversimplification. The first scenario entails the premature crumbling of the post-Westphalian system. One or more of the acute tensions apparent today evolves into an open and traditional conflict between states, perhaps even involving the use of nuclear weapons. The crisis might be triggered by a collapse of the global economic and financial system, the vulnerability of which we have just experienced, and the prospect of a second Great Depression, with consequences for peace and democracy similar to those of the first. Whatever the trigger, the unlimited exercise of national sovereignty, exclusive

Anger and anxiety are common drivers of the Tea Partiers

self-interest and rejection of outside interference would likely be amplified, emptying, perhaps entirely, the half-full glass of multilateralism, including the UN and the European Union. Many of the more likely conflicts, such as between Israel and Iran or India and Pakistan, have potential religious dimensions. Short of war, tensions such as those related to immigration might become unbearable. Familiar issues of creed and identity could be exacerbated. One way or another, the secular rational approach would be sidestepped by a return to theocratic

absolutes, competing or converging with secular absolutes such as unbridled nationalism.

One symptom that makes such a scenario plausible has become visible. Many commentators have identified anger or anxiety as a common driver of the Tea Party movement in the United States and the rise of xenophobic parties in Europe, perhaps stemming from a self-perception of decline. Anger (directed towards the neo-colonialist or pro-Israeli West or – especially recently – domestic authoritarian regimes) has also been associated with grievances in the Middle East, following the failure of earlier reformist and secular movements.¹⁰ Despite relative popular optimism, anger can also be detected in Asia, hand in hand with chauvinism and a sense of lack of appropriate recognition by others, stemming from a self-perception of rising influence and power.

The opposite scenario contemplates not an unprecedented era of peace and prosperity, but rather continuity in the international system, with further consolidation rather than rupture. Current conflicts and those most likely to emerge from existing tensions are contained, thanks to diplomatic or coercive instruments, and major wars are avoided. Economic and financial give-and-take is kept under control and gives way to a more stable global game, including increased safeguarding of public goods such as the health of the planet. This scenario does not entail the United Nations becoming a global government, nor the European Union turning into a fully fledged federation, nor the various 'Gs' becoming boards of a global corporation. But these international organisations, reformed to improve representativeness and effectiveness, would remain to strengthen the rule of law globally.

A major factor in the unfolding of this scenario might be the trend towards increased societal interaction, or even empathy. But there is also a risk that this transformation might lead to chaos. Domestically, civil society could become a challenge to the legitimacy and effectiveness of parliaments in representative democracies or an excuse for authoritarian repression. Internationally, governance may become more difficult if states are not fully in control. However, social revolutions driven by advances in science and technology (particularly telecommunications and the Internet) and improvements in the status of women worldwide (access to the labour market and above all control over reproduction), may also gradually enhance transnational relations and understanding and privilege a conciliatory approach to human relations over a confrontational one, with obvious but not radical differences from nation to nation.¹¹

* * *

The return of religion appears to be more consistent with the first scenario and, if it is really a sustainable trend, may make that scenario more probable than the second. In 2007, atheists and non-believers comprised a mere 11% of the global population. Even including the equal numbers who do not consider themselves affiliated to any religion, they remain a minority. But

these figures are an order of magnitude higher than a century earlier and are expected to increase further.¹²

According to data from Gallup, moreover, 'religiosity is highest in the world's poorest nations', whatever their religious beliefs.¹³ The proportion who answer the question 'is religion an important part of your life?' in the negative correlates almost perfectly with per-capita income, from 5% for \$2,000 or less to 52% for \$25,000 or more. The United States, with only 35% answering in the negative, bucks the trend, but even there 16% report no religious identity, a number that has grown gradually since the 1980s after a dramatic rise from 1–2% in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁴ This trend has been confirmed by the survey of American 'millennials' (the generation born after 1981) by Pew Research Center. As many as 26% describe themselves as 'unaffiliated with a religion', six points higher than the previous generation (1965–80) and twice as many as the 'boomers' (1946–64).¹⁵

Logic therefore suggests that, as nations improve their economic status, the religiosity of their citizens will tend to diminish. And the data show that such a trend is compatible with the growth of Christianity in the countries of the southern hemisphere. Continuing social inequality in the emerging economies (such as those in Latin America) and the large impoverished majorities in the less-developed nations (especially in Africa) will, however, pose a challenge to neo-Protestant evangelism. Although currently rather successful, it promises riches in this life before salvation in the next and may come to face a delivery problem.

Besides defying the correlation between religiosity and affluence, the United States is peculiar in other ways. Three to five decades ago, nearly all Americans considered themselves religious, yet moderate and secular approaches to political conduct, including foreign policy in the threatening times of the Cold War, predominated. Over the last two decades or so, formal affiliation with religious denominations has declined, but politically combative religious commitment has risen (although the intergenerational differences do suggest this trend may not continue).

On the global scene, the data show that a religious revival is not competing so much with secularism per se as with the transformation of society as a consequence of affluence. This is consistent with historical experience; as

Roy puts it, 'secularisation in the strict sense in no way implies a conflict or a brutal separation from religion, as can be seen from the examples of Northern Europe, the USA, Great Britain, and even Thailand and Japan'.¹⁶ Post-Enlightenment secularism does not allow for a religious state, but allows for coexistence between believers and non-believers. The divorce is more recent and comes from new cultural rather than political paradigms. 'What are these new paradigms?', Roy asks. The answer is 'their central themes are sexuality, women and reproduction, and the place of the individual, and therefore of freedom, and the wariness of any transcendental order'.¹⁷ While the wary transcendence may have more to do with the new religiosity than with a 'conflict' with secularism, women and reproduction do play a crucial role in societal change, along with the new communication technologies, mentioned before.

With the growing global importance of East Asian societies, moreover, where philosophical creeds such as Confucianism tend to prevail over those stressing redemption, an exclusive focus on the three major monotheistic faiths becomes less tenable. A secular environment, such as the one in which the current international system operates, is better suited than a faith-dominated environment to dialogue on human rights and the rule of law between nations and societies belonging to different cultures.

The assumption that the religious revival in today's world heralds a new era is not supported by the evidence. Data and analysis both suggest a continuing, complex, hierarchical and multipolar, but also interdependent and multilateral, global system. Those acting under the inspiration of a creed will, in the long run, have to adapt to the secular concepts that underpin the foundations of the world order rather than the other way around.

Notes

- 1 The expression 'post-secular' can be attributed to the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, a well-known analyst of the interplay between the return of religion and the fate of secularism. A key question arising from this phrase is whether the 'secular age', magisterially discussed by the British philosopher Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), is coming to an end. Taylor distinguishes three modes of secularity: (1) secularised public

spaces; (2) declining beliefs and practices; and (3) cultural conditions that make unbelief in God a viable option. While he focuses on the third, this article mostly considers the first, though it arrives at similar conclusions. For an outstanding treatise on the current revival of religion see Olivier Roy, *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2010).

- 2 See, for example, Olivier Roy, *ibid.*, with whom I am slightly at variance on this point.
- 3 Data on religion have been made available over the years by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, <http://pewforum.org/the-pew-templeton-global-religious-futures-project.aspx>. For Europe in particular, see for example the series of articles published by the French daily *La Croix* in 2007 under the title 'Quel avenir pour le Chistianisme?', available at <http://www.la-croix.com>.
- 4 For a discussion of how evangelical Christianity has influenced US foreign policy, particularly with respect to Africa, see Asteris Huliaras, 'The Evangelical Roots of US Africa Policy', *Survival*, vol. 50, no. 6, December 2008–January 2009, pp. 161–82.
- 5 See, for example, Scott M. Thomas, 'A Globalized God: Religion's Growing Influence in International Politics', *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 2010. Transatlantic differences are discussed by P. Berger, G. Davie and E. Fokas in *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); and by C. Merlini in 'Not so Far Apart: Societal Change and its Impact on Transatlantic Relations', *The International Spectator*, vol. 39, no. 2, April–June 2004, pp. 61–78.
- 6 See John L. Esposito, 'Retreat from the Secular Path: The Democracy–Secularism Debate in the Muslim World', *Quaderni ISPI*, no. 12, April 2010.
- 7 See 'Support for Terror Wanes among Muslim Publics', *17-Nation Pew Global Attitude Survey*, 2005, available at <http://www.pewglobal.org>. Subsequent polls seem to confirm this trend.
- 8 'The world is a far more peaceful place that at any time in history' writes Christopher J. Fettweis in an article significantly titled 'Threat and Anxiety in US Foreign Policy', published in *Survival*, vol. 52, no. 2, April–May 2010, p. 64. The proportion of civilian casualties in conflicts could be as high as 9 in 10. Such a high ratio is, however, questioned by Adam Roberts in 'Lives and Statistics: Are 90% of War Victims Civilians?', *Survival*, vol. 52, no. 3, June–July 2010.
- 9 Roy, *Holy Ignorance*, p. 2.
- 10 With only slightly different terminology Dominique Moisi argues that, as a consequence of globalisation, the West is dominated by fear, while among Muslims and Arabs a sense of humiliation generates a culture of hatred. See *The Geopolitics of Emotions: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010). Hope is the prevailing 'emotion' in East Asia, according to Moisi.
- 11 I tentatively discussed both effects (insofar as Europe and the United States are concerned) back in 2004: see Merlini, 'Not so Far Apart'. More

recently, the exponential increase of blogs worldwide, Islamic ones included, seems to have reinforced and extended to the global sphere the conclusions I had come to then.

- ¹² These data are taken from Phil Zuckerman (ed.), *Atheism and Secularity*, 2 vols. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009).
- ¹³ Gallup's Global Report, 31 August 2010.
- ¹⁴ See 'In U.S., Increasing Number Have No Religious Identity', Gallup Global Report, 21 May 2010.
- ¹⁵ Pew Research Center, 'Millennials. A Portrait of Generation Next', February 2010, p. 85, <http://pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ Roy, *Holy Ignorance*. This quote and the next are from chapter 4, p. 113.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 123, 124.