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A Globalized God
Religion’s Growing Influence in International Politics
By Scott M. Thomas
The resurgence of religion in the last modern century
Is it possible to remain religious and to become modern?
An interview with Professor Scott Thomas

Dr. Scott Thomas is an American who lectures in International Relations and the Politics of Developing Countries. He studied in the School of International Service at the American University, Washington, DC before going to the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics for his MSc and PhD. He taught at universities in the United States, Switzerland, and South Africa before coming to Bath in 1994, where he is a permanent member of the teaching staff. At Bath he teaches a variety of courses on international relations.

Dr. Thomas has a research programme which centers on how the global resurgence of culture and religion have transformed international relations. It challenges the existing constructions of culture, religion, and identity, and examines the impact of culture and religion on key areas in international relations - conflict, cooperation, diplomacy, peace-making, inter-religious dialogue, and economic development. He writes for a variety of journals, and speaks widely on the role of religion in international relations today to both academic organizations, such as the International Studies Association, and to a variety of NGOs, governments, religious groups, and other organizations.

Recent speaking engagements include the Dutch and Canadian foreign ministries, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace at the Vatican, the Netherlands Chapter of the Society for International Development, the International Federation of Catholic Universities, and Sandhurst, the Royal Military Academy. He is a contributing editor to The Review of Faith & International Affairs, and is also involved in inter-religious dialogue between British Catholics and a variety of Shia clerics from Iran sponsored by Heythrop College, the University of London.
Why contrary to all predictions, hasn’t Western modernization led to the erosion and demise of religion even in developed countries?

It is true that we now live – especially for most Westerners, or Europeans, ‘We live in a world that is not supposed to exist.’ Why do we live in a world that is not supposed to exist – the short answer is that religion was supposed to decline with modernization and economic development, and this has not happened. The idea that there is such a relationship – is a product of (Western) social science, in which what happened to the West – socially, politically, economically, was thought to establish general principles, patterns, propositions, or relationships which were valid for all peoples and cultures in the world. However, there may not be a set relationship between religion, secularization, and modernization, and the relationship between them might be related to specific cultures, religions, and civilizations.

The decline of religion as a part of modernization has been predicted since the 18th century Enlightenment: education, urbanization, science, technology, and the rise of literacy, and the middle class (i.e. better living standards) were all – allegedly – supposed to lead to the end of religion. This has not happened, and these factors have even contributed to the vitality of religion. A number of factors come together to shape the contours of the global political and religious landscape in the 21st century: (i) the rise of the global South (demography), (ii) the rise of emerging powers (economy), (iii) the rise of global urbanization (megacities in the global South), (iv) the rise of the global middle class (in the megacities, in the global South), (v) the rise of refugees, migrants, and diaspora communities, and (vi) how these contours intersect or come together in the ‘religious world of the global South.’ So, from Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo, Lagos, and Cairo, to Seoul, and Jakarta - contrary to secularization theory, and contrary to the European experience of modernization, megacities, mega-churches, megamosques, and being religious, educated, and middle class go together in the 21st century. Religion returning to public life, and religion and modernization can go hand in hand, especially in the global South, and dramatically so in East Asia (China, Korea, Japan, where the state, the nation, religion, and modernization have gone together). Moreover, by 2050, if not before this time, China will have the largest number of Christians and Muslims in the world.

We do need to careful since the Middle Ages were not entirely the great ‘age of faith’ as it is often made out to be, so there also may not be a great age of decline. Moreover, these are factors which might link not necessarily be linked to all religions, but only Christianity and modernization, or perhaps only European Christianity and modernization, i.e. the close relationship between church and state (‘throne and altar’ in European history) is what contributed to the decline in religion, and this is not like Christianity in other parts of the world. It is often argued the separation of church and state has contributed to vitality of religion in the U.S. (an argument going back to Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century, seeing the close relationship in Jacksonian America between religion, voluntary organizations, and civil society).

A couple of other points may be relevant. The idea of ‘decline in religion’ is often seen as synonymous with ‘decline in church attendance,’ membership figures, etc., but it is not clear this is an indication of the interest of people in spirituality (regardless of how this concept is defined). The number of people – even in what might be called ‘neo-pagan’ secular Britain, there is still a wide desire, thirst, for meaning, authenticity, spirituality, and transcendence. If this is the case, then it might be argued one part of the explanation has to do with the nature of religious institutions themselves. It is also not clear a decline of institutional religion is directly caused by cultural trends – since many institutions are struggling with members (e.g. political parties, trade unions, etc., and these are secular institutions).

Why do some thinkers name the 20th century as ‘The Last Modern Century’? Should we consider Western modernity as a linear process and generalize it to other parts of the world or can we think of ‘multiple modernities’?

The idea of the ‘last modern century’ is a recognition of the rise of the ‘postmodern’ and the ‘postsecular’ in the sense that toward the end of the 20th century there has been a growing lack of faith, even a collapse of faith, in a hegemonic narrative of (Western) modernity and modernization. In other words, a lack of faith in a single overall character, direction, and meaning of progress, modernity, and development, which would now spread around the world. What is now happening is postmodernity and postsecularity open up the possibilities for the rise of multiple modernities (i.e. the collapse of the hegemonic Western narrative), multiple ways of being religious and being modern in the 21st century. This connects with what I said earlier about the religious world of the global South or the religious world of the 21st century.
I first examined this idea of the 20th century as the ‘last modern century’ in my book The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations. I argued there that one of the aspects of the global resurgence of religion was the way (cultural) ‘authenticity has come to rival development as a key to understanding the political aspirations of the non-Western world.’ This referred to the ways societies, countries, want to gain economic prosperity, and organize their political, economic and social systems in ways that are consistent with their moral base, their cultural heritage, and religious traditions. Basically, it is one of the results of the failure of the secular, modernizing, state to produce democracy and development. Now I would add the failure of more and more people to share in the benefits of globalization. It is also for these reasons why it would be misleading to view the global religious resurgence as the same as ‘fundamentalism’ or a ‘clash of civilizations.’

Moreover, given what I have said about the religious world of the global South, it is simply no longer the case that secularization is inherently a part of modernity and modernization. Modernity – as a type of social condition, and modernization - as a type of social process – yes, was a linear process, began in Europe, and now was spreading – or seemingly spreading, around the world. How much this ‘linearity’ is itself a product of a Judeo-Christian or really ‘Abrahamic’ view of history (i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) is an interesting question, but clearly for the West this linear view of history is a product of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

However, the alternative view is still with us - it is the idea that what happened in the West – a particular type of modernization and development, will happen in the rest of the world, or as V.S. Naipaul, the British write born in Trinidad who won the Nobel Prize for literature famously put it, ‘Western civilization is the universal civilization.’ However, what we can now see is that the European great power politics went together with the universal idea of the inevitability of the global spread of Western civilization (i.e. spread in the early ideas of European anthropology, sociology, etc.). This is also why today the decline in Western hegemony is accompanied by the increasing idea of multiple modernities to account for the ways of being modern, and being religious in the rise of the global South.

Do you consider modernity or secularism as a universal theory or as a faith or myth?

I do not consider modernity or secularism to be a universal theory, or universal theory of modernization, but (like the sociologists Robert Bellah and Robert Wuthnow) I consider them to be a type of myth, or a type of faith, in a certain (Western/European) view of progress, modernization, and development (how the doctrine of progress is itself a secularization of the concept of Christian eschatology I will not examine now). What makes the theory of secularization ‘mythic,’ i.e. the idea that modernity, modernization, secularism, and secularization are inherently interrelated social processes, is that it does what myths have always done – for (so-called ‘traditional societies’ as well as ‘modern’ societies; myths are powerful stories we tell ourselves – who we are (identity), and who we want to be in the world (the ‘telos’ or end goal of ourselves, our societies, and what our countries, or civilizations can offer the world, which need not be based on arrogance, but on a genuine appreciation of others).

We have to remember that what are now regarded as the periods of Western or European history – what are now called ‘the dark ages,’ the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment began as ideological constructions to legitimate certain ideas, interests, groups, and institutions before they became merely the periods of time. The idea or concept of ‘the Renaissance’ - the way European history is divided up and characterized, is itself an ideological construction by Vasari, Petrarck, and other Renaissance artists and thinkers. The point was to link Italy – and see all of Europe or Renaissance Europe (e.g. Henry XVIII as a renaissance Prince), as a ‘rebirth’ a ‘renaissance’ of classical Greece and Rome – derogatively, calling the period in between as ‘the dark ages’ or the ‘middle ages’ and the cultural rebirth of Greek and Roman heritage in the city-states of Italy. Now the concept of the ‘global renaissance’ tries to connect the Italian Renaissance within ideas, events in international relations – trade, finance, commodities, patronage, imperial conflict, and encounters/exchanges between other cultures (esp. Islamic world of Levant, Middle East), which were also part of the Renaissance. In other words, the collapse of faith in (Western) modernization, and multiple modernities are opening up a new reading of history, even a new reading of Western history, one which tries to argue not necessarily against Western achievements, but towards a greater recognition of the interdependence of cultures and peoples around the world.

If Westphalian order led to the marginalization of religion in international relations, can we say that the emerging post-Westphalian order and the erosion of states’ absolute power has
resulted in the return of religion to public sphere?

It is true that Westphalia – the treaty in 1648, which brought the (allegedly) religious wars or Thirty Years War to an end, frames the dominant narrative in the discipline of International Relations on the rise of the modern international system, and the rise of modern international relations. ‘Westphalia was the majestic portal which leads form the old world to the new world,’ as the conventional story is famously told. In this sense ‘Westphalia’ is the benchmark or template against which contemporary international political change or social and political change is assessed in international relations.

It is important to recognize that sovereignty is a legal condition, and autonomy (states’ absolute power) is a political condition. The U.S. after 1945 was in a uniquely powerful position – it was the most unique ‘unipolar’ movement, and yet the U.S. still worked to found the United Nations (rather than only coalitions of the willing), which arguably was established on the legal equality of states – even though the U.S. was one of the most powerful. European states also agreed to limit to some extent their sovereignty to found the European Community. I have argued that religion mattered in both instances - in the U.S. it was a kind of ‘Protestant’ hegemony, in which theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, and the Christian realists, and Christian liberals (i.e. the mainline churches, at a time when American evangelicalism was in a low position), helped form the United Nations, and World Council of Churches. The Protestant churches in the 1940s actually produced Sunday School materials to support the founding of the U.N, something now, with the rise of conservative evangelicalism, would never take place. The point is that these early theologians constructed a ‘public theology of international order’ which supported international law and international institutions, and it was Christian Democrat leaders (de Gasperi in Italy, Adenauer in Germany), and Catholic social teaching which provided many of the ideas underlying the European Union. So, the idea of ‘the return of religion to the public square’ does need to be contextualized.

- Contrary to our expectations, even reflectivist or post positivist thinkers like Alexander Wendt who pay attention to social factors, neglect religion and don’t take it seriously. What is the reason of this negligence? Is it as you write in your book, because of ‘secular habit’?

Yes, this is broadly the reason since these broad societal characteristics also influence academia. The reasons are the standard ones I explained in my book. Firstly, scholars of International Relations marginalized religion since it was supposed to decline according to the theory of secularization – (Western) modernity would be the global home of all of us. Secondly, religion was marginalized, given what I called the ‘Westphalian presumption,’ i.e. a certain reading, a certain set of assumptions, which argued that the lessons of the Thirty Years’ War (1648-1618), i.e. mixing religion and politics, inevitably leads to violence and intolerance, and so the Westphalian settlement – according to the conventional story, separated religion from international politics. Thirdly, for these reasons religion was marginalized from the main theories, paradigms, or traditions of thought in International Relations. Fourthly, is the impact of positivism and materialism on the study of International Relations: positivism is based on naturalism (i.e. the same scientific method is applicable to explaining a natural event like a volcanic eruption or a political event like a political revolution), and it is based on the separation of facts from values. Materialism – all varieties, and not only Marxism, argues the basic material, economic, and technological forces are what are important for studying international relations. Positivism and materialism established the epistemological basis of the discipline – what constitutes knowledge, and how
to go about discovering it. However, what had been lost is the role of ideas, values, beliefs, desires, hopes, and passions in international relations. Alexander Wendt’s form of social constructivism – dominant in the U.S., is now often called ‘conventional constructivism’ – it combines a positivist epistemology with a social, or relational ontology (i.e. the types of actors engaged in International Relations), in contrast to ‘consistent’ social constructivism, which combines a social epistemology and a social ontology. The first conforms to mainstream social science, and the other recognizes the reflexive, inter-subjective nature of international politics, and I think the implications of this difference can be seen in some of my responses below, and my use of critical theory in international relations.

Why do you consider religion as ‘The Soul of the 21st Century’?

What else is there, what other idea, concept conveys what this concept has conveyed throughout much of history? The concept has always grappled with how identity, meaning, and purpose are connected in diverse ways in societies and communities around the world. At some level these ideas are also connected to conceptions of transcendence – even in critical theory. This is also what provides the basis – beyond an individualist ontology for interreligious dialogue.

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Today we witness a contradiction that in practice, religion and religious actors play an important part in international relations but in theory, they are still neglected and marginalized by mainstream or even reflectivist theories. How can we interpret and solve this contradiction?

Well, what can be called ‘the religious turn’ in the study of International Relations, which has been going on since the 1990s has tried to deal with this problem. There is also now the Religion and International Relations section of the International Studies Association. However, the real problem is religion is still ‘securitized,’ what the Copenhagen School of Security Studies argues when something is perceived to be a security threat, which legitimates extraordinary actions by states (migration, immigration have also recently been securitized). The story I told earlier of the role religion in the United Nations and the European Union requires a lot more research since the idea religion in relevant to international institutions is denied, ignored, or forgotten by many elites, or secular elites, from developing countries. I am not sure it can be resolved entirely but there can be glimpses of hope for the future. The Catholic lay organization, Community of Sant’Egidio, which helped establish with the Italian government ‘humanitarian corridors’ for Syrian refugees which may turn out to be a model for Europe (a similar arrangement has recently been signed with the French government). What Pope Francis has done, which in all likelihood will outlive his pontificate, is the link between social policy and interreligious dialogue. In the past interreligious dialogue has been about doctrines, but Pope Francis has linked it to how people from different religious traditions can work together on some of the major social policy questions affecting many states and societies. One of the key pointers towards the future on theory and practice may very well be the role of religious non-state actors (social ontology), and the kind of knowledge from below (social epistemology) which they have, and the new concept of religious engagement in foreign policy and international relations.

What do you mean by ‘The Revenge of God’ in your book when you refer to the global resurgence of religion? Can we say that westerners’ excessive attitude in marginalizing and omitting religion has resulted in its coming back to the West?

The West marginalized religion, and the Communist world persecuted it, and God is coming back to both worlds. I would not use the word ‘revenge’ to describe the future. The Catholic lay organization, Community of Sant’Egidio, which helped establish with the Italian government ‘humanitarian corridors’ for Syrian refugees which may turn out to be a model for Europe (a similar arrangement has recently been signed with the French government). What Pope Francis has done, which in all likelihood will outlive his pontificate, is the link between social policy and interreligious dialogue. In the past interreligious dialogue has been about doctrines, but Pope Francis has linked it to how people from different religious traditions can work together on some of the major social policy questions affecting many states and societies. One of the key pointers towards the future on theory and practice may very well be the role of religious non-state actors (social ontology), and the kind of knowledge from below (social epistemology) which they have, and the new concept of religious engagement in foreign policy and international relations.

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The problem is this - God’s return – if God ever went away, at least in the public, political, and scholarly consciousness, always seems to be related to anger, jealously, revenge, and violence. This is, as I said, what the Copenhagen School of Security Studies calls the ‘securitization’ of religion. It reflects what I have called ‘the Westphalian presumption,’ the dominant ways religion - and its seemingly inevitable relationship to violence has been perceived, and even conceived in the European political imagination, and recent Western concerns regarding religion in international relations.

Recall it was Ludwig Feuerbach (a strong influence on Marx), who wrote at the time the famous book, The Essence of Christianity (1841). Religion, he argued, consists of ideas and values produced by human beings in the course of their cultural development, but they mistakenly project them on to divine forces or gods. So, ‘God fights back’ (BBC), ‘God’s Warriors’ (CNN), ‘The Revenge of God’ (Gilles Kepel), and similar titles perhaps say more about contemporary (or at least Western, or Western secular) views of god than they do about religion and international relations.

However, following Feuerbach, who may be (partly) on to something - is it God who is angry, violent, and revengeful, or is it we humans who are like this? We cannot conceive of a God who is not angry, violent, and revengeful since this is what we are like. So, we project (as he says) our violent characteristics onto God, and in this way we do indeed create God, or really create our images of God as a God of war, violence, and revenge to justify our own violence.

In your opinion, can we understand and theorize religion in the framework of existing IR theories or do you believe that there should be new theories?

I am more inclined to say this depends on the broad division between positivist and post-positivist approaches to the study of International Relations – and, how religion is conceived within in them. Any approach will be deficient which does not recognize that the discipline of International Relations not only seeks to explain the political world, but is also crucially, and inevitably also a part of the political world, and a part of global politics. This opens up also the whole area – which is not widely engaged with, regarding the concepts of religion. How we study religion and its impact in politics and international relations changes if we recognize that religion is not a transcultural or tranhistorical concept but is socially and politically constructed. Therefore, I now argue, taking the argument of my book further, if you want to take religion seriously in International Relations, take politics seriously. I mean by this not the conventional agenda – with examining the consequences of mixing religion and politics, i.e. religion being securitized. What now need to be studying the politics surrounding the way the concepts – the sacred, the secular, and the political are socially and politically constructed in specific countries, contexts, and historic states-systems.

What opportunities do interpretive, normative and constructivist approaches provide for theorizing religion in international relations?

I concluded my book, The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations, by saying to see the world differently is already a way of beginning to change it. So theory does matter. It opens up new way of seeing and interpreting what is going on. I am no deconstructionist, there really is a world out there, but if I was in the Twin Towers on September 2001, 11 I would not be here. However, the social world is not like the natural world. All of us – especially in the West, but now many people in the global South with the rise of the NICs and BASIC countries, do not influence the volcanic activity of Mount Vesuvius in Italy (i.e. not positivism or naturalism in social science), but we all can have an influence on many contemporary international events. What critical theorists call ‘theory as negative critique’ – how the world got to be the way it is, should it be this way, and can it be changed, fits very nicely from a theological viewpoint with the idea of theory as prophetic critique, and offers a basis for critically assessing international relations from within the perspective of the Abrahamic religions. Critical theory’s approach to ‘theory as theory as every day social practice,’ argues every one of us – by our life styles, what we buy, what we consume, how we travel, etc., every one of us every day is living out a theory of international relations. Again, this view of theory fits with what every believer in the Abrahamic religions conceives of as the moral life, the social life, and the spiritual life.
The dialectic of secularism and religionism

The presence of religion in the public sphere and its implications for secularism

An interview with Professor Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

What made you focus on religion studies in a discipline (International Relations) which considers religion and religious beliefs to be completely irrelevant and unimportant?

I am interested in the history and politics of the categories of secularism and religion. This requires a dual focus on the study of politics and the study of religion, as well as their complex mutual interrelations. My intention is to move beyond the extremes of both an uncritical secular separationism and a naïve religious accommodationism. This “third way,” which to my mind better reflects the complexities and contingencies of the world we actually live in, offers a path for thinking and practicing difference differently. We can and should continue to acknowledge the power of differences that are organized around the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular,’ but without treating them as fixed, inevitable, or universal. I adopt a critical cross-cultural perspective on religion and politics, with attention to their mutual co-implications and transformations.

Do you think that religion went into exile (private sphere) and has returned to public sphere recently or do you believe that it never went away at all?
It never went away. As I see it, there are two central and competing storylines about religion, politics and public life that dominate the discussion right now. They are both descriptive and prescriptive. That is, they claim to both describe the world as it is and they also prescribe particular ways of acting. In the first narrative, which is perhaps falling out of style, religion is seen as irrelevant to politics and public life, confined to private affairs, spaces, places, and fields of study that deal with these matters—anthropology, theology, religious studies. This notion—the sense that religion ‘left’ public life—has now been successfully and I think rather definitively debunked. In the second, competing narrative, the pendulum has swung, religion is back, and it has “gone public.” Religion is now everyone’s business. This is a popular narrative right now; but it is also problematic because it assumes that at one point religion had been evacuated from public life, which of course is simply not the case. There is some tension between these two narratives, despite their shared foundational assumptions, but the second one is prevailing in most quarters. In my estimation, most scholars would now agree that religion cannot be ignored, or written off as epiphenomena to the “real stuff” of social and material life. The notion that religion has “gone public” has gathered momentum as an alternative to the conventional story of secularization as religious privatization or decline. I find this shift between the two narratives fascinating. It motivated me to write my book, Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion. It is fascinating to me that scholars and public policymakers, many with minimal or no background in the study of religion, have been drawn almost magnetically to a stable, transhistorical and transcultural notion of ‘religion’ as a freestanding analytical and descriptive category. This secularist presumption seems to have at least nine lives. It does a lot of cultural and political work.

Some scholars believe that ‘it seems time to carry the secularization doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories.’ What is your idea? Do you think that secularism has lost its legitimacy and is in crisis due to the global resurgence of religion?

This is an interesting question because the answer is both no and yes. Secularization and various doctrines of secularism have been and continue to be highly influential both historically and in the present. On the other hand, the historical, legal, religious and political contingencies of secularist settlements, and the normative commitments and theological and political presumptions that underlie and sustain them, make it impossible to speak of any fixed or final definition or understanding of ‘secularism.’ To move forward, we need to pose a series of new questions about religion and politics. To name a few: What if we were to suspend the assumptions about religion and about politics that underlie separationism? What if we were to avoid collapsing religion into the social or political, making it evaporate, so to speak—but at the same time also avoid treating religion as an ahistorical essence that stands outside of history, law, economics, politics or the natural environment?

This involves continually reassessing and reckoning with the histories of the categories of religion and of politics. It involves deep contextualization. It involves a lot of work. The need for this kind of effort first came into sharp relief for me in writing my first book, The Politics of Secularism in International Relations. I was struggling with apprehending that which was denounced as “religious” and “political” in non-European, including many colonial and postcolonial, contexts, as well as in Iran and Turkey. What can it mean to talk about secularism as the “separation” of church and state in societies in which there is no “church” in a European Christian sense? How should scholars study religion and politics in such a way so as to avoid merely reproducing the discourses of separation, secularism, disestablishment, free exercise, and religious freedom that often contain nestled within them the very assumptions that are most in need of interrogation? What do we have if we have neither complete religious freedom—in the sense of religion’s total autonomy from the social and political—or religion’s complete absorption into the political? I am interested not only in rethinking our understanding of the religious but also and simultaneously rethinking our understanding of the political. This is the challenge.

In your opinion why the Western civilization has failed in implementing what Max Weber called “disenchantment of the world”? Was it totally a wrong idea to consider religion as an irrational and obsolete tradition that must be marginalized and finally eradicated in modern era?

The notion that religion should be marginalized or eradicated requires a very stable and secure definition of “religion” which we simply do not have. We live in a complex world characterized by diverse and shifting ways of belonging, believing, and being. These lifeways both shape and are shaped by legal, economic, political and historical factors and institutions, and cannot be fully separated from the latter in such a way as to
definitively demarcate the 'religious' from the 'political.' The latter, of course, is the defining move of secularism. To challenge the foundations of the assumptions that underlie secularist epistemology does not however mean that secularism was a "failure" but rather that it needs to be carefully contextualized historically and politically. It needs to be understood rather than either celebrated or condemned. One of the aims of my first book was to do precisely this work in the context of the twentieth-century politics of Iran and Turkey, a deep and longstanding interest of mine.

Do you think that we need a mode of analysis in International Relation and foreign policy that attempts to merge the spiritual and the material? What deficiencies do you diagnose in these fields of study in the absence of religion? The discipline of International Relations has come a long way in recent years in terms of the level of sophistication of the discussion and debate around religion and politics -- with a little help from political theory, religious studies and cultural anthropology. The challenge as I see it now is to strike a balance which involves simultaneously accepting the power of the categories of secular and religious without giving in to their fixity, primacy, or stability in any given context. There is temptation to abandon the terms altogether — to move toward new vocabularies—for a variety of reasons. I don't think scholars should abandon the terms however. Rather I agree with Webb Keane when he observes in his excellent book Christian Moderns that "conceptual categories like religion and culture have been let out of the bag, and we are hardly in a position to scoop them back up again. Like 'the modern,' they are part of both elite and everyday discourses and mediate self-awareness just about everywhere; the categories have themselves become social facts.... to accept existing categories demands (at least) considerable self-awareness. It asks us to reflect on (what Foucault would call) their genealogy and explore its implications." David Chidester makes a related point in the concluding chapter of his book Empire of Religion. I highly recommend both of these texts to anyone interested in the study of the politics of modernity.

Are the existing theories of International Relations adequate for understanding religion's role in world politics or should there be new theories based on different approaches and meta-theories? New approaches are needed. My book Beyond Religious Freedom emerged from my own inability to reconcile what I had learned about religion and politics from the disciplines of Religious Studies and Critical Theory—including the complexities and instabilities of these categories themselves—with the ways in which International Relations and public policy experts were talking and acting with regard to religion. The deep epistemological and disciplinary divides in the politics and practice of knowledge production around 'religion' is crucial to my argument. While religious studies appears to be increasingly skeptical of world religions discourse, building on the work of Tomoko Masuzawa and others, social scientists are living in a different reality: they are drawn to the world religions frame magnetically, relying on it to design sophisticated measures and models to account for (and, as I argue in the book, to realize) the public and political salience of 'world religions.' It is these religions and their spokespersons that are becoming actors and advocates on the global political stage. They are the central players on what the American comedian Stephen Colbert calls the international "faithscape." In political science and policy studies, scholars are working overtime to identify the contribution of religion and religious leaders to world affairs, to control it for political ends. I am continually surprised by the degree of consensus, energy, certainty, and excitement that surrounds the perceived need to identify and manage deviant radical religion, and to cultivate and celebrate compliant, conforming religion. It's an odd preoccupation—what's this about?

This of course led me to more and deeper questions: who gets nominated to be a religion and who doesn't, who speaks for 'religion' and who cannot, who and what is made invisible or illegible in such deeply politicized and 'religionized' global institutional and intellectual fields? Whose religion is being protected in international legal efforts to promote religious freedom? What is the relationship between the legal "religions" that are privileged through these efforts, and the broader life worlds in which they intervene? Who speaks on behalf of the 'religious individuals that populate our faith-based global policy landscape? And whom exactly are those representatives presumed to represent? To address these questions the book examines the specific kinds of religion and religious subjects that are created and protected through three sets of governing arrangements: international religious freedom, protections for religious minorities, and projects to create tolerant religious subjects who practice interfaith dialogue and disavow (whatever the authorities denominate as) extremism.

How do you predict the future of secularism...
I'm not much for predictions, but I suspect claims to secularism will retain their appeal in many quarters for some time. Rather than focus on the 'success' or 'failure' of secularism, of interest to me, and here I am following the pioneering contributions of anthropologist Talal Asad, is to ask: why are these claims felt to be necessary or even urgent? What is it that those making such claims seek to accomplish? What assumptions about religion or the secular underlie them? And what forms of life are enabled (or disabled) in and through a focus on realizing particular notions of secularization? In his wonderful book, Beyond Church and State, Matthew Scherer has shown that the transformative processes that produced the notion of secularism as separation did not merely separate religion and politics along a clear line of distinction, but rather re-determined the nature of both politics and religion simultaneously. This is important. Modern secularism did not simply emerge “from a religious past with which it had broken.” Instead, it should be seen, to quote Scherer again, as both “divided from a religious past and also locked in continuous and shifting patterns of interrelation with religion in the present.” Despite these obvious complexities of the secular-religious binary, which have been acknowledged by scholars around the world for some time now, contemporary US (and other) governmental efforts continue to rely on and also to produce a stable rendering of the ‘religious’ in order to ‘solve’ global policy challenges associated with so-called ‘religious’ sources of violence, and those that require the irenic qualities of religion as a source of community, morality and freedom. My recent book is critical of these efforts. It destabilizes the category of “religion” as an object of political and legal intervention. This is a familiar move in religious studies, but less so in the study of politics. The challenge as I see it is to communicate with an audience that does not see any problem, or any politics, in defining and ‘restoring’ religion in international public life. To show the politics involved in this move, I developed a set of heuristics (lived, expert, and governed religion). These categories allow me to show that there are no stable things out there in the world called ‘religions’ or the ‘religious’ that stand cleanly apart from their ‘secular’ or ‘political’ counterparts, waiting in the wings to be restored to public life. Upending that assumption moves us into a different epistemological field, which I discuss in the concluding chapter of the book and also in more recent writings.

A Globalized God
Religion’s Growing Influence in International Politics

By Scott M. Thomas
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A round the world -- from the southern United States to the Middle East -- religion is on the rise. It is growing in countries with a wide variety of religious traditions and levels of economic development, suggesting that neither poverty nor social exclusion is solely responsible. The religious resurgence is not simply defined by the growth of fundamentalism -- rigid adherence to a particular set of rituals and doctrines -- but is occurring through a variety of renewed rituals and practices, both public and private. Demographics are reinforcing this trend. The global religious landscape in the coming years will be affected by the massive shift in population growth from the developed countries of the North -- predominantly in western Europe and the former Soviet republics -- to the developing countries of the so-called global South. The North accounted for 32 percent of the world’s population in 25,1900 percent in 1970, and about 18 percent in 2000. By 2050, it will likely account for just 10 percent. Religion has emerged as a driving factor in this redistribution. Religiosity is now one of the most accurate indicators of fertility, far more telling than denominational or ethnic identity, since religious people tend to have more children than their secular counterparts. Religion will also increasingly be an urban phenomenon.
The growing population in the developing nations will mostly settle in vast, burgeoning, and largely impoverished metropolises — areas where religion is spreading. According to conventional wisdom, secularization became an inevitable part of modernization with the spread of education, science, technology, and prosperity. But these new megacities are havens for religious revivals. Historically, religions have been adept at gaining adherents in urban environments; Christianity formed as an urban religious movement in the cities of the Roman Empire, and the Franciscans began as an urban reform movement in medieval Europe in response to the poverty and inequality accompanying the rise of the market economy. Islam may follow the same path by expanding in urban environments. Although urbanization can lead to civil unrest and cities can provide cover for criminal and terrorist networks, urbanization also offers well-meaning religious institutions opportunities for urban ministry that could help prevent such threats in the first place.

Another aspect of the religious resurgence is the disintegrating relationship between the West and Christianity. Traditionally seen as a Western or European religion steeped in that continent’s culture, Christianity evolved from its Jewish origins in Palestine, conquered the pagan world, and spread east to Iraq, India, and China before the Mongol invasions reduced it to its European setting. It is now returning to its roots by becoming a post-Western religion dominated by the peoples, cultures, and countries of the global South. For U.S. policymakers — many of whom currently consider Islamism to be the most urgent religious challenge to Washington’s foreign policy — the politics of global Christianity may soon prove just as pivotal.

A variety of trends, including demographic shifts, urbanization, and the global transformation of religion, indicate that religion will help shape the dynamics of existing, new, and emerging great powers, influencing U.S. attempts to promote freedom, civil society, democracy, social cohesion, and economic development across the world. Globalization’s transformational effect on religion will also play a key role in the prevalence of global terrorism, religious conflict, and other threats to international security.

**CHRISTIAN AND ISLAMIC RESURGENCE**

The most dramatic religious explosion in the world today is the spread of Pentecostalism and evangelical Protestantism. It is part of the demographic shift toward the global South and a key factor in Christianity’s worldwide transition. Pentecostals and evangelicals share many of the same core beliefs: they subscribe to the authority of the Bible (often interpreting it literally) and believe in the need to proselytize to non-Christians. According to a 2006 report by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, the number of evangelicals worldwide, including Pentecostals, is estimated to range from 250 million to 688 million. After Catholics, Pentecostals represent the largest single group of Christians. They live predominantly in Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, the Philippines, and the United States, but they also enjoy a presence in Chile, Ghana, Guatemala, South Africa, and South Korea.

The explosion of Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity has collided with entrenched religious communities. Three countries with substantial Muslim communities — India, Indonesia, and Nigeria — also have large Pentecostal populations and sizable minorities of Christians more broadly. Muslim-Christian tensions have recently arisen in those nations, most notably in Nigeria, where sectarian violence erupted earlier this year and left over 500 people dead.

Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity appeal across class lines. Their message of God’s love, hope, and consolation attracts the occupants of shantytowns in many megacities, and their inspiring themes of forgiveness and personal transformation through a sober, frugal lifestyle blends with middle-class values around the world. Once thought of as highly personal religions with little interest in politics, Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity have become more politically active — particularly in Latin America, where Pentecostal and evangelical candidates largely support democracy and lobby for religious freedom in heavily Catholic countries. But their biblical literalism can also motivate religious intolerance. Either way, Pentecostals and evangelicals will be a major religious, social, and political force in the coming century.

Islam is also experiencing a genuine revival, one that extends beyond the more extreme Islamic fundamentalist movements. More Muslim women are wearing the veil, more Muslim men are growing beards, and more Muslims are attending mosques more often. According to the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies, Islam is thriving, with 86 percent of Turks, 90 percent of Indonesians, and 98 percent of Egyptians surveyed reporting that religion plays an important part in their lives. The Islamic world extends far beyond the Arab world. It is therefore difficult to generalize about Islam’s position regarding women, democracy, capitalism, or terrorism.
Yet much as Westerners must attempt to understand the facets of Pentecostal and evangelical Christian growth, they will need to make the same effort in striving to understand the global spread of Islam.

**RELIGIOUS RENEWAL IN ASIA**

Remarkably, given its Marxist past, China is experiencing a tremendous expansion of Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity. The Center for the Study of Global Christianity projects that there may be 218 million Christians in China by 2050, perhaps 16 percent of its total population. The current Pentecostal and evangelical populations are concentrated among the growing middle class. Protestantism spread rapidly in China only after the communist government expelled foreign missionaries between 1949 and 1953, making its spread almost entirely indigenous. Now primarily concerned with its economic development, China tacitly allows established religions -- Christianity and neo-Confucianism -- to operate relatively freely, believing that they can promote social harmony amid rapid social changes. The question for China is whether this domestic tranquility will continue. If Christianity achieves the kind of cultural permeation of China that it has in South Korea -- where it has reached over a quarter of the population -- it could fundamentally alter China's political fabric.

Meanwhile, northwestern China is home to over 20 million Muslims and is now in the grip of an Islamic reawakening. Chinese authorities are concerned about the young Chinese Muslims now studying across the Middle East, and especially in Saudi Arabia, whose rigid Wahhabi institutions are offering educational scholarships and bringing Chinese Muslims under their influence. Ethnic minority Uighur Muslims and Han Chinese have clashed violently in the western province of Xinjiang. Deeply concerned about their country's fragmentation, China's leaders areadamant about preventing a separate Islamic enclave from gaining autonomy in the western half of the country. The rise of Christianity and Islam in China, then, will color discussions about political stability, democracy, human rights, and foreign policy there for years to come.

The rest of Asia is also experiencing dynamic religious changes. In contrast to religion in the West, religion in Asia is less individualistic, more communal, and more socially embedded. Thus, religious vitality appears consistent with secular politics in a variety of politically modernizing states -- China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. The same religious diversity is spreading to India. Although over 80 percent of Indians are Hindus, this dominance masks considerable religious variation across India's states. Muslims comprise 67 percent of the population of Jammu and Kashmir. Christians predominate in India's small eastern states of Nagaland (90 percent), Mizoram (87 percent), and Meghalaya (70 percent) and are significant minorities in two southern states, Kerala (25 percent) and Tamil Nadu (6 percent). Sikhs make up nearly 60 percent of the population in Punjab.

Long-standing social tensions within India -- most notably in relation to the country's caste system -- also have a significant interreligious dimension. In particular, the movement for the rights of Dalits, the country's lowest caste, known as «untouchables,» has long been complicated by Dalit religious conversions, often from Hinduism to evangelical Christianity. This has angered Hindu nationalists, leading to Hindu-Christian tensions. Despite these internal conflicts, India remains a model of a large, vibrant, successful, deeply religious, and multiethnic democracy outside the West.

**RUSSIA AND THE ORTHODOX CHURCH**

In Russia, meanwhile, Orthodox Christianity is enjoying a revival after 70 years of communist suppression. Few have appreciated the depth of the damage caused first by communism and then by corruption in the post-Soviet era -- they undermined trust, integrity, and accountability, as well as moral and cultural values, in the country.

The Russian Orthodox Church is now aiming to restore these values and overcome modernization's atomizing effects on post-Soviet Russian society. According to a 2004 study by the Kennan Institute, the Orthodox Church is Russia's second most trusted institution, behind the presidency, with far greater credibility than the media, the police, the army, or the overall government. It has formed an alliance around these goals with fellow religious organizations, a partnership that has the potential to be an important part of civil society. Yet Russians must still determine what freedom of religion means for a country that is predominantly Orthodox. A debate is also taking place within and outside the Orthodox Church itself over the nature of human rights -- whether they are consistent with Orthodoxy or are cultural imports from the West -- and their appropriate place in modern Russia.

The Orthodox Church's role is especially crucial given that cultural and political power seem intertwined in modern Russia. The church's attempt to unify its domestic and overseas hierarchies in the wake of Soviet rule and its increasingly close relationship with
the Russian state have established a type of Russian Orthodox identity politics. The Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church is one of a number of «autoccephalous» (literally, «self-headed,» meaning «independent») churches within Orthodoxy, and it sees the reunification of the church’s various branches as an important step in spreading the patriarchate’s influence worldwide. The Russian state, meanwhile, views reunification as a means to boost ties between Russia proper and the Russian diaspora as part of its quest to regain global power. Although the Orthodox Church claims that it has no wish to serve as an organ of the state, its relationship with the Russian government will play a major role in Russia’s near-term future. Muslims are also an important force in Russia, making up between 12 and 15 percent of the population. Russia has more Muslim inhabitants than any other country in Europe. Battles with Muslims in the North Caucasus -- Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia -- have left Moscow viewing Islam as a source of extremism, separatism, and secession. The Russian Orthodox Church has had a checkered relationship with Islam, dating back over 700 years, but current problems between the two religions are fed by more recent phenomena. These include Orthodox fears of Islamic extremism and renewed notions of an Islamic-Christian struggle, which first emerged from the Soviet war in Afghanistan and then from the regional struggles following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

● GLOBALIZED RELIGION

All these trends are inherently intertwined with globalization and highlight its tendency to create a more unified and yet more fragmented world. Global and local religious identities are becoming linked because globalization is changing the very nature of religion and its role in international affairs. Ever since Samuel Huntington popularized the notion of a «clash of civilizations» in these pages, many accounts of the world’s religions have cast each religion as a vast, static bloc linked together by culture, theology, and territory. Up to a point, Huntington was broadly right. Religions often have intersected with specific cultures, states, and territories. In Europe, this reality was reinforced by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which essentially privatized religion to the realm of individual belief and nationalized it as the basis for organizing modern states. Later on, European colonialists attempted to interpret Hinduism and Buddhism through the lens of Protestant theology, exporting their understanding of religion, culture, and territory to the developing world.

But religions have seldom operated as static blocs with set beliefs. They have always been adaptable and in flux, shaped by and shaping their surroundings. In his new book Holy Ignorance, Olivier Roy argues that globalization is facilitating the detachment of religion, culture, and territory, thus unraveling religious traditions from particular cultures and nationalities. Roy points to global religious movements such as Salafism, a militantly literalistic form of Islam; Pentecostalism; and evangelical Christianity to contend that fundamentalism is particularly well suited to globalization because its claim of a universal truth is inherently disconnected from particular states and societies. Whether or not the other groups he references -- Tabligh Jamaat (the largest transnational Islamic organization in the world), China’s Falun Gong, and Sri Lanka’s Theravada Buddhism -- can be considered fundamentalist, they have joined existing global religious traditions, such as the Roman Catholic Church and the various Orthodox patriarchates, in impacting international relations. Globalization is also making religion more pluralistic. The kind of religious monopolies that have benefited the Orthodox churches in central Europe, the Catholic Church in Latin America, and Hinduism in India will be difficult to sustain. Religion is increasingly, if unevenly, becoming a matter of choices -- about whether to believe, whether to embrace one particular kind of religion, and, if so, what elements or sect of that religion to embrace. Religion is no longer imposed or taken for granted by prevailing cultures. The debates in the new Iraqi parliament and increasingly in many other Muslim countries -- over the lines between Islamic law and religious freedom, the role of women in society, and regulations regarding conversion and proselytizing -- indicate that this shift is also taking place in the Islamic world. Globalization also gives greater influence to ethnic and religious diasporas. These communities are contributing to the changing nature of international security and are one of the most significant types of nonstate actors in international relations. Globalization has blurred the lines between religious organizations involved in advocacy, proselytizing, or social welfare -- for example, Tabligh Jamaat or Hezbollah -- and purely terrorist organizations. It is these kinds of both local and global social networks that allow people to support or facilitate the operations of al Qaeda, Hamas, and other illicit groups across the world.

Yet the mixing of sacred and secular objectives in religious institutions is nothing new. Piety and political struggle have often accompanied each other in developing countries. Sufi brotherhoods in North Africa,
for example, supported Islamic resistance fighters against French occupation in the nineteenth century. Westerners find this blending of religion and politics uncomfortable. But in the religious world of the global South, there is often an overlap between social, charitable, political, and even terrorist networks. In weak and failed states, which are plagued by corruption and crumbling social infrastructure, a variety of charities and faith-based organizations will remain a main source of education, social welfare, and health care.

Globalization also enables members of diasporas to join religious groups in their countries of ethnic origin. The Internet and cheap airplane tickets, for example, give young, rootless, and alienated Muslims in the diaspora the opportunity to construct new, radical identities by joining a virtual ummah, or global Islamic community. One recent example is Faisal Shahzad, the so-called Times Square bomber. A Pakistani-born immigrant who lived in Connecticut, Shahzad nonetheless visited Pakistan often and received terrorist training from the Taliban.

Simmering local conflicts could, if allowed to fester, lend fodder to extremists arguing that Islam and Christianity, or Buddhism and Islam, are at war. This has happened in Buddhist Thailand, where an Islamic separatist insurgency is raging in the south, and it is happening in the Philippines, where a long-running Islamic independence movement has linked itself with al Qaeda in recent years. In both places, isolated revolts have taken on international proportions as war zones within a larger battle.

**FAITH AND FOREIGN POLICY**

As the world becomes more religious, religion will also likely alter relations in the traditional nation-state system. At a basic level, religion will be an important factor in understanding the general foreign policy orientations of many countries. There will undoubtedly be exceptions -- Western states supported Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo over Christians, to take one instance -- but many historical examples suggest that religion reinforces collective identities and guides foreign policy. Germany's Catholics pressured the country to recognize Catholic Croatia's secession from Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the Cold War. Orthodox states such as Greece and Russia opposed NATO's bombing of Orthodox Serbia in 1999. Russia's claims of political influence over the Ukraine are related to the fact that Uniats, also known as Eastern Rite Catholics, dominate its western territories and are at odds with the Russian Orthodox Church.

The foreign policy implications of religion are evident when it comes to Islam as well. Saudi Arabia's cultural diplomacy has consolidated the country's influence in the Islamic world by spreading its more rigid form of Islam, upsetting local Islamic practices and long-standing traditions of religious toleration and coexistence. Meanwhile, Iran has pursued an equally aggressive religious diplomacy, exporting its messianic form of Shiism across the Arab world and supporting sectarian movements in Lebanon (Hezbollah), the Palestinian territories (Hamas), and Iraq.

Another potentially important factor in international relations is the impact of Christianity on foreign policy orientation. The political scientist Walter Russell Mead has argued that the global rise of Christianity is good for U.S. foreign policy. Christianity, he says, is «the world's most pro-American faith» because it is congruent with American beliefs and ideas (if not always actions), supports religious freedom, and helps inculcate the kind of values conducive to democracy and economic development. Mead is partly correct, although perhaps

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According to conventional wisdom, secularization became an inevitable part of modernization with the spread of education, science, technology, and prosperity. But new megacities are havens for religious revivals.
not for the reasons that he cites. U.S. foreign policy is increasingly influenced by the way globalization creates or empowers new types of collective identity and political action, including global Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity. Globalization enables Muslims and Christians in the global South to link their local conflicts to competing global narratives. Islamic and Christian nonstate actors -- for example, Franklin Graham’s Christian relief organization, Samaritan’s Purse, now active in the Sudan -- draw on diasporas to provide them with financial and political support. American Christian values and goals connect the United States to societies and countries in the global South with Pentecostal or evangelical constituencies. The religious dimensions of this kind of collective identity and transnationalism is a growing feature of U.S. foreign policy and explains (to a large extent) legislation in the past decade on human trafficking, religious freedom, the violence in Darfur, and human rights in North Korea. Yet Mead’s vision of Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity boosting the status of the United States in foreign countries is not a foregone conclusion. Given the increasingly indigenous development of these Christian groups in non-Western countries, they have embraced local concerns and local politics in places such as China. Pentecostalism and evangelical Christianity are certainly not monolithic, and it remains unclear whether Christians in the global South will align with their more conservative U.S. counterparts on foreign policy issues. On the issue of the Iraq war, for example, they did not.

Meanwhile, evangelicals in China seem more inclined to follow Chinese nationalist sentiment than to embrace the United States. It is possible that religion in the global South will not reflect Western political categories. For both Muslims and Christians in developing countries, religion is likely to be more socially conservative than in the West, taking a harsher stance on abortion and homosexuality. At the same time, religion in the global South could be more politically liberal, since people in developing nations are generally more concerned with poverty, economic justice, and the environment; more skeptical of capitalism and globalization; and more supportive of the United Nations and international law.

Globalization and its impact on religious trends will undoubtedly affect domestic conditions as well. Religiously divided populations from Indonesia to Nigeria have clashed in recent years, and fresh Muslim-Christian conflicts are erupting in Côte d’Ivoire and Kenya. Statistics on civil unrest indicate that once a minority religious group in a given country reaches -10 percent of the population, it can sufficiently resist policies promoting religious harmony and can even sustain struggles for liberation. Clearly, other factors contribute to such strife besides religion. Yet although many conflicts are the result of politics, economics, and governmental mismanagement, religious ideas do matter. Collective action depends on how social groups perceive the world in which they live and how they view their own identities in relation to the identities of others. The way religious institutions address literacy, schooling, governance, human rights, and interreligious dialogue can support governments’ ability to respond to crises surrounding these issues or exacerbate religious strife.

**RELIGION IN THE WORLD AHEAD**

A new kind of world is in the making, the people, states, and religious communities that compose the global South are making it. The major world religions are all taking advantage of the opportunities provided by globalization to transform their messages and reach a new global audience. Faith informs the daily struggles of millions in confronting larger political conflicts regarding democracy, human rights, and economic development. Ethnic and religious diasporas in the global South are connected to the West in ways that can create or reinvigorate collective identities, whose influence can both promote social welfare and fuel terrorism and interreligious conflict. As a result, understanding religions worldwide -- their beliefs, values, and practices and the way they influence the political goals, actions, and motivations of states and religious communities -- will be an important task for U.S. and international foreign-policy makers in the coming decades. If the United States recognizes and utilizes the worldwide religious resurgence, it can harness its power to improve international security and better the lives of millions. If the United States fails to confront the implications of this religious rise properly, however, the potential for religiously motivated violence across the globe may increase dramatically over the next century.

The global religious landscape in the coming years will be affected by the massive shift in population growth from the developed countries of the North to the developing countries of the so-called global South.