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Religion and Global Conflicts

Faith's Role in International Politics

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ROME, JULY 24, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- As the 10th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks draws near religion's role in conflicts and politics continues to be debated.

A valuable contribution to this discussion is a recent book, "Religion, Identity, and Global Governance: Ideas, Evidence, and Practice," (University of Toronto Press). Edited by Patrick James, from the University of Southern California, it contains many of proceedings from a conference held in October 2007.

Jonh F. Stack, a professor at Florida International University, examined the challenge to international relations theory in one of the book's chapters. Even before the events of the last decade it was clear that religion, far from having disappeared, was still a powerful global force, he maintained.

Within the United States, for example Protestant and evangelical influences have played a major role in domestic politics. Religion has come back in the countries of the former Soviet Union since the collapse of communism and the influence of Islam has been evident in Africa, Asia, and Europe.

Nevertheless, Stack noted that international relations theory has largely ignored religion's role. In many cases during the twentieth century influential thinkers in the social sciences theorized that religion was not only irrelevant, but that it would gradually disappear.

The persistence of religion and its evident influence in politics has subsequently forced a change in this expectation. Religion is relevant, Stack explained, as it is a basic dimension of human life that influences culture, tradition, and world views.

"Religious belief may not be satisfying for Western social scientists studying the behavior of individuals, groups, social movements, or states, but it resonates deeply in the most basic values and choices," Stack said.

That said he admitted it is sometimes difficult to calculate the specific role of religion and to discern whether religion is merely a cover for other factors such as ethnicity, culture or group power.

Backlash

The last decade has certainly seen an explosion in studies about religion and international affairs, wrote Ron E. Hassner in his contribution. Hassner, an assistant professor at U.C. Berkeley, said that more books have been published on Islam and war since 9/11 than since the invention of the printing press up to prior September 2011.

He deplored what he termed the "secular, foaming-at-the-mouth backlash," that has characterized a good number of the books.

"Dismissing religion as a dangerous form of group dementia is not only unreasonable, it also is unhelpful because one cannot both reject and expect to understand religion."

Authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens display a blatant double standard, Hassner accused. Wherever religion is associated with war these authors affirm that there is a causal relationship. At the same time they dismiss as spurious any such association with the promotion of morality, culture or science.

In her contribution Cecilia Lynch, a professor at the University of California, proposed a markedly different approach to studying religion to that of Dawkins and others. It's important to look at the practice of religion and not just the doctrine, she said.

We also need to understand that while religion provides ethical guidelines there are always gaps that leave openings for interpretation. Religious doctrines and traditions, Lynch affirmed, can never cover all eventualities in prescribing behavior.

In addition we should view religious belief and action as being shaped by historical circumstances and traditions, as well as contemporary economic and social factors.

One area of religion that Lynch focused on was its involvement in humanitarian activity. Due to some conflicts in the last couple of decades involving both Christians and Muslims their respective humanitarian organizations have begun to work together.

In addition, secular groups have had to adapt when they are working in Muslim-majority societies. Since the events of 2001, however, some countries look with suspicion on the Islamic aid groups.

Just War

James L. Heft, a Marianist priest and a professor at the University of Southern California examined the Just War doctrine and how it was interpreted by Pope John Paul II.

According to Heft John Paul II developed an understanding of just war teaching that made it more difficult to justify war, and also placed it within an ethical framework that emphasized non-violent means for resolving conflicts.

This trend started well before John Paul II Haft explained. After the Catholic Church lost the Papal States and its temporal power, so it was freed to more fully defend the rights of others and it also tended to oppose war to a greater degree. This development was particularly evident in Pope John XXII's encyclical "Pacem in Terris," published in 1963, he said.

On Oct. 4, 1965, Pope Paul VI addressed the United Nations and exclaimed "No more war, war never again."

Coming to John Paul II Heft described how both in his encyclicals and speeches the pope defended human rights and opposed war repeatedly. He did not entirely rule out the use of force, but it was to be limited and carefully circumscribed.

The events of 1989, which saw the liberation of Eastern Europe without any war, confirmed the pope's conviction in the power of non-violent methods, Heft said. Something which he spelled out two years later in his encyclical "Centesimus Annus." In later years John Paul II strongly opposed the invasion of Iraq.

Nevertheless, Heft pointed out that John Paul II cautiously supported the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. In his World Day of Peace Message for 2002 he said there is a right to defend oneself against terrorism. Along with that he also advocated humanitarian intervention in the former Yugoslavia.

Overall, John Paul II's awareness of the consequences of war made him very reluctant to endorse violence, but it is not correct to portray him as a pacifist, Heft concluded.

Mediation

Turning to the topic of peace Robert B. Lloyd addressed the topic of faith-based approaches to conflict resolution. Lloyd, an associate professor at Pepperdine University, pointed out that figures such as former American secretary of state Madeleine Albright have affirmed that faith-based diplomacy is a useful tool of foreign policy.

Lloyd centred his attention on Christianity. The world doesn't lack mediators, he pointed out, but a Christian one differs due to the formation received in a particular religious community.

Regarding the Catholic Church Lloyd noted the long history of mediation. The Treaty of Tordesillas in 1494, brokered by Pope Alexander VI, resolved a conflict between Spain and Portugal over the control of the newly-discovered lands in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

More recently, in 1984 a treaty was signed between Chile and Argentina to resolve a dispute over islands in the Beagle Channel. The Church's mediation helped resolve a conflict that saw the two countries on the brink of war.

Lloyd also pointed to the Community of Sant'Egidio in Rome. It played a key role in mediating the end of a 15-year war in Mozambique.

Is there anything distinctive about Christian mediation? Lloyd identified some differences. Christians place an emphasis on reconciliation or the building of new relationships where none existed, he said.

Another concern is for a just outcome. The strong theme of justice that is found in Scripture provides additional motivation for Christians as compared to other mediators.

A third characteristic mentioned by Lloyd is the preferred role of negotiation, and in particular of establishing lines of communication where none had existed between the conflicting parties.

Like their secular counterparts Christian mediators do not always succeed, but Lloyd said that it does show how a strong religious identity is not just a source of conflict, but is also a means of peace and reconciliation.

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