

## Religions in the global world: prospects for Sophia Global Studies

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# Religions in the Global World

## Prospects for Sophia Global Studies

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**Abstract:** *The author offers some reflections on the place of religions in a global world. The first relates to the failure of the so-called secularization thesis, and the re-emergence of religion in the international arena. The second relates to certain imbalances in the ways in which commentators have dealt with this resurgence, especially when they link religions to conflict without recognizing the potentialities that religions offer for conflict resolution. The third point builds on the previous, recognizing the growing recognition that religion can represent a strategic resource for diplomacy, peace-building and development. The author recognizes the potential that the Sophia Global Studies center offers to the study of the complex role of religions in today's world.*

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First, let me congratulate Sophia University Institute on this ten-year milestone. I look forward to the growth and development of this new Global Studies program in the years to come. In my brief remarks, I would like to make three points related to the place of religion in a global world: the first sociological, the second theoretical, and the third more practical.

The first point, and you will permit me to be a bit provocative in this regard, is that the world we inhabit, a world where the religious dimension continues to be visibly manifest in the public sphere, was not supposed to still exist. Modern societies were supposed, following all projections, to be secular. For much of the twentieth century, scholars believed that the future of the world would be marked by less religion in the public sphere. Societies, they observed, were developing in a linear, modernizing trajectory through which religion would either disappear or be reduced to the private sphere of spirituality, but definitively would not be on the pages of newspapers in the way it is today. Religion was supposed to have gradually, but ineluctably, withered away. At most, ultimately, religion was to have been relegated to the private sphere.

For much of the twentieth century, then, the paradigm of modernization cum secularization went unchallenged. According to this paradigm, all societies should have transited in similar ways from a traditional condition to a modern one, and a key feature of this modernization was secularization. The so-called secularization thesis presented for most of the twentieth century an uncontested assumption of any form of sociology of religion. Secularization meant different things to different sociologists, of course, but overall they concurred that religion was something of the past and that therefore it would become unnecessary to discuss religion anymore.

And yet, here we are, launching a program on religions in the global world. Why is this? What has happened? Why is it that some sociologists of religion, such as Peter Berger, and scholars among the founding fathers of the secularization thesis in the 1950s and 1960s, are now saying that this theory has empirically been proven wrong. In fact, it now appears that the world has been desecularizing: becoming more modern and more religious at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Now, what does this desecularization mean? This is a topic of huge debate. If we open the pages of a major newspaper in Italy or in other parts of the world, religion seems to be present in many different conversations around politics, society, and the economy. Religions are newly visible, and we absolutely need to make sense of this phenomenon. The important reflection developed today by Olivier Roy can be read as a contribution to this crucial question of the contemporary sociology of religion. My first point, then, is that all talk of religions in today's global world takes place against the backdrop of sociologists' failed predictions. Scholars today are taking seriously the global resurgence of religions and the impact of this phenomenon on the global world.

The second point I would like to make relates to the problematic way in which many analysts have interpreted the resurgence of religion in global politics.<sup>2</sup> This view, which is strong in western

academia and political circles, assumes that the combination of politics and religion in international relations is best understood in terms of a narrative of political instability, a disordered state of international affairs, fundamentalist politics, and terrorism. As a result, any positive role that religion might play in international relations, by contributing to modernization, democratization, and even peace-building, tends to be overlooked.

To illustrate this point, it is enough to note that for the predominant academic and public discourse following the end of the Cold War, the return of religion in international politics has primarily taken a militant and even violent form, almost as a God-sent plague or punishment on the earth or as "the revenge of God," as if there was only "terror in the mind of God," as the titles of two of the first books that focused on this resurgence evoke.<sup>3</sup> Of course, many examples can sustain this approach: conflicts in Bosnia, Algeria, Kashmir, Palestine, and Sudan; and the rise of worldwide Islamism and Hindu nationalism or the growing role of the Christian Right on American foreign policy or of Orthodoxy on the Russian state. Of course, the events of September 11 came as a seal to confirm unequivocally such a worrying and destabilizing trend.

More generally, I think that there are three ways in which international relations experts read this resurgence of religion in international politics : 1) in the context of the so-called new wars,

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1. Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World*, ed. Peter L. Berger, 1–18 (Washington, D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999); Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 1999 60, no. 3: 249–73.

2. Scott Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, eds., *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave, 2003); and Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy

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Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2011).

3. Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World* (London: Polity, 1994); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

wherein political violence is often manifested within “failed” states and driven by a politics of identity and irregular warfare designed along religious lines; 2) in the context of religious fundamentalism and international terrorism; and 3) in the context of fear around a forthcoming “clash of civilizations.” However different, these three political manifestations of the global resurgence of religions share the implicit assumption that this resurgence is, by definition, a threat to security and inimical to “modernity” and the resolution of conflicts. My argument is that such an assumption is an ideological understanding more than the product of a social-scientifically based and historically grounded analysis. Scott Thomas called these problematic assumptions the “Westphalian presumption,” others “the myth of religious violence.”<sup>4</sup> As Scott Appleby has effectively put it, religion is politically ambivalent: On the one hand, it can promote political violence and conflict, but, on the other, it can promote nonviolent civic engagement, development, conflict-resolution, and even reconciliation.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, religion in international relations does not need to be seen only as a problem. It can also be part of the solution.

This insight leads me to my final, more practical point: There is an emerging recognition that religion can be a strategic resource for diplomacy, peacebuilding, the strengthening of human rights, and the advancement of sustainable development. This new policy-oriented discussion, referred to in foreign policy as “religious

engagement,” is emerging as one of the most promising fields of strategic and creative thinking on which governments and international organizations increasingly are working.<sup>6</sup> And here, in the idea of engaging religious and communities abroad to promote development and humanitarian assistance, advance human rights, and prevent and resolve conflict, you have, I think, the unique possibility for Sophia Global Studies to develop an innovative cutting-edge research agenda on the role of religions in the global world, one that can hope to have a real impact. This opens new unexplored practical horizons: Religion has, for example, something to say to the moral economy and to the current critique of the global political economy. It is not a coincidence that the most powerful criticism of the current economic and environmental crisis has been put forward by a religious leader like Pope Francis. Religion has a huge amount to say about how peace is built and how communities that have been divided can be reconciled. Religion can contribute to current discussions about sustainable development goals or the global refugee crisis. Religion can strengthen the discourse and practice of human rights, which are being challenged from many perspectives.

To access the resources that religion can offer us, however, we need to understand that the broader secular society has a huge religious literacy problem and a tremendous need to understand more deeply the many ways in which religion interacts with

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4. Scott, M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2005); William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

5. Scott R. Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

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6. See Scott Appleby and Richard Cizik, eds., *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: Chicago Council, 2010); Fabio Petito and Scott Thomas, “Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge: Italy as a Special Case of Religious Engagement in Foreign Policy,” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (2015): 40–51; Pasquale Ferrara and Fabio Petito, “An Italian Foreign Policy of Religious Engagement: Challenges and Prospects,” *International Spectator* 51, no. 1 (2016): 28–43.

society and politics. This is an area where scholars inspired by the multidisciplinary and collaborative vision of Sophia Global Studies can contribute. At the same time, religious faith traditions need to embrace the modern social sciences and secular thought that have been developed over centuries. This kind of post-secular dialogue—to use the formulation of Jürgen Habermas—needs to happen if religions are to respond effectively to some of the contemporary challenges.<sup>7</sup> This secular-religious dialogue, I think, is a necessary condition for developing new forms of secular-religious partnerships capable of dealing with the complexities and multifaceted nature of some of the challenges faced by the international community. I am more and more convinced that religious communities, leaders, and organizations can play a role in meeting some of these challenges, in partnership with other institutions: governments, the civil society, international organizations. But how to conceive of this partnership is still something that we need to better understand and put forward. Hence, the essential role that an institution like Sophia Global Studies can play.

Finally, let me say that I think there is also a unique role that interreligious dialogue and collaboration can play, locally and globally, in building a more cohesive society for the common good. Engagement with religious actors and interreligious dialogue and collaboration can be crucial policy tools for combating intolerance and discrimination and for strengthening peacebuilding, especially in a context where too often antagonistic narratives like the “West versus Islam” or “Christianity versus Islam,” the clash of

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7. Habermas, Jürgen et al, *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010)

civilizations, and the “Sunni versus Shia” proliferate. I was struck by the response in France to the horrible terrorist assassination in 2016 of the Catholic priest Father Jacques Hamel while he was celebrating Mass. The social context was tense and could have allowed for social and violent retaliation against the French Muslim community. “What’s going to happen?” was the question that many believers and nonbelievers asked at that moment, sensing a new level of violence and intensity had been reached. And then there was an outstanding and unexpected response, not by the government, not by civil society, but by the very religious communities that had been involved in the incident: The Christian community and the Muslim community met together during the Sunday Mass in all the churches of France. I think here there was a prophetic vision. Religious communities have a role to play in building a new unity, which I’m afraid the secular world is really struggling to produce.

I hope these short remarks have made clear that we terribly need research and training initiatives such as Sophia Global Studies: The sociological transformation of our global world into a desecularized and post-secular context has made it possible to reflect critically on the changing political role of religion beyond its biased and taken-for-granted association with violence. This is de facto opening the way to explore new practical and political horizons to respond to the common global challenges and to strengthen peace and the common good. We need to translate this political intuition into a concrete research and training program: I am confident that Sophia Global Studies will succeed in contributing to this important enterprise and worthwhile dream.

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