Introduction

“In the name of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity…”

So began the General Treaty of the Congress of Vienna two centuries ago.

The role of religion in world order has changed markedly since. The forces that dominate international affairs today – nation states, market economies, and international institutions – interact outside of any religious frame. The recent 109-page nuclear accord with the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, is free of religious language.

This is not to say that religion plays no role in world politics. In fact its domestic salience has grown over the past several decades. Examples include the Religious Right in the United States and Israel, Hindu and Buddhist nationalism in Asia, and Political Islam across parts of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa. Even in Europe, a bastion of secularism, a growing religious pluralism is impacting the political scene.

Because the boundaries between domestic, transnational and international politics are fluid, this religious resurgence has impacted the overall trajectory of world order. Religious ideas and actors, working within and across countries, influence how political leaders approach global issues ranging from peace and security to economic and social development. The examples of terrorism, human rights, and global inequality attest to the importance of religious identities and norms in motivating and legitimating political and policy coalitions around particular agendas. In these and other cases, religion matters.

Nevertheless, this paper argues, religion’s influence continues to be felt within an international system that remains strikingly secular. A first section acknowledges the historical debt of sovereignty, human rights and other constitutive principles of world order to religious origins, but argues that they operate today within a predominantly secular and surprisingly resilient frame. Subsequent sections trace the resilience of that order in the face of three religious challenges over the past century – American Civil Religion, Political Islam, and the Catholic Church. A concluding section argues that in the contemporary phase of globalization the interaction of religion with the dominant secular institutions of world politics is shaping the contestation of global order around three critical issues – terrorism, human rights, and inequality – in significant ways.

Historical Legacies

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1 Religion is defined here as shared beliefs and practices oriented to the supernatural or transcendent. This definition excludes secular worldviews without religious referents such as humanism, nationalism, socialism, liberalism or consumerism.
For most of human history political legitimacy has rested on some sacred foundation. The Mandate of Heaven in China, the Caliphate within Islam, the Divine Right of Kings in the West— all are examples of rule legitimated in terms of some supernatural, transcendent, or timeless foundation. Of course rulers and would-be rulers also pursued material self-interests, then as now. But for most of human history they did so within a taken-for-granted religious frame that served to describe and justify their actions. They acted within a world of religious ideas, rituals, and normative precepts.

This religious frame also applied to external affairs. Relations among empires, kingdoms, and principalities—the closest analog to today’s international relations—unfolded within a higher, cosmic or sacred order. For most of recorded history it was routine to invoke God, or gods, in both the conduct of war and the negotiation of peace. The Congress of Vienna participated to a considerable degree in this age-old tradition.

By 1815, however, the religious frame was beginning to fade. Today’s secular international system had its roots in early modern Europe and accelerated in the 19th century. The emergence of states out of the ruins of the Holy Roman Empire, the waning of ecclesiastical power and the Reformation, and the end of the religious wars in the Peace of Westphalia (1648) were critical milestones. The democratic and nationalist ideologies advanced by the American and French revolutions at the turn of the nineteenth century reinforced the secularizing trend. Against this backdrop the Holy Alliance that followed on the Congress of Vienna appears as a failed effort to revive the idea of Christendom— to forge a Europe of God-fearing rulers committed to “justice, love and peace.” The tide of revolution at home and rivalry abroad soon buried the project. By the turn of the twentieth century the European powers, along with the United States and Japan, were locked in a fierce global struggle for industrial and military preeminence. The idea of an international order grounded in shared religious and ethical norms had all but dissolved.

The world order that emerged after two cataclysmic wars, the onset of the cold war, and decolonization was deeply secular in its foundations. The United Nations system was built upon the principles of national sovereignty, national self-determination, and non-interference in the affairs of other states. It did not invoke God, gods, or any particular religious tradition. The UN Charter of 1945 did affirm a “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” But this was presented as a secular faith, not a religious one. And it was open to widely contrasting interpretations of civil, political, economic, and social rights, all reflecting different national views—and non-binding on member states in any case. The legal regimes that have evolved within the UN System since 1945 have mostly reflected the secular cast of the international system. Interstate diplomacy, transnational trade and finance, and international law are primarily the realm of material interests and secular rules and norms. They can be described and practiced without reference to religion.

This is not, of course, to argue that the institutions, rules, and norms that constitute the international system have nothing to do with religion. As recent scholarship has shown, principles of sovereignty and norms of human rights and humanitarianism have a
considerable historical debt to religious ideas and practices. It does not follow, however, that those institutions are religious today in any meaningful sense. International leaders in politics, business, and civil society, are able to think, talk, and act across a range of transnational issues without reference to God or any particular religious tradition. That represents a significant historical break, the outcome of a centuries-long evolution.

**Religious Politics and World Order**

Religion certainly plays a significant role in domestic politics across states. As an important cultural and social force, religion shapes the worldviews and policy frames of political actors around the world. Certain governments and non-governmental organizations resort to religious imagery and appeal to ethical norms grounded in religious traditions in explaining their international activities. And religious leaders across traditions seek to hold political actors accountable to those norms. It is striking, however, that even with the religious resurgence of the past several decades, international politics remains dominated by states, material interests, and international institutions constructed around the secular norm of national sovereignty. The resilience of this secular international system is evident from a cursory survey of three powerful religious forces that have had only a modest impact on international affairs, at least to date: American Civil Religion; Political Islam; and the Catholic Church.

**American Civil Religion**

The world’s leading power, the United States, has an atypically religious citizenry. But religion has had only a modest influence on its foreign policy and on international affairs.

In American political culture, most citizens view God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness as universally valid and universally binding. In American “Civil Religion” (Robert Bellah), forged out of Enlightenment deism and Puritanism and now on a broad Judeo-Christian foundation, the United States is called by God from among the nations to advance Providence upon the earth. It follows from this American Exceptionalism that the US should promote freedom around the world through its example and, where appropriate, through its actions. As John Kennedy expressed this consensus idea in his Inaugural Address in 1961, claiming that "the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God." Presidents before and since have echoed the same theme.

The belief that the United States is “the greatest nation on earth” (Barack Obama) and has a sacred duty to promote universal human rights comes into periodic tension with the secular international system and its foundational principle of national sovereignty. Presidents have historically criticized other countries for violating human rights, with a particular focus on major geopolitical competitors and on the freedom of religion and expression. (The social and economic rights also enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights receive less emphasis). US human rights critiques, codified in State Department annual reports, generate periodic rebuttals from China, Russia, Iran,
and other countries that reject them as unwarranted interference in their sovereign affairs and as a throwback to the colonial era.

Interestingly, the case of US religious freedom policy illustrates the strength of the secular international system and its dominant norms. Successive American Presidents, both Republican and Democratic, have championed religious rights far more at the level of rhetoric than of action. The United States has never imposed meaningful sanctions on other states for violations of religious freedom, despite its prominence as the “First Freedom” in the Bill of Rights and its universalist thrust. In US foreign policy, when support for oppressed religious minorities abroad has been seen to clash with material national economic, political, and security interests – the secular currency of international politics – the latter have invariably prevailed. In the critical case of religious liberty, the power and policy of the US, a superpower with a religious majority, has had limited impact on course of international diplomacy and the trajectory of world order.

**Political Islam**

A second religious challenge to the international system over the past century has been Political Islam. But it, too, has had a negligible impact to date.

Strong opposition to secularism within the Muslim world can be traced back to the colonial era of the nineteenth century and influential thinkers including Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Mohammad Abduh. It found its most influential mid-20th century exponent in the life and work of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. When these thinkers rejected liberal democracy and nationalism as modern forms of idolatry and called for a new form of political community based on Islam, they also challenged the secular basis of the international system. Once the colonial yoke was thrown off, some of these thinkers argued, Shariah should become the norm within and across societies. The solidarity of the Ummah, the transnational Islamic community, would displace the world order created by a secular and imperialist West.

During the more than half-century between the dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 and the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Political Islam was a marginal force in most of the newly independent states of the Arab world and the Muslim-majority nations of Asia and Africa. Things began to change in the 1960s, when the secular nationalism and industrialism that had predominated after two world wars and decolonization, personified by the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, began to lose its appeal. Islam emerged as national and transnational political force, energized by two Arab-Israeli wars and supported by the new oil wealth of Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies. One symptom of the shift was the formation of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), an international grouping of Muslim-majority states, in 1969.

In this context the Iranian Revolution of 1978-79 appeared to some as a potential challenge to the secular international system. But in the decades since, with some isolated exceptions, we have not seen a spread of Islamic regimes. Islamic movements and parties have had periodic success in the domestic politics of Muslim-majority states without
transforming their secular foundations. There have been some efforts through the OIC and other platforms to articulate Islamic norms at a global level, in the financial arena, for example, and through the promotion of a Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981). But salience and impact have been marginal at the level of the international system. Terrorists invoking Islam have fared little better. The attacks of September 11, 2001 proved only an isolated success for Al-Qaeda, which has since been on the defensive. It is too early to say whether the recent rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria and of Boko-Haram in Nigeria – violent groups claiming to be working together as part of a global Islamic effort – will pose a serious challenge to the existing world order. Until now, however, Political Islam, in both its peaceful and violent variants, has had a much greater impact at the domestic and transnational than at the international level.

*The Catholic Church*

A third notable religious challenge to the international system has been the Catholic Church and its social teaching. But its influence, too, has been quite limited to date.

The Roman Catholic Church saw its political significance diminish as the secular international system began to take shape during the early modern period. Its long slide from international preeminence, from the late Middle Ages through the Reformation and the French Revolution, continued with the unification of Italy in 1871, which reduced the Papal States to the confines of Vatican City. This political decline reinforced a siege mentality most evident in Pius IX’s Syllabus of Errors (1864), with its blanket condemnation of liberalism and modernity. Only with the formulation and promulgation of Catholic Social Teaching over the subsequent decades did the Church begin to recover some of its international political influence. In his Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Leo XIII developed a powerful critique of the emerging global industrial order based on core principles including human dignity, social justice, and peace.

The Church’s impact on international affairs was very limited through the first half of the 20th century. It was powerless to slow the onset of two world wars, and its legitimacy suffered as a result of accommodation with Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) represented a new political departure. The Church abandoned its opposition to liberal democracy and religious freedom and powerfully rearticulated the importance of Catholic Social Teaching for a global era. “Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power,” the Council noted, “and yet a huge proportion of the world citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty.” In the context of “growing interdependence of men one on the other,” the idea of the “common good” took on “an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race.”

In the decades since Pope Paul VI articulated these themes before the UN in 1965, successive popes have travelled the world meeting with heads of state and advocating principles of Catholic Social Teaching. John Paul II famously influenced the rise of Solidarity in Poland in 1979-80 and helped to precipitate the unraveling of the Soviet bloc ten years later. And after decades of supporting autocrats in Latin America and
Philippines, Church leaders backed a wave of democratization in the 1980s. At the level of the international system, however, the Church’s advocacy for human dignity, human rights, and economic and social justice has achieved only isolated successes, one being the Jubilee 2000 debt relief campaign, part of a broad religious-secular coalition. The 2008-09 global economic crisis provides a vivid example of the limits of the Vatican’s reach. When Pope Benedict XVI, the leader of a billion Catholics worldwide, published a critique of global capitalism in his 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, very few took notice. Pope Francis has had a greater impact more recently. But it is too early to tell whether his signature policy intervention, the 2015 environmental encyclical *Laudato Si*, will inject a strong moral dimension into the global climate change debate.

**Religion and World Order in the 21st Century**

This brief overview of three religious challenges to the secular international system demonstrates its overall resilience. American Civil Religion, Political Islam, and the Catholic Church are salient examples of “public religions in the modern world” (Jose Casanova) both at the national and transnational level. They have had a significant impact on world politics – in the case of US religious freedom advocacy, the rise of terrorist extremism, and the “Catholic wave” of democratization. But they have not challenged the foundations of the secular international system that has crystalized in the two centuries since the Congress of Vienna – the system of states, market economies, and international institutions based fundamentally on principles of national sovereignty.

As globalization accelerates, religious forces do have the potential to shape the evolution of world order – and emergent challenges to it – more profoundly in at least four contexts: the politics of human rights, controversies over global inequality, the struggle against terrorism, and the rise of regionalism. In all four cases, religious actors and ideas are increasingly interacting dominant secular norms and institutions to shape outcomes.

**Human Rights.** The politics of human rights poses the starkest challenge to the secular norm of state sovereignty. The idea that governments are not the final arbiters of what goes on within their borders, while still hotly contested, has advanced considerably with the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the Responsibility to Protect (RTP) doctrine over the past two decades. Faith-inspired human rights activists have been part of a wider secular-religious coalition pushing for these changes. The importance of religious agency in human rights and religious freedom struggles should not be surprising. Christianity and Islam, for example, proselytizing traditions that emphasize God’s ultimate dominion and the unity of humankind, coexist somewhat uneasily with the idea that states are sovereign. It does not follow that the religious politics of human rights will have a uniform impact into the future. Conservative and progressive forces remain divided, within and across the world’s leading traditions, on topics ranging from women’s and LGBT rights to freedom of expression and protections against blasphemy.

**Global Inequality.** The past several years have seen the emergence of a debate about economic and social inequality within and across states. As economic growth and innovation has pulled hundreds of millions out of abject poverty worldwide, it has also
generated rising expectations and awareness of growing wealth disparities. The world’s great religious traditions, with their emphasis on basic human dignity and solidarity, are a natural reservoir of political opposition to rising inequality. Here, as in the case of human rights, religious-secular coalitions for change have emerged. From Occupy Wall Street to the Sustainable Development Goals, a range of religious leaders across traditions have worked with secular activists, governments, and international institutions to advance a progressive economic and social agenda. In his travels and public statements, Pope Francis has emerged as their most visible and influential spokesman. How the inequality issue will play out, nationally and internationally, remains uncertain. But religious actors have certainly helped to put it on the agenda and will shape its future evolution.

Terrorism. The threat of religious-inspired terrorism continues to spread, although at a pace and scope much less than many have feared. (For example, there has not been a single large-scale terrorist attack on US soil since September 11, 2001.) Over the past several years, the crisis of state order in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and parts of Africa, has created an opening for violent Islamic extremists. The radical anti-Western rhetoric and repeated atrocities of ISIS and Boko Haram have attracted both international recruits and widespread condemnation around the world. Leading Muslim and other religious leaders have reiterated their traditions’ teachings on peace and, alongside non-religious leaders, pledged their solidarity with the victims of terrorist violence. To date, clashing great power interests have undermined any effective multilateral response to civil war, sectarian violence, and terrorism in the Middle East and elsewhere. China and Russia, for example, have used their Security Council vetoes to oppose the application of R2P in Syria. Into the future, religious actors will likely continue to promote terrorism and, in far greater numbers, to advocate national and international measures to contain it.

Regional Blocs. In his 1993 Foreign Affairs article, “The Clash of Civilizations?” Samuel Huntington famously raised the specter of a world divided along cultural and religious lines. The intervening decades have not been kind to his argument; they have revealed the resilience of national interests and of deep divides within civilizations, including Islam. Still, one cannot rule out the emergence of civilizational blocs, as the relative power of the United States declines and multipolarity takes hold. The rise of China and other Asian economies makes a “Confucian” bloc at least plausible. The Chinese leadership has sought to invoke Confucian norms such as “Harmonious Society,” which resonate in parts of East Asia, to build political legitimacy at home and abroad. Buddhism, with its emphasis on peace, is another potential building bloc for a regional identity. In the North Atlantic and Europe “The West” still exists Christian/Secular cultural and political force, evident both in support for liberal democracy and in widespread hostility towards Islam. And the idea of the Ummah remains prominent in the Islamic political imagination, as many Muslims feel a sense of solidarity and shared purpose with Muslims in other countries. While distinctive blocs remain unlikely in the decades to come, given the resilience of national states and global markets as pillars of world order, a trend towards multipolarity might reinforce divergent religious and cultural identities at a regional level.

This quick overview of four key challenges to world order suggests the critical importance of religious-secular interaction in driving future outcomes. Religion impacts
regionalism where it sustains transnational ties that predate the rise of the modern nation state. It matters around issues of human rights, global inequality, and terrorism, because norms of human dignity, justice, solidarity, and peace resonate across the world’s great religious traditions. In all these cases, religion’s political force depends on its identity-making and norm-generating capacity. In practice, however, that capacity is still sharply constrained and shaped by the secular triad that still constitutes world order – nation states, markets, and international institutions. Within that secular order religious actors and ideas are engaging politics and shaping outcomes across a range of key global issues.

There is no guarantee that this configuration will persist into the future. One can imagine a transformative turn in globalization – long awaited by many – that will take us beyond the nation state to a global civil society, in which religious and other social and political forces can somehow forge a world polity. In this scenario, issues including human rights, inequality, and terrorism would appear in a more global frame. The salience of religion around such issues, evident over the past decade in national and, to a lesser extent, in international politics, would become much more prominent at the global level. In such a world, the impact of religion would depend on demographic factors – for example, when and how Islam should overtake Christianity in numbers of adherents – and on the direction of contestation within and across religious communities on basic questions of order and justice. A more global civil society and emergent global polity would certainly allow more of a role for religion in the (re)construction of world order. Whether the result would ultimately be more harmony or more conflict is a matter for speculation.

Another, opposed set of changes to the international system would also allow a potentially transformative role for religion – not the formation and integration of a global polity but varieties of global disintegration. One can envision a range of regional catastrophes that might have the double effect of unraveling the existing international system and generating large-scale religious awakenings. The collapse of the global economic order; ecological disaster and pandemics; the dissolution of international organizations; the emergence of warring regional blocs; and the worldwide spread of terrorism and anarchy – these or other developments could simultaneously cripple the existing international system and stoke millennial revivals across religious traditions that might give birth to a new world order. It is not hard to imagine that the intolerant and violent currents within those traditions would flourish in such apocalyptic scenarios.

The specter of such disasters, perhaps more real than often acknowledged, is reason enough to encourage a positive role for religion in the reform of world order today and in decades to come. The overlapping ethical principles of peace, justice, and solidarity articulated across major religious traditions will always be in some tension with norms of state sovereignty and economic self-interest that now ground the international system. Given that tension, one can imagine the emergence of a powerful, transnational coalition of religious and secular forces mobilized around ethical principles that works through governments, markets, and international organizations to advance basic civil, political, economic, and social rights, and peace on a global level. Such a development might gradually transform our existing world order from within – and for the better.
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