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Asia Journalism Forum

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Religion and Politics in Asia: Cooperation or Conflict?

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**Keynote Address: AJF-IPS Conference,
Singapore, 6 April 2011**

Kofi Annan, Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, 2001

- Each of us has the right to take pride in our particular faith or heritage. But the notion that what is ours is necessarily in conflict with what is theirs is both false and dangerous. It has resulted in endless enmity and conflict, leading men to commit the greatest of crimes in the name of a higher power.
- It need not be so. People of different religions and cultures live side by side in almost every part of the world, and most of us have overlapping identities which unite us with very different groups.
- We *can* love what we are, without hating what – and who – we are *not*. We can thrive in our own tradition, even as we learn from others, and come to respect their teachings.

“Unsecularization” of the World’?

- ‘Anybody who had predicted 30 years ago that the 20th century would end with the resurgence of religion, with great new cathedrals, mosques and temples rising up, with the symbols and songs of faith everywhere apparent, would, in most circles, have been derided’ (Martin Woollacott, British journalist, 1995)
- “Unsecularization” of the world’ (George Weigel, public intellectual, 1993)
- ‘In the modern world, religion is central, perhaps *the* central force that motivates and mobilizes people ...’ (Samuel Huntington, Harvard academic, 1996)

The 'Return' of Religion to Politics

- Secularisation = 'Law' of Social Sciences
- Until recently, modernisation believed to lead *inevitably* to modernity, secularisation and secularism.
- But modernisation = secularisation *not* end of story
- Today, 'multiple modernities', some with important religious role: Singapore, Iran, Turkey, USA, Israel.
- How to understand current role of religion in conflict?
No single, elegant theoretical model to explain all cases.
- Two key events: end of Cold War; 9/11.
- During much of Cold War, religion ignored in global politics and usually domestic politics too.

Connections between Religion and Globalisation

- Globalisation is an historically unprecedented era of current global change with: massive technological, economic and political changes; swift urbanisation; rapid industrialisation (or de-industrialisation); unprecedented environmental damage
- Globalisation undermines traditional value systems, leading to increased uncertainty, instability, insecurity.
- How do globalisation and religion 'connect'? What is the result regarding conflict in Asia and elsewhere?
- Three areas: **Ideas, Experiences and Practices**

Ideas

- *Religious ideas* can help us explain the world, define ethical life and influence socio-political worldviews
- Traditionally, religious ideas find expression in a particular community: Peter Berger's 'sacred canopy', enabling believers to make sense of, and come to terms with, the world
- Globalisation stimulates free(r) circulation of ideas, helping slash holes in the sacred canopy
- Anti-globalisation/secularisation reactions from religious protest movements eg, some Orthodox Jews in Israel against shopping on the Shabbat

Experiences

- Dynamic and dialectic connection between globalisation and religion can lead to new *experiences*
- Globalisation can lead to increased self-reflection: result of increased transnational cultural/religious/social interactions
- Can create/deepen tensions: religious belonging is identity-forming, can become more important while, at the same time, identity may be changing.
- For example, Islamists may regard globalisation as a Western hegemonic tool spreading 'alien' ideas about gender relations, human rights and democracy.

Practices

- *Religious practices* often intimately connected to specific cultures, but does not imply they are static
- Religions become more dynamic, developing as a result of encounters with each other
- Globalisation encourages diversity of religious practices, eg, religious diversity in Asia, Africa and Latin America
- Implies that religious practices differ – even within the same religious tradition.
- Various versions of same religious tradition – eg, within Islam – encompassing people with different practices/goals, eg, al Qaeda and (Fethullah) Gülen Movement.

Religion: Conflict *and* Cooperation

- ‘Positive’ view of religion emphasises enhanced opportunities for positive involvement in various global issues, eg: *international development; human rights; conflict resolution and peace building* (‘Enhanced global dialogue’)
- ‘Negative’ view emphasises religion’s involvement in domestic and international conflicts, leading to stalemate over intractable problems (‘Clash of civilisations’)
- Latter can be *between* countries or *within* them, eg, so-called ‘culture war’ between Orthodox and secular Jews in Israel.

Religion and Inter-group Conflicts

- Religious worldviews can characterise core views relating to fundamental issues, eg: control of state and territory in many countries in Asia and elsewhere
- Such conflicts can take on 'larger-than-life' proportions: a struggle of good against evil
- Inter-group conflicts are sometimes explicitly framed in religious terms; may be encouraged by globalisation
- Increased popular interaction leads to encounters between different religious traditions: not always harmonious

Sources of Religious Conflict (1)

- Religion is implicated in domestic/international conflicts in Asia and elsewhere, when it shows **four** factors that undermine or destroy chances of peace:
 1. Religion is focused on the absolute and unconditional and as a result can adopt totalitarian characteristics.
Some followers of Abrahamic religions may have especial difficulty trying to distinguish between, on one hand, claims of the absolutely divine and, on the other, the traditions and history of *human* existence.

Sources of Religious Conflict (2)

2. If claiming both absolute and exclusive validity, religious conviction can lead to intolerance, over-zealous proselytisation and religious fragmentation. It can also be hostile to both pluralism and liberal democracy.
3. Religion can increase aggressiveness and willingness to use violence. Added symbolic value can be an aspect of religious conviction, deriving from profane motivation and aims that become 'holy' objectives.
4. Religious leaders may seek to legitimise abuses of power and violation of human rights in the name of religious zeal. Such leaders are nearly always men, and as a result there can also be specific gender-based human rights concerns.

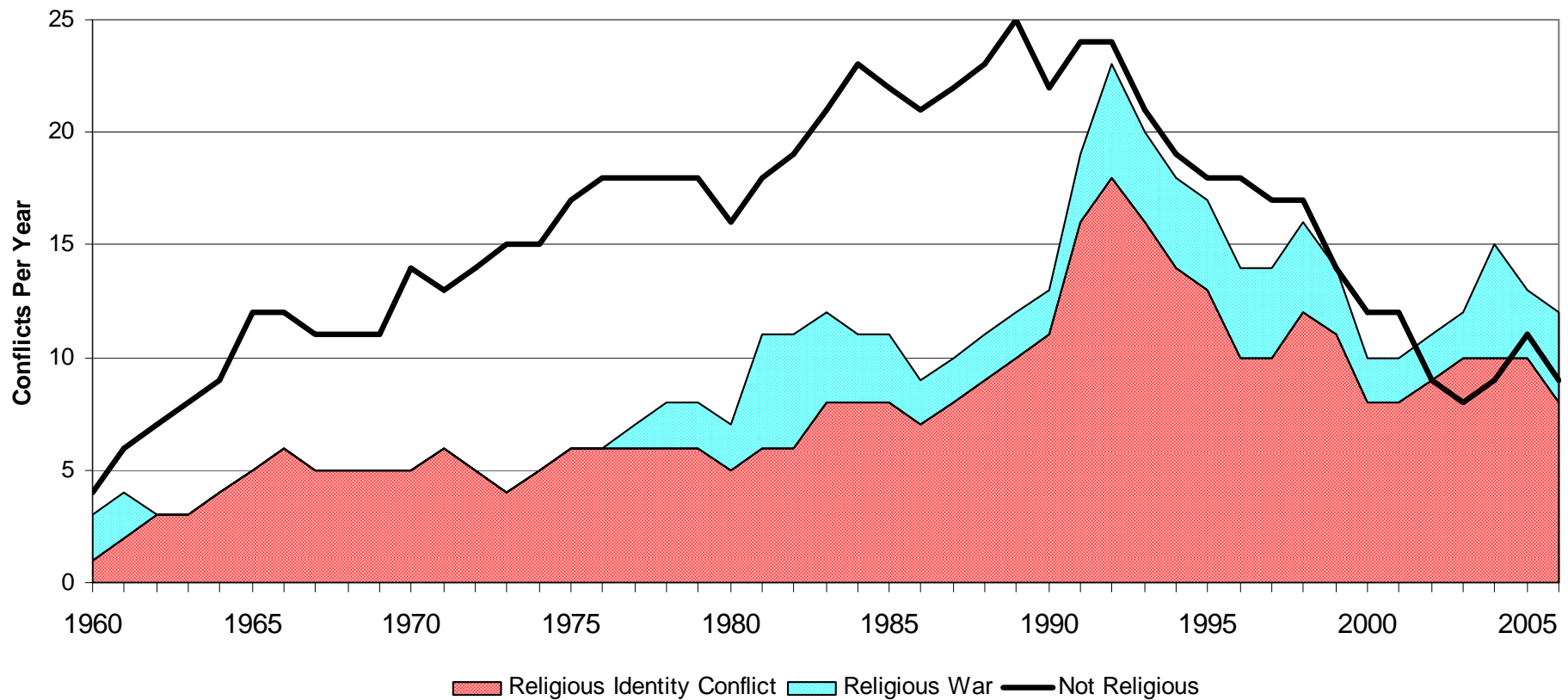
Exclusive Accounts of the Nature of Reality

- Concerns are especially problematic when they relate to ‘exclusivist truth claims’: ie, when religious people accept *only* their own religious beliefs as *true* beliefs.
- Examples include ‘religions of the book’ – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – because each claims authority that emanates principally from their sacred texts.
- Exclusivist truth claims are a serious and continuous challenge to religious toleration and diversity, essential to peaceful co-existence in our globalised world, as they make conflict more likely and peace less likely.

Religion and Conflict: 9/11 and After

- Since 9/11, apparent increased religious involvement in so-called 'inter-civilisational' conflicts.
- This includes protests and increased tension between Muslim world and the West following invasions of Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003), 'Mohammad cartoons' (2005).
- Continuing impact of Israel/Palestinians conflict and perceived Western support for the former.
- Flexing of muscles of Shiite Iran in (Shiite-majority) Iraq and Lebanon, where Shiite Hezbollah is influential.

Religious and Non-Religious Conflicts, 1960 to 2006



Religion: Cooperation

- Yet, simultaneously, religions often also provide sources that proclaim *incompatibility* of violence with religious tenets, expecting sacrifices for peace and respect for people of other religions
- If we are to assume that, for the foreseeable future, the religions of the world will continue to be a factor in political conflicts, then it is high time that we seek to strengthen the ‘cooperative’ side of the sacred, making it more difficult to be taken over by interests with other, much less normatively desirable, goals.

Conclusions (1)

- Globalisation involves thrusting religions into new global contexts, issues and controversies
- Religions can no longer isolate themselves and must deal with range of socio-political issues
- Religion affects politics in Asia and elsewhere in both ‘good’ – inter- and intra-faith cooperation pursuing normatively desirable goals – and ‘bad’ – religious terrorism & fundamentalism – ways
- In short, globalisation affects religion’s socio-political involvement in various ways, towards *both* cooperation *and* conflict.

Conclusions (2)

- Religion can play a significant role in attempts to resolve inter- and intra-group clashes and help build peace
- All religious traditions contain references in the form of didactical stories, teaching or even direct recommendations as to how the faithful should act in order to achieve harmony and peace within him/herself in the first place
- Religious leaders are uniquely positioned to foster nonviolent conflict transformation through the building of constructive, collaborative relationships within and across religious groups for the common good.