



WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS ?

BY NCOLAS KAZARIAN

Associate Research Fellow, IRIS

November 2015

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS?

By Nicolas Kazarian / *Associate Research Fellow, IRIS*

The religious third millennium foreseen by Malraux half a century ago seems to be well under way. Certain experts refer to a "return of religion" in the early 2000s, but in reality religion was never completely out of the picture. Religion has demonstrated a real vitality; it takes an apparently chaotic array of forms, often merging with cultural heritage and issues of identity. Religion is also shaped by the contingencies of an era marked by profound paradigm changes.

A prospective approach should avoid the pitfall of turning into political fiction, so in light of the instability and complexity of spiritual realities, I will simply address the essential trends that will shape the global religious landscape over the next fifteen years. Specialists in religious studies agree that profound changes are currently affecting Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, etc. A close analysis of the proximity of the structural analogies between Wahhabism and Evangelism, or the aspirations of Hasidism and Charismatic Pentecostalism reveals that it is the religions themselves that are transformed, not without creating certain paradoxes. These changes in turn affect the reconfiguration of the global geopolitical map, through "instinctive alliances" between religions, to quote Jean-François Mayer, director of the Swiss institute Religioscope.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

Demographic shifts are the first global religious change, and certainly the most important. At a time when Western countries are increasingly heavily secularized, the gradual withdrawal of religion from the political and social spheres observed there does not apply at a global level. In addition, a strong correlation between religious practice and a high birth rate is a significant driver behind shifts in the religious landscape. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church must take into account the demographic crisis that is affecting and will continue to

affect the Russian Federation. At the other extreme, according to UN statistics, by 2030 India and China should have populations of 1.45 billion each. As for Africa, it should total half of the global population increase by 2050¹.

Population dynamics are a key strategic issue for religions, not only in terms of the absolute number of believers, but also in terms of percentage of the world population. The most significant increase is, according to the Pew Research Center, that of Islam, which would grow from 1.6 billion members in 2010 to 2.2 billion in 2030. India will have the world's largest Muslim population, surpassing Indonesia and Pakistan. This new reality for the Indian religious landscape would weaken the position of Hinduism which would, however, remain the country's largest religious community. Certain countries in the Balkans (Bosnia-Herzegovina and FYROM) are also about to see the emergence of a new Islamic majority. The number of Muslims in the US is expected to double, while in France the proportion of Muslims will rise from 1/13 to 1/10. In addition to strengthening the presence of Islam in areas where it is already dominant, particularly the Arabian Gulf and North Africa, the rising number of Muslims will also influence geopolitical tensions worldwide, creating the conditions for future international upheavals².

Europe, still the center of gravity of Christianity today, will inevitably lose importance in favor of Africa. By 2050, the Africa will be home to 40% of the faithful, at the cost of intense competitions between Catholicism and Protestantism. In 2050, Buddhist population, concentrated in Asia, will remain the stable despite a slight predicted decrease in 2030. Judaism seems to be growing at the same rate as the world population, remaining steady at 0.2% of the global population.

RELIGIOUS RECONFIGURATIONS AND GLOBALIZED MINORITIES

The rate of natural increase of the world population alone cannot explain the different data mentioned above. The intensification of migration flows worldwide remains a lever of

¹ <http://www.un.org/apps/newsFr/storyF.asp?NewsID=30521#.VZE2TeceYsE> (Accessed on October 27, 2015)

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/#projected-growth-map> (Accessed on October 27, 2015)

geographic expansion, and is reinforced by the different religions' missionary abilities, as well as the central role of religion in the formation of diaspora communities.

Judaism, for instance, will continue be structured by the dialectic between its center, Israel, and its powerful diaspora. For others, like the Christians of the Middle East, the failure of the international community to commit to protecting them for fear of jeopardizing their alliances with the Muslim world whose ancient Christian communities are being obliterated, marks the end of a multimillennial presence. Diasporas are created as they gradually move away from their homeland. Even the American idea of a Christian "Bantustan" in the Eastern Mediterranean seems to be a stage for their disappearance, shutting them off from their homelands in an artificial space. Christianity in the Middle East, with the vast diversity of its churches and cultures, no longer plays its role as a regional mediator, which was a prerequisite for its sustainability. By 2030, it will have become the poor "*manager*" of increasingly fragmented communities, the spiritual director of the huge open-air museum which the Holy Land will become for Christians from abroad.

Religion will continue to be a major concern on the international scene due to the proliferation of conflicts involving religious minorities. In a speech given on November 6, 2013 at a symposium on "*Religion and Foreign Policy*", French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said that, "*The second challenge stemming from the collision of religion and politics regards the fate of minorities. Some countries, such as North Korea, limit the freedom of religion or belief in all its forms. Today, the state of freedom of conscience is a fairly good indicator of the state of freedom in general. Religious minorities are often oppressed, harassed and sometimes even persecuted, whether they belong to Christian communities as in Iraq, Pakistan or Muslim communities as in Burma or other groups like the Baha'is in Iran.*"

Too often, especially in recent history, the question of religious minorities has been used as a geopolitical lever by states seeking to exercise their national sovereignty through their international influence. Theological divisions often nourish imaginary antagonisms, which are used for political ends. One recent example is the opposition between the Greek-Catholic and Orthodox communities in Ukraine in 2014. Sub-Saharan Africa, too, is the scene

of festering conflicts which will continue to break out. Similarly, the rise of developing countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, will foster competition between religions.

The protection of communities like the Ahmadis and Christians in Pakistan, Baha'is in Iran, Buddhists in Tibet, Muslims in Burma, Uighurs in China, Sikhs in India, Old-Believers in Russia or Yazidis in Iraq is made possible by the promotion of freedom of religion and conscience. Looking forwards to 2030, the trend is not positive: the indicators show that religious restrictions are rising sharply. The increase in these restrictions is associated with the relativistic or culturalist idea of religious freedom, which is supported, for instance, by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The OIC holds that religious freedom is conditioned by national law, the role of religion in the rule of law, and by the very nature of different states. Could it succeed in imposing legislation on blasphemy on international law? Potentially yes, if other States, such as Russia, move in the same direction. Religious extremism, totalitarianism, and terrorism are the three main issues restricting religious freedom today, as highlighted in the US State Department's reports on religious freedom³.

RELIGION, BETWEEN IDENTITY AND IDEOLOGY

Religion cannot be understood exclusively as personal adherence to a belief system. It is also a powerful element of personal identity used to define of a community. All religious aspects of collective identity are mobilized to define membership through adherence to dogma, religious regulations and symbols.

The shift in religion from identity to ideology started under the influence of nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, before becoming a weapon against communism during the second half of the 20th century. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 produced an ideological paradigm which institutionalized religious fundamentalism as a structuring factor in international relations. For example, Ayatollah Khomeini was originally supported by Western powers in order to prevent Communist expansion in the oil producing region of the Gulf. For Jean-François Colosimo, a French historian of religion, "It remains, however, that

³ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/> (Accessed on October 27, 2015)

Muslim fundamentalism as a paradigm partially explains its volume, its intensity or the delays of its socioeconomic environment."⁴ "Fundamentalism" here refers to a movement whereby religion becomes secular: it denies its historical roots, overvalues the literalism of its sacred writings, imposes religious recommendations in the socio-political sphere and encourages aggressive proselytism. It is in this sense that some experts refer to "*the divinization of the society.*"

Fundamentalism is certainly not unique to Islam. The term, born in the context of Evangelical Churches in the early 20th century US, continues to refer to the application of a theopolitical project based to a varying extent on religious symbolism, at least in terms of rhetoric. In a report by the National Council of American Intelligence released in December 2012, the role of religion over the next fifteen years is primarily considered as influencing ideological conflict⁵. The report notes that democratic freedoms, such as those which emerged during the Arab revolutions of 2011, have and will continue to have paradoxical consequences, leading to the imposition of Islamist regimes, as in Egypt with ex-President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood or Tunisia with Ennahda.

Religion, when used as an ideological background, can provide inspiration: "*The ability of religious organizations to define norms for governance in religious terms and to mobilize followers on economic and social justice issues during a period of global economic upheaval is likely to raise the prominence of religious ideas and beliefs in global politics. In this new era, religious ideas, actors, and institutions are likely to be increasingly influential among elites and publics globally.*"⁶

In the coming years, the most urgent concern will be to stem the alarming expansion of ISIS, whose territorial and reticular project is fully assumed and controlled. It openly aims to rule a wide geographical area, according to its own rhetoric, and does not intend to stop at the doors of Europe. Today, computer skills, recruitment capabilities, communication tactics, but

⁴ Jean-François Colosimo, « Métamorphoses du divin. Un reportage d'idées », *Le débat*, no 160, vol. 3, May-June, 2010, p.82.

⁵ www.dni.gov/files/documents/GlobalTrends_2030.pdf (Accessed on October 27, 2015). National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, NIC, décembre 2012, p.13

⁶ Ibid. p. 15.

also extension of the battleground by “franchising” terror are part of a global strategy, where archaism of the message is perfectly supported by the tools of modernity. If Al-Qaeda formed a terrorist network, Daech’s claim to be a state while maintaining the reticular dimension of the first makes it a particularly worrying threat. Will the Shiite axis, from Tehran to Damascus, via Baghdad, be able, with the support of the international community, to deal with it?

CONCLUSION

This overview of the future religious landscape is an interpretation of the current situation, and it is not unlikely that History will prove me wrong. In a sense, I hope it will do so. I am aware that I could not be completely comprehensive. I should also have mentioned the rise of Atheism, Agnosticism, and believers with no religious affiliation, as well as the new religious movements and new religiosities (Angelology, Kabbalah, Satanism, Astrology, Voodoo) making this panorama even more complicated.

The leading challenge for religions in the next fifteen years will clearly be demographic. In 2030, the Christian and Muslim populations are likely to be equal. Minorities and identities mingle with the search for meaning, searches to which religions seek to offer answers. Religions often generate conflict due to the strength of fundamentalist temptations, which are used for political purposes and which minimize their capacity as mediators. Are we replacing the resurgence of the *Huntingtonian* prophecy of a "clash of civilizations" by the allegedly growing clash of religions, a clash which leaves their commitment to peace and dialogue by the wayside? ■

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS?

By **Nicolas Kazarian** / *Associate Research Fellow, IRIS*

OBSERVATOIRE GEOPOLITIQUE DU RELIGIEUX / NOVEMBER 2015

Observatoire dirigé par Nicolas Kazarian, chercheur associé à l'IRIS
kazarian@iris-france.org

© IRIS

TOUS DROITS RÉSERVÉS

INSTITUT DE RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES ET STRATÉGIQUES
THE FRENCH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC AFFAIRS
2 bis rue Mercœur
75011 PARIS / France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60
F. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 70
contact@iris-france.org

www.iris-france.org