Religions and International Relations

Background

The role of religions in international relations is still misconceived by both the scientific and the policy community as well as in the context of the broader public debate. The so-called global resurgence of religion is too often presented as resulting in political instability, a disordered state of international affairs and terrorism. Unfortunately, this assumption overlooks the positive role religions can play to the modernisation, democratisation and even conflict-resolution in several countries of the Western and non-Western world as well as to the construction of a more peaceful and just international society.

This is the main reason why the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI) and the Autonomous Province of Trento in 2009 launched a project of an yearly event to be held in Trento with the aim to discuss these issues by gathering scholars and experts of religions and international relations, but also movements and associations particularly active both in conceptualizing and implementing intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

The first edition "*Religions and International relations. Challenges and opportunities*" was aimed at giving an objective and informed appraisal of the role of religion in international relations involving professionals and experts in the IR field.

The 2010 edition "*Religions and International Relations. Religion and Global Governance*" was focused on the relationship between religions and global public goods (namely environment, health, stability) and on the relationship between religions and human security.

The 2011 edition "*Religions and International Relations. The Euro-Mediterranean Region: Religions and New Perspectives For Dialogue*" analyzed the Arab Spring impact on religion with the objective of analyzing the events that had taken place in North African and Arab Countries through the epistemological lens of the "post-secular" political discourse, investigating the similarities and differences of those phenomena with the Euro-Atlantic experience of post-secularism. The goal of the meeting was to create an opportunity of an original dialogue between scholars and experts of both shores of the Mediterranean, in view of a possible cooperation with the new political actors and experienced players in the domain of religion and politics.

The last edition "*Religions and International Relations. Muslim Democracy as Christian Democracy?*" explored the analogy between Muslim democracy and Christian democracy, whose use in public discourse has increased in recent years especially in the aftermath of the Arab revolts with reference to the democratic streams of political Islam. This workshop showed that on the knowledge base generated by this comparative intuition a more empathetic dialogue between these two major religiously-inspired political traditions can emerge and become be a privileged cultural-political framework for dialogue between Europe and the Muslim world.

"State-Religions Arrangements in a Post-Western World: A Cross-Cultural Dialogue on Freedom of Religion"

Trento, October 17th-18th 2013

Concept
Silvio Ferrari and Fabio Petito[1]

1. Contemporary international society is experiencing an epoch-making process of transformation beyond its modern and Western-centric matrix: the economic shift towards the East, the emerging of the BRICs countries, the spreading of 'non-liberal' forms of politics and democracy. The global resurgence of religion is not unrelated to these structural changes of international society. It can actually be understood within the context of the emergence of a new multipolar world of 'multiple modernities', whereby the merging of 'modern' political values and practices with traditional local references and ways of living, often rooted in religious traditions, will be the rule and not the exception.

2. At the same time, Western and non-Western societies are living through difficult times of social transformation and political crisis, in which the established ways of conceiving the role of religion in politics and in the public sphere, among other things, are being criticised and challenged. This predicament has generated a recent wave of reflexive thinking on the nature of secularism and the secular mode of politics, as shown by the recent debates on the new ideas of the 'postsecular' and 'varieties of secularism'. In some ways, this conceptual development has been a welcome improvement in the discussion of how to make sense of the resurgence of religions in global politics, which especially since 9/11 had previously been dominated by a security framework - with its emphasis on a never-problematized secular/religious divide and the related assumption of what William Cavanaugh has appropriately termed the 'myth of religious violence'.

3. This workshop is based on the idea that a focus on religious freedom in the context of a global comparative analysis of the different models of State-Religions arrangements provides a fruitful framework for examining some of the epoch-making transformations the international system is going through. This focus also allows us to move away from an abstract and often biased understanding of the global resurgence of religion and, in the spirit of our Trento

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[1] *Silvio Ferrari, University of Milan & Member of the Steering Committee, International Consortium for Law and Religion Studies; Fabio Petito, University of Sussex & Scientific Coordinator of the MAE-ISPI-Trento Seminar on 'Religions and International Relations'.*

seminars, paves the way for asking some dialogical questions for thinking afresh on the topic and opens new channels of cultural-political communication. In more detail, this year's seminar will explore four sets of comparisons: Euro-Islam, Euro-Indian, Euro-Chinese and Euro-Russian. The idea is to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue on freedom of religion through a comparative-dialogical methodology as the one exemplified - with reference to Euro-Islamic relationships – by the following quasi-symmetrical questions:

- What can Europe offer the region's Muslim-majority countries in terms of inputs for a sustainable model of State-Religions relationships?

- What is the foreseeable impact of the transformations taking place in the Arab countries of the Mediterranean and in Turkey, on the evolution of Western patterns of law-religion relations? Can, for example, the legal and political debate underway in these countries suggest new solutions to European states, particularly regarding ways of dealing with the religious minorities living in their midst?

- What is the role played by Muslim communities (and leaders) living in Europe and by Christian minorities living in Arab countries, as a two-way bridge to allow exchange and communication between the Arab/Muslim (plus Turkey) world and the European world?

4. The Western approach to freedom of religion has been deeply influenced by the conception of religion which started taking shape in a large part of Europe after the formation of national states and the religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. On the one hand religion became progressively less associated with actions, practice, rituals and symbols which imply a visible and public dimension and more focused on conscience and belief i.e. on an inner and private dimension. On the other, religion was progressively conceived more as a matter of individual choice and less as affiliation with a group: the idea that one is born in a religion was slowly but surely replaced by the idea that one chooses his/her religion. In this perspective the private sphere is seen as the primary place for religion, while its public manifestations become less central and therefore can be limited without infringing freedom of religion when they endanger the secular character of the public sphere.
This notion of religion lies at the foundation of the modern concept of freedom of religion and belief, which is grounded on a distinction between *forum internum* and *forum externum* (reflected, for example, in the division into two parts of art. 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights). On the one hand the freedom to have, not to have, and to change religion is absolute and cannot be restricted. *Forum internum* is seen as an area where the state has no power. On the other hand, manifestations of religion and belief may be limited, as actions and behaviours may have an impact on others' rights that requires state regulation.

5. This conception of freedom of religion and belief has a long and important history, which has contributed to the greatness of Western culture. However, it is not a universal conception. In other parts of the world, different notions of freedom of religion and belief prevail, characterized by a less neat distinction between *forum internum* and *externum* and by an idea of religion as something to which individuals belong, something akin to family, ethnicity, or nationality. Due to the processes of globalization and migration, these different conceptions of religion have been brought into contact within the same geographical area. Such coexistence of different visions of religion is at the roots of the tensions surrounding the right to freedom of religion and belief in many parts of the world. In this situation more cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue is needed to combat cultural misunderstanding and mistrust and to strengthen peace, both locally and globally. We also need to build a new international consensus on different religiously and culturally sensitive issues, such as for example the crucial question of the legitimate boundaries between freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

6. Although in different forms, European countries approach these tensions through the eyes of legal systems characterized by a clear distinction – often a separation – between the law of the land regulating the status of religious groups and activities on the one hand, and religious laws, namely Churches' internal regulations, on the other. In recent decades, an awareness has progressively emerged of the post-modern interaction and intermingling of the law of the land and of religious laws, and more broadly of secular and religious norms. However, experts have not fully developed such an awareness, which is usually confined to acknowledgment of the socio-political context. A fresh approach to the real dynamics articulating secular and religious norms and their interaction is badly needed.

7. Contextualizing religious and secular norms is the first step required for the renewal of such an approach. Both are cultural and historical constructs that can be traced back (in the West) at least to the religious wars. Understanding that in other religious-civilizational settings the division between and the content of religious and secular may be different is a precondition for interpreting correctly what is happening e.g. after the so-called "Arab Spring".

8. Understanding the difference between religious and secular normativity is the second step. Little attention has been paid to the structural differences between secular and religious norms. The tension between the (prevalently) territorial nature of the former and the (prevalently) personal character of the latter (which is at the roots of many clashes between the two) has not yet been fully grasped. Without falling into the trap of essentialism and generalization, we should take into account that what is normative from a religious perspective may not be normative from a secular perspective, as recently evidenced by the debates about circumcision or ritual slaughtering (the invocation of the will of God may be enough to ground a religious norm, but is insufficient justification for a secular norm). Working out the difference between religious and secular normativity entails a major challenge for the state from the perspective of the current debate on majority rule (e.g. the counter-majoritarian dilemma), minority rights and neutrality. Religions are equally challenged as they are facing internal debate on their normativity (e.g. tensions in internal democracy, reform of religious laws, and implementation of human rights).

9. Taking into account the different systems of State-Religion relations is the third step, and the one we think could work well as a starting point for our seminar discussion. Roughly speaking, at least three different patterns can be identified in Europe:

   - The first is based on the conviction that traditional religions can still play a central role in granting the national cohesion that, in the opinion of many, is required to deal with the process of globalization and pluralisation: therefore traditional religions deserve a special position in the public space. In this perspective the dominant religion of a country is seen as a central component of the civil religion i.e. the set of principles and values that all citizens of that country are required to accept and defend. Italy and Poland are good examples of this trend, together with a number of countries where the Christian Orthodox religion is the majority religion of the population.

   - The second model answers the same need in the opposite way. It is based on the conviction that national identity and social cohesion can no longer be granted by the traditional religions, which have become too weak to serve as a unifying factor. In this perspective, common citizenship can only be built around a set of "secular" principles – liberty, equality, tolerance, democracy and so on - that every individual and group must embrace independently of his or her origins, preferences, and creed. These principles should shape the whole public space. France provides an illustration of this second approach.

- The third pattern is based on the belief that the organization of the public space should be redesigned to reflect the current religious plurality, which is considered an irreversible phenomenon of contemporary European societies. The need to find a balance between human rights and religious rights is the most challenging and, at the same time, the most problematic element of this model, as the UK experience shows. It strives to achieve some kind of "inclusive neutrality" of the state and its institutions and to open up new avenues to meet the challenges posed by a plural society, but it requires constant monitoring of how much the proposed solutions to address each situation are able to harmonize cultural and religious diversity on the one hand and respect equal treatment on the other.

THE WORKSHOP

10. The workshop will therefore attempt to explore the interplay of tensions between different ways of understanding religion and freedom of religion and belief, between religious and secular normativity, and between different ways of conceiving and structuring these tensions. Within this framework, our meeting aims to discuss the political and legal models of freedom of religion and belief that are taking shape in the Islamic, Indian, Chinese and Russian worlds on the one hand, and the constitutional models existing in Europe in the context of the major geopolitical, ideological and economic shifts that the international system is going through, and to which the very process of global resurgence of religion is connected in ways that have often been overlooked.

11. The idea of a more empathetic cross-cultural dialogue based on comparative explorations can have significant implications and applications in a more multicultural and global world. In same way, this method is arguably a more appropriate way of thinking and communicating in a post-Western world of multiple modernities. To prove the point, we need only turn to Asia where we find other interesting experiments and reinterpretations of the religion-state nexus: experiments that cannot be confined only to monotheist religions (as, for example, in Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world), but also the growing role played by Hinduism and Confucianism as cultural-political sources of innovation in India and China.

The workshop will be structured around four panels:

1. Religious Freedom and Foreign Policy Challenges: State-Religions Arrangements in a Post-Western World

2. State-Religions Arrangements in Euro-Islamic relationships

3. State-Religions Arrangements in the Euro-Indian and Euro-Chinese relationships

4. State-Religions Arrangements in the Euro-Orthodox World relationships