

Call for Papers!!

Religion in Security Politics

New Themes and Challenges

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Organised by:

Ravinder Kaur (Institute for Society and Globalisation, RU)
and
Dietrich Jung (Danish Institute for International Studies)

1. Introduction

Religion is a prominent theme that defence analysts, security strategists and political commentators are now increasingly confronted with in the 'West'.¹ The current discourse in international security politics is found replete with various references to threats from religious 'fundamentalist', 'extremist' and 'terrorist' groups. It is noteworthy that within this threat perception, religion per se is not always seen as a problem. Rather, specific religions are identified as bearers of violence and conflict.² More often than not, and particularly post 9/11, these groups are explicitly identified as 'Islamic' thereby locating the roots of a given conflict at once within the distant realm of 'Other' religions. The 'otherness' is implicitly found in the exotic, vastly unfamiliar, and therefore possibly fearsome locus of Islamic history, theology, ethics and social practices. A number of states in Europe besides USA, India and Russia, to name a few globally, are engaged in framing national policies to counter the threat of 'Islamic extremism'. Clearly, the growing rhetoric of religion on one hand, and the overarching, everyday debates on 'Islam and the West' on the other now precede issues that once would have been purely considered matters of national and international security.

Though religion is increasingly seen as enveloping security concerns, the deeper sociological underpinnings of such conflicts are yet to be fully addressed. It is not unusual to find contemporary conflicts staged and/or sustained around religious symbols, legends and apocalyptic prophecies – of which the recent Danish cartoon row, the rise of

¹ For past few decades the role of religion within international politics was limited as a identity marker in ethnic conflicts. Religion as a full fledged actor in international politics emerged with the publication of Huntington, S (1993) 'The Clash of Civilisations?', *Foreign Affairs*, No. 72, Issue 3, 22-49 pp where Huntington proposed clash between civilisations consolidated around world religions. Since then, a number of researchers have addressed the theme. See for instance Philpott, D. (2002) 'The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations', *World Politics*, Vol 55, October, 66-95 pp; Fox, J. (2001). 'religion as an overlooked factor in international relations', *International Studies Review*, Vol. 3, Issue 3, 53-73 pp; Appleby, RS (2000). *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation*. Lanham, Md. Rowman and Littlefield; Juergensmeyer, M. (1993). *The New Cold War: Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State*. Berkeley. University of California Press; and essays in Appleby, RS and Marty, M. (1991, 1993, 1994, 1995). *The Fundamentalist Project*. Chicago. Chicago University Press.

² The recent controversy over Pope's remarks, when he cited Byzantine Emperor Manuel II discourse on 'evil and inhuman Islam' on 12-09-2006, is an apt example of this trend.

Christian evangelical power lobbies in US and their support for the Iraq war³; and role of the Shia prophecy of return of the Hidden Imam in the Iran-US tensions are some examples. This conference aims at addressing *new themes and challenges visible in this emergent overlap of religion and security politics*.

2. Issues and Themes

The revived focus on religion in general and Islam in particular presents two valuable explorative opportunities. *One*, employing religion as a broad epistemic category outside the specific historical and cultural developments of a given faith is a pitfall that security experts frequently fail to circumvent. The very definition and understanding of religion seems to have found new meanings when passed through the prism of security politics. Here religion appears in a significantly *reductive* form which is primarily structured around the practical need of policy makers to comprehend violence and conflict. This reductive form can be called the *frame of violence* that not only transposes but also embodies religion within the security politics. The raging debates on religion these days appear concomitantly with notions of violence and intolerance in media and the public sphere at large. Thus, religion/violence fuse together as a one-dimensional object of enquiry made comprehensible through a reading of religious texts, organisations, institutions and their doctrines. What is left out in this approach, however, is the crucial mass of ordinary believers who may view religion outside the frame of violence variously as constitutive of sacred objects, rituals, belief systems, identity marker, community or even little traditions that become an inalienable part of one's everyday life. In other words, the deeper significance of religion as understood by its practitioners risks being misplaced and misinterpreted within the limited scope of the current security discourse. This risk does not represent misreading of mere academic nature, rather that of misconstruing subtle indications and un/expressed public opinion that could be crucial to both researchers and policymakers.

Two, the increased focus on Islam within Europe and the western world – encompassing issues from suicide bombings to veils worn by Muslim women – seeks to grasp the conflictual ‘Otherness’ represented by the Muslim world. The cartoon row in Denmark, for instance – staged around Islamic sacred symbols and taboos vis-à-vis the legacy of European Enlightenment – was seen by many in Europe as a dichotomy between European values (tolerance, freedom of speech) and emotively constructed Muslim response. The latter symbolised in global violent protests, 56 dead protestors and numerous death threats to the cartoonists that followed the publication of the cartoons. The passionate, public and violent display of anger was found hugely disproportionate, irrational and undecipherable within Europe. The *politics of passion* here signifies the ‘Other’, a theatrically composed embodiment of impending threat that simultaneously draws and repels its western audience. But can passion be understood as an unexplored terrain of political rationale? Is death and bodily harm too a particularly honed political

³ Mead, WR. (2006). ‘God’s Country’ in special theme ‘Religion and the US Foreign Policy’. *Foreign Affairs*. Sep/Oct 2006. 24-44 pp. Also Wills, G. (2006) ‘A Country Ruled by Faith’, *New York Review of Books*, 16th Nov 2006, 8-12 pp; and Esposito, JL (2006) ‘Islamists and US Foreign Policy’, *International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World Review*, No. 18, Autumn, 6-7 pp.

rationale? To open these questions, politics of passion needs to be understood not merely as a concatenation of impulsive reaction to perceived slights, but rather as a forceful vehicle of political intent.

Incidentally, the Judaeo-Christian traditions somehow stand absolved from the category of 'religion' once religion as a knowledge body is subjected to the scrutiny of security experts and policy makers. In other words, religion as a source of security concern excludes Judaeo-Christian traditions from its purview. The rise of powerful evangelical Christian groups in the USA and their extensive networks in Africa and Asia has only recently begun registering as a significant political phenomenon. Similarly, the expansion and consolidation of 'Hindu power base' in constitutionally secular India has occurred in the past three decades during which the minority groups – Muslims, Sikhs and Christians – have been subjected to violent attacks and organised pogroms on the charges of subversion, terrorism and proselytisation. In this case too, the majority religion – Hinduism – does not appear a problem to the Indian state, it is the spectre of 'Other' religions that poses a security threat to its national fabric.

A related theme that calls for address is the larger debate between the 'secular' West and the religious East that the cartoon row catalysed in its wake. Herein, religion represents a medieval, authoritarian and irrational belief system, while secularism appears as its anti-thesis best suited to the liberal, democratic and modern nation-states.⁴ Is public expression of religion, then, untenable with the conditions of modernity? Do visible religious symbols, pieces of outer clothing and/or traditions of daily worship of the sacred denote intolerance and sectarian politics? These questions remain central to the current debates on religion/secular theme, and also on the prospects of, for example, Muslim minority groups within Europe.

3. Key Issues

This public conference is open to policymakers, media, researchers and students across disciplinary boundaries of history, international-politics, anthropology, sociology and area studies. It welcomes contributions to panel discussions with emphasis on both theoretical and/or empirical orientation and which are informed and located in fieldwork knowledge gained from Asia, Middle East, Africa and diasporic locations; and seeks to address the following themes:

- construction of religion, mainly 'Other' religions framed in violence, as a civilisational threat within the current security politics discourse; and how security politics is itself being shaped anew through incursions into fields of theology, sociology, and philosophy that home religion otherwise,

⁴ Talal Asad (2003) in his seminal work *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* Stanford, CA. Stanford University Press, notes how secularism is considered a natural successor of religion when societies evolve from pre-modern to modern. While religion whose object is the sacred is located in the domain of non-rational, traditional societies, secularism is seen as an advanced form in tune with modernity, democracy and human rights. He proposes that religion and secularism are closely interconnected and one cannot be studied without understanding the other.

- exploration of the politics of passion as witnessed in the Middle East and Asia, and
- frequent use of *past* traditions, historical events, religious prophecies, myths, folktales etc. to construct a fluent narrative of the *present* conflicts and disagreements.

The conference invites original papers based on ongoing research – both fieldwork based and/or theoretically oriented – across disciplines of history, sociology, political science, anthropology and area studies. The written papers must not be longer than 6000 words and the oral presentations must be limited to 20 min followed by comments and discussions. The proposals may be sent in by **Feb 1, 2007** while the written papers must be submitted by **March 1, 2007** to either Dietrich Jung (dju@diis.dk) or Ravinder Kaur (rkaur@ruc.dk).