

Interreligious Cooperation, Peace, and the United Nations

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If we consider the quest for peace throughout history, we should not ignore the role of religion. While religion is often cited, quite accurately, as a frequent contributor to conflict and violence, it has also, and more substantially served to advance the cause of peace in many profound and various ways, including its calls for practices such as non-violence, restraint of acquisitiveness, forgiveness, reconciliation, and just war theory. The human aspiration for peace has roots in religious ideals that are widely shared among the world's religions, and which long predated modern secular movements or ideologies.

There are two good reasons to recognize religion's role in matters of peace and security. First of all, it is simply more truthful and scientific to acknowledge the power of religion in world affairs. Secondly, by recognizing and understanding religion's role, one is better positioned to mitigate religion's negative impact and, at the same time, encourage its positive potential.

If we attribute the discounting of religion's role in public affairs to the European Enlightenment, and that intellectual and social movement's legacy, as expressed in Marxism, Darwinism, scientific reductionism, positivism, methodological atheism and secularization theory, it may be said that the fairly widespread denial of religion's significance is a fairly recent phenomenon, dating back only a few hundred years.

Moreover, recent trends, since the end of the Cold War Era, have been precisely moving in a direction that acknowledges religion's ongoing role in human affairs. This new emphasis has multiple causes; two are obvious. First of all, perspectives which attempted to build the good society without religion have been unsuccessful, or at least equally as unsuccessful as attempts by religious believers. Secondly, there is the obvious empirical fact that religion continues to be a major force in the lives of individuals and, taken in the aggregate, in world affairs. Statistics show that there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 1 billion Hindus and 400 million Buddhists in the world. One would have to live in a state of serious denial to fail to observe this reality. Moreover these believers are active in the world as citizens, government leaders, scientists, educators, intellectuals, artists, etc. They impact the social, political, and economic world.

Stated a bit differently, predictions of the withering away of religion as a necessary consequence of the rise of science and rationality have not proven to be prophetic. In fact, post-Cold War classics such as Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*[ii] are illustrative of the formidable presence of religion in the fabric of ordinary life. For billions of people, religion continues to shape social, cultural, ethnic and national identities; as well as moral values and, in turn, human practices in the world. Consider also Francis Fukuyama's recent study of the *Origins of Political Order*. Fukuyama underscores the religious origins of the rule of law in the West.[iii]

Efforts to build a world of peace without an understanding of religion's power and relevance are impoverished, and there is a growing awareness of this reality. Increasingly, those who are committed to peace are coming to recognize the limitations of a perspective that fails to include an appreciation of the religious factor.

When we consider issues of peace and security, analysis of the religious factor should not be ignored. Who could deny the relevance of religion in understanding conflicts in places such as Israel and Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Kosovo, Mindanao, southern Thailand, Somalia, Sudan, or Tibet? Who can deny the relevance of religion in the analysis of the motives and the logic that underlies the passion, commitment and ideology of terrorists. Moreover, who could deny the relevance of religion in understanding attitudes, whether we like them or not, toward violence, toward women, toward citizenship, toward education, toward ethnocentrism, or toward human rights. As such, it's quite difficult to conclude that religion has little ongoing relevance within the public sphere of life.

Consider the way in which citizens of almost any democratic country discuss matters such as abortion, stem-cell research, gay marriage, taxation, distribution of goods and services, public education, sex education, etc. It is very difficult to imagine any of these debates taking place without religious factors being at play. Religion simply cannot be excluded from democratic decision-making processes, neither at

the national level, nor at the international level. For example, even the world's pre-eminent global institution dedicated to peace, the United Nations, must, and in fact is, reassessing the relevance and significance of religion.

Religion and Peace

Any student of religion knows that the concept of peace is not merely a political concept, nor merely a secular moral concept. Islam, for example, is not only a religion that affirms submission to the will of Allah; in principle, if not always in practice, it is a religion dedicated to peace. Christianity's emphasis on love of God and love of neighbor is understood by believers as the essential prerequisite for building the Kingdom of God, which is a world of peace and justice. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount includes the well-known phrase (Matthew 5.9), "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called Sons of God." Jainism and Hinduism, are legendary for their emphasis on non-violence, ahimsa. Hinduism's "peace chant" from the Isha Upanishad reads, "All this is full. All that is full. From fullness, fullness comes. When fullness is taken from fullness, Fullness still remains. Om. Peace, peace, peace." [iv] In the Talmud, we read, "Our rabbis have taught, We support the poor of the heathen along with the poor of Israel, visit the sick of the heathen along with the sick of Israel, and bury the poor of the heathen along with the dead of Israel, in the interests of peace." [v] And Buddhism enjoins us all to a life that turns away from the desires that would lead to violence and conflict. In the Anguttara Nikaya of Buddhism, we read, "This is Peace, this is the excellent, namely the calm of all the impulses, the casting out of all 'basis,' the extinction of craving, dispassion, stopping, Nirvana." [vi] In Sikhism's Adi Granth, we read, "Now is the gracious Lord's ordinance promulgated, No one shall cause another pain or injury; All mankind shall live in peace together, Under a shield of administrative benevolence." [vii]

At the same time and with all due respect, we also recognize that the absolute commitments that religion often inspires have frequently had unfortunate, unintended consequences, including violence, intolerance and prejudicial views of non-believers, and supremacist perspectives. This is by no means to suggest that secular or militantly atheistic worldviews have not had similar or even more horrible outcomes. The legacy of Marxist regimes is there to remind us that the pathological tendencies of human beings are not erased by espousing atheism or even humanism. But leaving that issue aside, reasonable believers, as well as those who have no time for religion, acknowledge that religion has at times generated, in addition to violence, regressive, anti-intellectual, authoritarian and polemical attitudes and practices. The pathologies of religious practice have caused many a thinking person to turn away in disgust, often throwing the baby out with the dirty bathwater.

For the above reasons, coupled with direct experience of religion's pathologies, many concluded that religion was a primitive stage in human development which would naturally and gradually wither away as human beings developed over time. Hence in the 19th and early 20th century, secularization theory became a dominant view among many intellectuals and social scientists. There's a vast literature involved in the analysis and discussion of secularization, but, risking oversimplification, secularization may be understood as a process whereby the dominance and authority of religious worldviews becomes recessive, as rationality, science, modernization and the exposure to pluralism unfold. In this process, the sphere of the sacred is gradually differentiated from other spheres of life—the state, the economy, civil society—and marginalized. In turn, religion becomes one discrete sphere of life, largely set apart from the state, the economy, and public life.

Enlightenment philosophers contributed to this discounting of religion, some seeing religion as a tool used by the powerful to manipulate the ignorant and illiterate or as merely a backward form of superstition that should be rooted out by the light of reason. This perspective reached its high point in Marxist thought, and the entirely dismissive view of religion as the "opiate of the masses" and the "false consciousness" that emerges out of the oppressive substructure of the capitalist system.

The theory that secularization would inexorably spread as human beings grew out of their infancy became widespread in the 20th century. Moreover, the ascendancy of the scientific worldview, and what may be called "methodological atheism", contributed to the marginalization of religious worldviews; religion was seen by many as either a quaint relic of a bygone era, or a kind of obstruction standing in the way of human emancipation and maturation.

Furthermore, with increasing immigration and advances in communications technologies, there has arisen a growing awareness of the plurality of worldviews that make up our world. This has awakened a sense, among believers and non-believers alike, of the difficulties any one religion faces in attempting to provide an overarching worldview that would attract universal affirmation. At the same time, for believers, it became increasingly difficult to maintain a closed community, devoid of comparative temptations. In addition, there have often been hostile and prejudicial relations among believers of various traditions, especially as they came to share a common space. Given the clash of religious worldviews, science and secular language came to prevail in the public sphere. Religious concepts, in turn, were increasingly cleansed of their religious or sacred significance; oftentimes by a form of translation of religious ideas into secular ideas, e.g., translating the idea of salvation into the idea of emancipation or liberation. At the

same time, the social fact of pluralism and the social fact of religion's pervasive social presence, has made any secularist rejection of religion as a legitimate social force untenable.

Max Weber's social scientific research was focused on the link between religion and the rise of western rationality, and the subsequent "disenchantment" of the world that occurred as instrumental rationality—as the basis of social organization—became dominant. Unlike Marxists, Weber understood the social and transformative force of religion. In his analysis of the world's religions, an effort to identify the causal factor giving rise to the goal-oriented, instrumental rationality that guided rational administrative processes and business practices that stimulated manufacturing and trade, Weber concluded that religion was the primary causal factor, and precisely not a by-product of material forces. On the contrary, religion was the linchpin that led to the rise of scientific rationality, the goal-oriented work ethic, the free market economy and efficient bureaucratic administration. At the same time, he recognized that these same offspring of religion gave rise of a type of rationality that often rejected or marginalized religion, hence the "demagification" or "disenchantment" (Entzauberung) of the world.[viii]

While Weber's ideas-move-history analysis was diametrically opposed to Marxism's materialist analysis, his conclusion is somewhat similar, namely, that religion is very likely on its way out, overcome by inexorable conditions of the rationalized, modern, political economic system.

One of the leading social scientific and philosophical movements emerging out of Marxist thought was the school sometimes known as neo-Marxism or critical social theory, most often associated with the Frankfurt School of Social Research. While the primary focus was not on the language of peace, its objectives were couched in the language of emancipation and liberation, and the elimination of the roots of oppression and violence.[ix]

One of the world's leading contemporary thinkers who emerged from this tradition of critical social theory is Habermas. For example, he served as a research assistant for Theodor Adorno (Dialectic of the Enlightenment) at the Frankfurt School for Social Research in the early 50's, at the time when Germany was struggling to transition from the legacy of the pathological political nightmare of Naziism, and the intellectual Zeitgeist that seemed to provide it the protection it needed to arise. Habermas was 16 years old in 1945.

Influenced by the national crisis and shame of Naziism, and the fact that intellectuals such as Heidegger failed to comprehend its malevolence, Habermas came to focus on the concept of a public sphere where the logic of reason can unfold in a transparent communicative process. Thus, his primary focus has been on the establishment of the moral foundations for the democratic public sphere. Like Weber, he sees the rise of participatory democracy in Europe as a unique social development. Unlike Weber, Habermas' research project, at least early on, did not reveal any regret over a loss of religion's force. Rather he affirmed a social evolutionary shift from archaic, primitive, and traditional societies to modern society, a process mediated by the development of the human capacity for self-reflection, that is, the ability to reflect on one's own thinking and one's own beliefs. The process of rational self-reflection leads the subject to come to an understanding of one's worldview as historically situated in some lebenswelt; thus, no longer a comprehensive worldview, but one particular worldview among many; A worldview, and not THE worldview.

Habermas' more recent work has been enlivened by increasing interaction with believers, and his own writings reveal a growing awareness of the ongoing significance of religion, albeit largely a functional significance. That is, he affirms the fact of religion's ongoing vitality as it functions in the lives of individuals who live and act in the sociopolitical world, while he remains agnostic about the various truth claims espoused by religion. Functionalism, in the analysis of religion's role in society, does not question the claims made by religion. While functionalist theory, from the believer's perspective, is disrespectful, or agnostic about religious claims, it represents a step forward from denial or the presumption that religion is a regressive, false or menacing force in society. Consider this quote from Habermas:

Even today, religious traditions perform the function of articulating an awareness of what is lacking or absent. They keep alive a sensitivity to failure and suffering. They rescue from oblivion the dimensions of our social and personal relations in which advances in cultural and social rationalization have caused utter devastation. Who is to say that they do not contain encoded semantic potentialities that could provide inspiration if only their message were translated into rational discourse and their profane truth contents were set free.”[x]

Increasingly Habermas has challenged secular and post-metaphysical thinkers to be aware of their own historical limitations and the fallible nature of their efforts to build the good society, enjoining them to re-think their attitude toward religion: “The insight that vibrant world religions may be bearers of ‘truth contents,’ in the sense of suppressed or untapped moral intuitions, is by no means a given for the secular portion of the population. A genealogical awareness of the religious origins of the morality of equal respect for everybody is helpful in this context. The occidental development has been shaped by the fact that philosophy continuously appropriates semantic contents from the Judeo-Christian tradition; and it is

an open question whether this centuries-long learning process can be continued or even remains unfinished.”[xi]

In a more recent interview with Eduardo Mendieta, Habermas says, and I quote at some length:

In the West, Christianity not only fulfilled the cognitive initial conditions for modern structures of consciousness; it also demanded a range of motivations that were the great theme of the economic and ethical research of Max Weber. For the normative self-understanding of modernity, Christianity has functioned as more than just a precursor or a catalyst. Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideal of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical re-appropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk.”[xii]

Religion and the United Nations

If we consider a document such as the charter of the United Nations, which speaks in secular language, we can recognize that this secular, political language is indebted to concepts formerly embedded in religious worldviews. Throughout its history, the UN has had only nation-states as its members. Non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, may be affiliated with the United Nations either through the Department of Public Information or the Economic and Social Council, but they are not members. There are several thousand NGOs affiliated with the United Nations. Many of these are faith-based organizations. Traditionally the place of religion and religious voices has not been centrally positioned within the UN system.

However, in the year 2000, things began to change. Just prior to the opening of the General Assembly in September of 2000, the so-called “Millennium General Assembly” convened, with the largest number of heads of state and government ever assembled in one place. This General Assembly produced the Millennium Declaration and the “Millennium Development Goals.”

Just prior to September’s opening of the Millennium General Assembly, two important events took place just one month prior to the opening of the General Assembly. One was the convening of a congress of spiritual leaders in New York, known as the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders; this conference addressed such topics as peace, poverty and sustainable development. A second, and more sustained program, was convened also in August under the sponsorship of the Universal Peace Federation [at that time known as the Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace], founded by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon who delivered an address at the United Nations, calling for the establishment of an Interreligious council within the United Nations system. Moon argued that with the creation of such a council, making the United Nations a kind of bicameral house, the UN “will be able to make great advances in ushering in a world of peace. The wisdom and vision of the great religious leaders will substantially supplement the political insight, experience and skill of the world’s political leaders.”[xiii]

Since the Millennium General Assembly, significant advances have been made in terms of the United Nations signaling a more accommodating position vis a vis religion. In 2004, a resolution, sponsored by the Philippines, was passed by the General Assembly (59/23), calling for the “Promotion of Interreligious Dialogue.” In 2006 a Tripartite Forum on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace was called for, aiming at partnership among the member states, the UN bodies, and NGOs. In 2007, General Assembly Resolution 61/221 called for the establishment of a Focal Unit in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. In December 2009, the General Assembly adopted a resolution 64/81 calling for the Promotion of Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. In 2010, H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan introduced a proposal calling for a week dedicated to interfaith harmony. On this foundation, in October of 2010, a resolution of the General Assembly was passed calling for a “World Interfaith Harmony Week” to be celebrated each year during the first week of February. Throughout this same ten-year period, both the former Secretary General, Kofi Annan, and the current Secretary, General Ban Ki Moon, have frequently included in their speeches references to the significance of interfaith dialogue for efforts to secure a lasting peace. The Office of the President of the 66th Session of the General Assembly, H.E. Nasir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, is preparing a special session in the General Assembly, scheduled for February 7, 2012, in honor of the “World Interfaith Harmony Week.”

These developments are concurrent with the growth of a post-secular consciousness that, while it may not itself be a religious awakening, is nonetheless an awareness that religion should no longer be excluded or marginalized, or viewed as uniquely disqualified to participate openly in the public sphere. Even if religion’s weaknesses and historical sins are acknowledged, this in no way should disqualify religion from being fully welcomed in the company equally flawed diplomats, political leaders, governments, NGOs, and private sector representatives, etc.

I believe Habermas' insights are quite relevant to the United Nations, and to religion, in three very important respects. First of all, his analysis of the public sphere and the effort to build a cosmopolitan order, as the fulfillment of the "Enlightenment project", building on the normative ideal of the communication community seeking consensus in the public sphere, guided by the "unforced force of the better argument," provides a strong theoretical foundation for the United Nations, and indeed the reform of the United Nations, widely recognized as appropriate and necessary at this stage. In this respect, the UN is a communication community, seeking to fulfill the telos of speech, namely, a consensus based on reason, and free from the non-discursive forces of money and power. As Habermas has stated, "I have been concerned with the postnational constellation and the future of the Kantian project of establishing a cosmopolitan order." [xiv] Habermas says, "The Kantian project only found its way onto the political agenda with the League of Nations, in other words after more than two centuries; and the idea of a cosmopolitan order only acquired an institutional embodiment with the foundation of the United Nations." [xv]

Yet, it is widely recognized that the United Nations faces enormous challenges, many of which are beyond the scope of the traditional nation state or the traditional operating principle of the United Nations: national sovereignty. Habermas points out that "The nation-states have long since become entangled in the interdependencies of a complex world society. The latter's sub-systems effortlessly permeate national borders — with accelerated information and communication flows, worldwide movements of capital, networks of trade and production, technology transfers, mass tourism, labor migration, scientific communication, etc." Moreover, "This global society is also integrated through the same media of power, money and consensus as the nation-states." [xvi]

Transnational networks continue to develop, enhanced by digital technologies. Habermas notes that these "networked flows of information" have a wide impact. He says, for example, "Beyond the nation-state, vertical power-based dependencies are receding behind horizontal interactions and functional interconnections." [xvii] These views are consistent with the analysis of the High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, commissioned during the tenure of Kofi Annan, and which produced the report, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*. [xviii]

Habermas suggests that there is a growing cosmopolitan order, and a rising sense of transnational citizenship, a reality that is implied in the concept of human rights, and implied in the limits that such documents as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights places on national sovereignty. He sees this growing "public sphere" in a variety of manifestations: "Decisions taken at the supranational level concerning war and peace and justice and injustice do indeed attract the attention and critical responses of a global public—just think of the interventions in Vietnam, Kosovo, and Iraq, and the cases of Pinochet, Milosevic, and Saddam. The dispersed society of world citizens becomes mobilized on an ad hoc basis through spontaneous responses to events and decisions of such import. Shared moral indignation extends across the gulfs separating different cultures, forms of life, and religions as a response to egregious human rights violations and manifest acts of aggression. Such shared reactions, including those spawned by sympathy for the victims of humanitarian and natural disasters, gradually produce traces of cosmopolitan solidarity." [xix]

Habermas' theory of the public sphere and the rise of a global society and global solidarity provide important analytical tools that may serve to guide the United Nations toward reforms relevant to the global changes that have taken place since 1945.

The second way in which Habermas provides valuable insights relevant to the reform of the United Nations is in the area of religion. In the foregoing discussion, we have seen Habermas articulate the need for a revision of secularism's unenlightened dismissal of religion. The Enlightenment project that, at least to some extent, found its ideals embodied in the United Nations, is in need of correction. Religion cannot be ignored, and neither can it be viewed as irrelevant, nor as merely a nuisance or menace. On the contrary, on a functional level, religion is profoundly important for most of the world's people. It is virtually impossible to imagine global citizenship without recognizing that the vast majority of such citizens are believers who do not view their beliefs as quaint curiosities.

Additionally, while affirming the functionality of religion, Habermas also concedes the meaningfulness of religion, admitting that its world-disclosing narratives, guiding principles and truth claims cannot be summarily dismissed, for they have, historically, served as the basis for many, if not most of the noble ideals that inspire humanity to its highest and most noble achievements. This is not to ignore the many pathological, immature, and distorted expressions of religion.

Based on Habermas' analysis, however, we can see the legitimacy of the claim that religion should have a place at the table in a reformed United Nations system.

Finally, the ideal of the communication community also serves as a very important regulative ideal for interfaith dialogue, offering a normative framework for believers of various religions to improve their

intersubjective relations, both internally among fellow-believers, as well as with believers of other traditions. The secularization of most modern societies, coupled with the empirical, social reality of pluralism, has had a marginalizing impact on traditional worldviews. Traditional worldviews and religions have been called to a form of self-reflection that results in situating themselves historically and comparatively within the broader scheme of things. This outcome is very difficult to avoid. Habermas states, "Every religion is originally a 'worldview' or 'comprehensive doctrine' in the sense that it claims authority to structure a form of life in its entirety. A religion must relinquish this claim within a secularized society marked by a pluralism of worldviews." [xx]

This assertion is of course problematic for believers, both those who deny the historicity and fallibility of their tradition, call them fundamentalists, and those who accept historical situatedness and fallibilism, call them liberals. There are, however, ways to engage in self-reflection and self-criticism while maintaining a faithful commitment to the truth one has come to know. In a certain sense, any deeply-held truth may be questioned, challenged and even may be proven to be flawed. Believers should always remain open in this sense. In fact, although doctrinal absolutism may be the norm for religion, there are theological perspectives which acknowledge a gap between human knowledge of truth and the reality of God and the ways of God. Most notably the field of hermeneutics has taught us that there are no uninterpreted texts. That is, texts are always interpreted by particular historical human beings. We cannot escape our particularity.

In a post-secular world, religion is increasingly less marginalized or excluded from the public sphere. Exclusion would be a denial of the historical and cultural roots of most societies, nation states and civilizations; exclusion would also represent a failure to acknowledge the religious roots of even secularized concepts and norms. This has implications for politics and international relations, and transnational relations, including the United Nations, as has been said. The steady rise of interfaith dialogue and intrafaith dialogue over the past 120 years, dating back to the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions convened at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, is itself a developmental step in the history of religion that was not anticipated by secularization theorists. Interfaith dialogue is a particular public sphere that works to improve the intersubjectivity of believers across various traditions. In many ways, the interfaith "movement" is a forerunner of the broader interfaith public sphere that is the very character of most of our communities; we live not only in a multi-ethnic, multi-religions world, but also in multi-faith neighborhoods, cities and nations.

Religion is here to stay for it is an expression of our need to understand our ultimate origins, our human condition and our ultimate destiny. Neither science, nor secular society has been able to supplant either the function of religion or the meaning it provides.

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