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RECORDINGS   UPDATES   ORGANISATION   CONTACT

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Search…

Go

TAG ARCHIVES: GLOBAL

15
Tuesday
Oct 2013

Austerity and the Language of Sacrifice

Posted by Dr Brian W Nail in Critical Religion, University of Luxembourg

🗎 **Comments Off**

Journalists frequently invoke the language of sacrifice when describing the consequences of the austerity measures currently being implemented in Britain and across much of Europe. Similarly,

politicians have long recognized the rhetorical force of the word 'sacrifice', but they often find more subtle ways of embedding the language of sacrifice within speeches by fusing their rhetoric with sacred symbols and ideals which derive their power from longstanding notions of national identity. Thus national symbols that have traditionally garnered powerful sentiments of loyalty to the state are rhetorically translated into an implied sense of fidelity to the prevailing political ideology of the present. In his recent speech at the opening of Parliament, David Cameron made a quick transition from acknowledging fallen British soldiers who "have made the ultimate sacrifice" while fighting in Afghanistan to applauding the government for cutting the national deficit by a third. The implication seems to be that, like the good soldiers who died for their country, British citizens must also be willing to make great sacrifices in order to secure the economic future of their nation. By juxtaposing the deaths of British soldiers with the supposed success of his economic policies, Cameron unwittingly reveals the extent to which the sacrificial rhetoric of austerity is invariably associated with very real human costs. In terms of the UK government's current policies, these costs are directly linked to an erosion of socio-economic rights in Britain.

The erosion of socio-economic rights that is currently underway is perhaps difficult to detect in the political discourse of austerity because its rationale is framed within the language of economic recovery. In recent speeches, Cameron has continually referred to the need for Britain to regain its competitiveness in the global marketplace. Improving Britain's competitiveness means making it into the sort of place where corporations and investment firms want to do business. Two of the most direct ways of accomplishing this aim are cutting corporate tax rates and creating what is often referred to as a 'more flexible labour market.' Although economists may suggest that there are complex theoretical and mathematical contingencies underlying these institutional policies, the sacrificial logic of these two issues is not difficult to ascertain. Within the so-

called developed economies of the West, corporations do not equate to the job producing powerhouses of manufacturing that once drove the industrial economy. The most profitable industries are banking and finance, and thus corporate tax breaks equate to lightening the tax burdens for the very institutions that played a significant part in bringing about the financial crisis in the first place.

Creating 'a more flexible labour market' is essentially economic jargon for reducing the employment protection legislation which ensures that employees are treated fairly and paid appropriately. A recent report from the OECD suggests that changes to employment protection legislation which make it easier for employers to terminate jobs should be accompanied by the development of public policies such as job-search assistance programmes and unemployment benefits that help to minimize the social impact of unemployment. A combination of public spending cuts and loosening of employment protection legislation has contributed to even greater economic uncertainty for many workers in Britain. If the current government's policies are implemented, Britain will be according to one perspective a better place to do business, but it will be a rotten place to work.

As it stands, the conflict between society's commitment to social welfare and the maintenance of the financial services industry is at the forefront of political debates in Britain and across the globe. And although it seems that these debates are more fierce than ever, from the earliest times the pursuit of money has had a polarizing effect upon society not simply because it goes hand-in-hand with the attainment of social status, but perhaps most importantly because the accumulation of wealth is also a means of securing political power. In his pseudo-historical novel *Picture This*, Joseph Heller explores the inherent antagonism that exists between the culture of speculative investment and the pursuit of the public good. In Heller's own vitriolic fashion, the novel's narrator describes the sociological and cultural consequences of the invention of money:

> *"With the invention of money by the Lydians in the seventh century before Christ the possibility of profit spread, and as soon as there was profit, there were people who wanted to make it, more than they wanted to make anything else. And whenever there is more money to be made from money than from anything else, the energies of the state are likely to be devoted increasingly to the production of money, for which there is no community need, to the exclusion of those commodities that are required for health and well-being, and contemplation. . . . There will be many who flourish in this environment of finance, and a great many more who can go straight to hell (1989, 55–56)."*

Contrary to the fundamental doctrine of economic liberalism which maintains that in the free market everyone is a winner, Heller's narrative highlights the ways in which the pursuit of monetary wealth within a society has a tendency to draw the energies of the state away from matters of social well-being and redirect its political energy towards the maintenance of financial institutions. The speculative activities that pervade the 'environment of finance' result not only in a highly unstable economic basis for society, but the

inevitable costs associated with these activities, in the end, come at the expense of public funds formerly dedicated to the welfare of the state. Thus, according to Heller's account, the 'environment of finance' that is made possible through the invention of money is not only presented as a risky basis upon which to build a nation's economy, but most importantly, such speculative activity has a deleterious effect upon the socio-economic rights that are essential to a civil society.

The literary critic Ian Gregson suggests that a pervasive theme in Heller's work is the "impact of institutions on what is conventionally taken to be 'the individual'—how thoroughly the supposed autonomy of that individual is compromised by far larger political and cultural forces"(2008, 31). In *Picture This*, the narrator's suggestion that those who do not flourish in a world dominated by the uncertainties of the environment of finance "can go straight to hell" could be considered more than merely a crass turn of phrase. In reality, those who end up the casualties of market forces not only suffer financially, but they also suffer a loss of political and social agency in a culture where wealth has become a measure of personhood. Falling off the bottom rung of the socio-economic ladder is tantamount to a descent into hell. Meanwhile the financial institutions and administrative overseers who facilitated these exchanges have only been subject to legal action in a handful of extreme cases. Their redemption, it seems, is predicated upon the fact of their irreplaceability—the environment of finance assumes the status of a self-perpetuating system that constantly seeks to transform every loss into a gain by shifting the sacrificial costs of its own existence onto a substratum of society to whom it bears no binding moral obligations.

Since the beginning of the credit crisis in 2008, austerity measures targeted at reducing public spending and supposedly stimulating economic growth have resulted in a substantial erosion of socio-economic rights in Britain and throughout the European Union. In

his 1974 study of Third World socio-economic development and political ethics, Peter Berger claims that "The history of mankind is a history of pain" (1974, 163). And he describes the principles that guide politicians in the development of economic policy as a "calculus of pain." Decisions that often result in actual physical and psychological trauma are considered "in terms of costs and benefits, of input and output." According to Berger, "Such analysis is typically very technical, and generally borrows concepts and techniques from economics, even where non-economic phenomena are involved" (1974, 164). Most importantly, he points out the rather obvious but nonetheless crucial fact that underlying the economic data on unemployment and income distribution there is the reality of human suffering and death.

In a recent study of the impact of austerity on public health inequalities, researchers concluded that "the burden of budget cuts is falling most greatly on disabled, low-income and unemployed persons"(Reeves et al. 2013). Focusing primarily on already economically depressed parts of the United Kingdom, the study reports a substantial increase in suicide rates which correlates with increased rates of unemployment particularly among public sector workers. It also predicts that changes to disability allowances and housing benefits will have a detrimental effect upon individuals who are already among the most economically deprived in Britain. Consequently, the study concludes that "austerity policies can be expected to impact health in several ways, each difficult to reverse or avoid in the absence of strong social safety nets" (Reeves et al. 2013, 4). These findings point to the real costs underlying the sacrificial rhetoric of austerity. The socio-economic rights which have arguably served to define Britain as a civil society are currently under threat, but it remains to be seen whether or not the nation will seek a viable alternative to the risky sacrificial games that must be played in the 'environment of finance.' Reflecting upon the internecine conflicts that plagued Western Europe in the 16th century, the narrator of

Picture This notes that "If they were fighting over money, Aristotle could have told them that it was not worth the struggle" (Heller 1989, 186). If money alone is not worth the struggle, then perhaps it is time to ask <u>Aristotle what is</u>.

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13 Friday Sep 2013

The Undergraduate Religious Studies Major as Preparation for a PhD in the Humanities and Social Sciences

Posted by Angela Sutton in Critical Religion, Vanderbilt University ▌2 Comments

Undergraduate students who are sold on the Religious Studies major for their undergraduate education are often promised that they will become better writers, critical thinkers, and that they will leave

university with a mastery of oral communication and presentation skills. These skills serve them well in any job or other postgraduate endeavor. But a degree in Religious Studies confers so much more than that. As Religious Studies encompasses every facet of the human experience, the scholar of religion by necessity becomes fluent in the humanities and social sciences as a whole. The interdisciplinary degree prepares students for postgraduate work in any of the humanities and social sciences in a way that enriches the student's background and allows them the lateral thinking necessary to figure out the best approaches for their proposed project.

I did not understand this when I started my undergraduate degree in History and Religious Studies at the University of Stirling, Scotland, back in 2002. I quickly learned that my history courses all followed a similar format consisting largely of textual analysis, historiography, and that certain way historians are taught to think and write. My Religious Studies courses, on the other hand, were as different from one another as they were from the subject of history. These courses had very few methodologies in common. While in one class we depended on a wide variety of economic theory to analyze the role religion plays in global economies, in the next we spent the entire semester reading just a few dense texts very closely to uncover the gendered philosophies behind major world religions.

At the time I couldn't see how this degree could help me on my quest to become a historian. Our classes read some histories, sure, and discussed historiography when we read theorists and philosophers in the order of publication, but there was so much other, well, *stuff*.

Instead of comparing religions, classes consisted of thorough exposure to the foundations of theoretical work in the humanities. They were hard-hitting and emphasized thematic, interdisciplinary study. Now that I am in my final year of the PhD at Vanderbilt University in the United States, I can see just how much time this

other *stuff* has saved me. My dissertation project uses the written sources of mainly seventeenth-century European slave traders (the British, Dutch, Prussian, and Swedish), to investigate how coastal West Africans asserted influence in the mercantile culture of the Atlantic slave trade. This will uncover their role in contributing to the early modern capitalist economy. Like Religious Studies, it too is by necessity interdisciplinary.

The work I had done as an undergraduate in the Religious Studies program introduced me to the fields of inquiry I need to be familiar with in order to complete this project. For example, in a course on religion and postcolonialism, our class poured over the works of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, which introduced me to the trajectories of the developing world, and the role Europeans played in this. Reading Karl Marx and Adam Smith in the religion and economy course introduced me to economic theory, and piqued my interest in the very fascinating debate on the connections between slavery and capitalism, at which Eric Williams is the center. Exegesis of religious texts like the Quran sharpened my skills in close readings of primary sources. This skill is essential for my project, as studying the history of Africans through European documents requires the most critical eye.

In addition to this, the language of many great philosophers of religion was German, and reading these texts in the original language (which was optional of course- my professors at Stirling were not sadists) improved my language skills and my readiness to learn further languages, such as Dutch and Swedish, for my project. Not to mention that all the theory we read (Freud, Kristeva, Foucault, just to mention a few) as part of larger writing projects in the Religious Studies department showed me how to apply theory, and how to know when to apply (and more importantly, when not to apply) it. In my honors year, writing an ethnography for my Religious Studies undergraduate dissertation conferred familiarity with the discipline-specific language of anthropologists and archaeologists, which I now

make use of to get at historical issues of pre-colonial West Africa about which the Eurocentric texts are silent.

This is but one example of how the interdisciplinary nature of the Religious Studies degree at the undergraduate level readies students to branch out to challenging PhD projects in virtually any area of the humanities and social sciences. The very cutting edge of the field is increasingly concerned with matters of interdiscliplinary inquiry, and some departments are changing their name to "Religion" in recognition of this shift. The critical study of Religion, with a capital "R," gave me the confidence to tackle a complex project that draws on multiple methodologies, and I can't recommend this type of critical program enough to any undergraduates who wish to continue in academia.

30
Monday
May 2011

Questioning 'the global resurgence of religion'

Posted by Timothy Fitzgerald in Critical Religion, University of Stirling

Comments Off

Tags

Critical Religion, global, international relations, religion, secular

Scott M. Thomas has been widely praised for his book The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century (NY & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2005). This is an ambitious book with many potentially fertile ideas. In his chapter in Fabio Petito & Pavlos Hatzopolous (eds.) Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile, (NY & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), Thomas makes an interesting attempt to historically problematize the category of religion, with the added virtue of drawing on the insights of critical scholars from other disciplines, such as Talal Asad (2003:47), John Bossy (2003:47) and William T. Cavanaugh (2003:27) to name only a few. Referring to "the modern invention of religion",

he suggests that "[a]t issue is the meaning of religion in early modern Europe, and how we understand religion today" (2003:25). He refers to "the invention of religion as part of the rise of western modernity" (2003:28). He notices, I think rightly, that "the rise of the modern state is the other part of the story…" (2003:27). He claims that

> *"Most scholars of early modern Europe now recognise that the confusion over the role of religion and other political and socio-economic forces in the debate on the Wars of Religion was based on retrospectively applying a modern concept of religion – as a set of privately held doctrines or beliefs – to societies that had yet to make this transition (2003:25)."*

That the author's aim seems to be a radical and critical questioning of the ideological functions of the religion and secular politics binary and much else that hangs on it appears to be made clear in the opening paragraph of the first chapter of his book:

> *"The concept of religion was invented as part of the political mythology of liberalism and now has emerged as a universal concept applicable to other cultures and civilizations. This*

> *understanding of religion is used to legitimate a form of liberal politics that considers the mixing of politics and religion to be violent and dangerous to reason, freedom, and political stability (2005:21)."*

Unfortunately Thomas continues the paragraph ambiguously, as though he is not quite sure whether or not he wants to critique the category of religion or simply make statements about religion as though religion had some objective existence in the world. Repeating the expression in his title, he continues:

> *"The global resurgence of religion, however, challenges the concepts of social theory that interpret public religion in this way. It challenges the idea that secular reason can provide a neutral stance from which to interpret religion, and it opens up the possibility of multiple ways of being 'modern', making 'progress', or being 'developed'... (2005:21)"*

The radical pronouncements that appear here and there suggest that Thomas is concerned with the challenge that problematizing 'religion' as a category implies for IR as a 'secular' discipline – a problem because if religion is a modern invention, as I think he

rightly argues in places, then not only IR but everything that is conventionally (and juridically) placed in that category is logically and discursively dependent on 'religion' for its conceptualization. Thomas acknowledges the implications of this insight for the wider academy and much else (2005:17).

But for most of the book, far from treating 'religion' as a rhetorical invention with a crucial part to play in the "mythology of liberalism", and far from critiquing an understanding of 'religion' that constructs it as a real and present danger to liberal reason and freedom, Thomas energetically re-inscribes the category along with its ideological binary 'secular liberalism' as a fundamental organizing principle of his book. Even in the paragraph just quoted, Thomas moves from saying "The concept of religion was invented as part of the political mythology of liberalism" to referring only two sentences later to "The global resurgence of religion", as though there could be any such thing.

The author stays safely within the well-worn discursive conventions of the "mythology of liberalism" that he also wants to critique, and in this way contributes to the rhetoric on religion and its implicit distinction from secular reason. I would suggest that his position remains unresolved because the conclusions he must draw are too radical. Too much is at stake. For the problem of the retrospective application of a modern concept "as a set of privately held doctrines or beliefs" set apart from the non-religious state and so on, ineluctably implies the problem of the retrospective application of these other modern reified concepts such as "socio-economic forces" which the modern concept of religion has made possible. If the modern secular state has, as in my view the author would be right to argue, depended for its conceptualization on the related concept of religion as a private right of faith in unseen mystical powers separated from the state, then so have those modern discourses which construct "political and socio-economic forces".

The murder of Osama bin Laden – the end of the beginning of the clash of civilisations?

Posted by Michael Marten in Critical Religion, University of Stirling

🗍 **14 Comments**

This morning I awoke to the news that Osama bin Laden was dead, murdered by the United States of America in a what appears to have been a heavily fortified compound in Pakistan; more precise details will no doubt emerge over time. The news is currently being presented in such a way as to suggest capture, not death, was the objective, though whether that was in any way realistic is open to serious debate: surely resistance was expected, and so the statement that bin Laden 'did resist the assault force' should come as no great surprise.

Although bin Laden was regarded as significant in many western policy circles, serving as a very useful oppositional figure (and one we will no doubt see replaced in a short time), he was not highly regarded by most Muslims, who saw his understanding of Islam as being no less abhorrent than many Christians' perspectives of Hitler's understanding of Christianity. His significance lay in substantial measure in his elevation to a position as 'super-terrorist' by US Presidents Clinton, Bush (the Lesser) and Obama on the one hand, and every self-serving dictator claiming to be an ally of the USA-led actions against 'international terror' on the other: indeed, one might reasonably argue that bin Laden was emboldened by all the attention he received.

In substantial part this way of thinking about bin Laden arose from a

racist strand of thought that was articulated in American neoconservative thinktanks, represented most publicly in two different though related books: Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* and Samuel Huntingdon's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (Fukuyama has since distanced himself a little from his thesis, though he is still firmly in the neoconservative camp). Huntingdon's book in particular has been influential well beyond its literary or intellectual merit. His thesis of distinct civilisational or religious blocs – one of them being Islam – that were in competition or even war with one another dominated Bush's administration, in particular as it suited his own simplistic dualism of good and evil struggling against each another. Although strenuously denied by Obama and especially by his immediate supporters, this kind of thinking has continued without change, albeit in more nuanced form, as the 'drone war' amply illustrates.

This thinking is not confined to conservative thinktanks and policy-makers, however, as the cheering crowds outside the White House celebrating bin Laden's murder demonstrate. There is clearly no understanding of bin Laden's significance or otherwise beyond American (and to a lesser extent, European) interests, and the conflation of his thinking into 'fundamentalist Islam' (as Tony Blair and others called it) simply highlights the paucity of intelligent reflection and comment (for a better assessment, the Independent's Robert Fisk offers careful engagement with bin Laden and his changing thought in *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East*). In fact, bin Laden's death is largely irrelevant to most Muslims in the Middle East and South East Asia, beyond perhaps removing a stigma that had become attached to idea of Islam – this is how we can read the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's statement that bin Laden's death has removed one of the causes of violence in the world. Bin Laden was not a cleric, had no formal training in Islamic law, spoke for no government, no substantial movement and had few followers: it is hard to underestimate his

irrelevance to most Muslims, who might have agreed with his assessment of the cause of problems faced by Muslims, but disagreed with his proposed methodology for dealing with these problems, as Tony Karon has argued. In so far as localised movements used or use the al Qaida name, whether in Iraq, in the Arabian Peninsula or elsewhere, it was and is always as part of a nationalist or irredentist movement, riding on the coat-tails of a wealthy supporter of attacks against a perceived enemy of Islam. As the name itself suggests (it translates simply as 'the base'), people don't really 'join' al-Qaida, they simply adopt the name if it suits them at that particular moment in time.

And that is a key issue: these nationalist movements will not go away unless some meaningful compromise or agreement can be reached on issues they are addressing. We might not sympathise with their modes of engagement, but their causes are often at least partially legitimate. None of this is about what we might think of as 'religion' in the sense of Islam being a key issue: these are struggles over land, rights, political engagement, freedom and the like, though they may be presented as being about Islam by some. Even bin Laden saw nationalist struggles as significant: one of his most important early demands was the removal of American troops from Saudi Arabia (he saw this as a violation of the land of Mecca and Medina, the two foremost holy cities in Islam), and his aim of defeating America in the same way (he claimed) he had defeated the Soviet Union was at least in part about liberating Muslims from American influence.

So if Americans and Europeans now think that they can begin to relax over the prospect of 'international terror', they are very mistaken. US policy in particular is catastrophically misaligned in the Middle East, Africa and South East Asia (where the majority of the world's Muslims live), proclaiming democracy, whilst propping up regimes that clearly only serve US interests rather than the interests of the people of these countries. For those who hitherto refused to see this reality it has been made very clear over the last year, with

two key factors playing a role: the first is [Wikileaks](#) and the unprecedented insight into US-policy making it offers, and the second is the 'Arab spring', as al-Jazeera elegantly calls the uprisings across the Middle East. Bin Laden was a minor, irrelevant issue in this context: he had not commented significantly on any of the current issues, had not engaged in any noticeable way with the rebellions, and so his murder, whilst perhaps a satisfying act of violent revenge for Americans, serves no useful or meaningful purpose in resolving these wider global conflicts.

After all, US and European policies towards Muslim-dominated countries in the Middle East and South East Asia are unlikely to change simply because bin Laden is now dead, and so rather than this really being the end, this is more likely to be the end of the beginning. So long as Americans and Europeans continue to think in simple dichotomies of good (us) and evil (them), advanced (us) and primitive (them), having rights (us) and threatening our rights (them), and so on, the 'clash of civilisations' will continue. Huntingdon thought he was describing a reality, when in fact he was describing a choice – in classic Marxist/Leninist terms we can see this as an ideologically-driven reversal of cause and effect designed to preserve existing systems of dominance. When viewed through a Fukuyama/Huntingdon lens, religion, culture, civilisations all become more important categories of analysis than they deserve to be in the wider struggle for rights, self-determination and freedom. If US and European policy continues to follow a doctrinaire view of the world as split into competing or warring blocs based on misappropriated understandings of religions, civilisations and cultures – note the plurals – rather than understanding the hybridity and connectedness underpinning our world, continuing conflict and equivalent resistance is assured. Sometimes that resistance will take the form of so-called acts of terror. Whether the tears of an Afghan mother or father mourning the death of a child in a drone attack 'defending American freedom' are worth the same as the tears of an American mother or father mourning the death of a child in an attack on

'imperialist invaders' is an active choice we make. We can make that choice and we can vote for governments that make that choice, but if we choose to prioritise our needs, our understanding of culture, religion or civilisation, then we must always expect that others will contest that. Murdering bin Laden does not help with these choices, rather it is simply more of the same: unless we make choices that subvert the dominant paradigm propogated by those that determine our countries' foreign policy, this might just be the end of the beginning, rather than the beginning of the end of the clash of civilisations.

21
Monday
Mar 2011

Praying For Japan

Posted by Kat Neumann in Critical Religion, University of Stirling   ▌**2 Comments**

This blog posting was written by <u>Kat Neumann</u>, *who is writing her PhD under* <u>Andrew Hass</u> *and* <u>Alison Jasper</u>.

After the catastrophic events in Japan, the language of secular politics and news reports on the economic and political impact on food supplies, the stock market, rising flight fares and evacuation of Western nationals, tactically evade the humanitarian horror scenarios, which meanwhile haunt our imagination, and touch base with our own privatised existences. The traditional response, in a Christian context, is the appeal to prayer. And yet, our modern minds have little if anything to go by when "prayer" is invoked – an emotional safety-blanket for some, a futile appeal to God, whom we fail to recognise in the continuous flow of "bad news" that reach us from Japan and elsewhere, for others. A clearer conception of what is meant by Christian prayer is needed if we, who may still hold to some form of Christian faith, are to find in it an adequate, that is, a sensible yet sensitive response to the situation.

The German theologian Dorothee Sölle (1929-2003), who until recently did not receive much critical attention from the academy, has been popularly known in Germany for her political activism, her engagement with the German peace movement throughout the Cold War, and her poetry. What fascinates me about this writer is the way that she engages religious sources – both the biblical text and the Christian tradition – to render her political context meaningful to personal faith without abandoning rational thought or analytical discourse, yet supplementing it with a poetic vision that reconfigures the divine after the "death of God". What this means is, that there is no place for romantic notions of God as one who directs the world and is *ultimately* responsible for the workings-out of history (relieving the political subject of lasting ethical obligations, tying these to the temporality of sin). On the premise that with the Holocaust there can be no God that intervenes and directs each individual fate according to a divine, predetermined plan, Christianity is called again to uncover what the metaphor of "God" as the signifier of the Unnameable One means in the concrete reality of *this* world. This forces Sölle to consider prayer for this world and in this world as a means, not to gain magical favours from a metaphysical otherworld, but for enabling divine revelation in the concrete realities by which we are confronted.

Sölle, within the climate of the Arms Race and the bloc building between East and West, can serve as a model for genuine prayer today, particularly in light of the potential nuclear disaster we are witnessing in the aftermath to the Tsunami that hit Japan. Sölle structured prayer meetings concerning political events and social problems along a threefold organisation: information, meditation and collective action. "Deprivatised prayer" (Sölle, 1971) was not to be public vanity as one exposes oneself as a believer to the world, but the conscious articulation of one's faith in relation to the world and a preparation for realising an alternative vision by concrete (political) action. Rather than denominational boundaries or institutional dogmas, this process would rehearse and reveal mutual

concerns that would mobilize people into recognizing their role and potentials for changing the *status quo*. This aim for prayer, the self-articulation and engagement with the world that recognises the believer's own, "private" spiritual need (for salvation in whatever shape or form to be envisioned) as bound up with the "fate" of the world, places faith firmly in the public sphere, and is the first step in manifesting compassion.

What the press describes in the ordeal of the so-called "Fukushima 50" is the human responsiveness to catastrophe. In the concrete threat of nuclear melt-down and high levels of radiation, the presence of the "Fukushima 50", as a human symbol of self-sacrifice, draws attention to a concrete formulation of compassion, borne out of the urgency of the situation: 'in the words of Japan's Prime Minister Naoto Kan, "retreat is unthinkable."' (March 18th). It is an intercession, a bid for time for those who these workers are seeking to protect and keep alive. Their struggle to contain the direct consequences of the damages caused by the earthquake and subsequent flood is paradigmatic of "deprivatised prayer". Their work is public protest against suffering nuclear holocaust.

The "Fukushima 50" have offered the world their petition – extending the time and space to reach out to the world. They remind us that we are not only responsible, to ourselves, and to those who come after us, but that we owe it to those that have gone before us, too, to join in their prayer. Terrifying as the ever-unfolding reports of the disaster from Japan appear, they cannot be overlooked. How then do we relate, how do we respond to the suffering these workers bring to focus? A prayer set in context of Japan published on the website of the World Council of Churches reads as follows:

Lord Jesus,
the storm is life and life is the storm
and there is no escaping it;
but what matters is that you are in the storm with us,

a beacon and a presence that is sure. Amen

What this prayer articulates is not only the inevitability of being faced with difficulties and dangers, but the assertion that "what matters" is assured solidarity. If we want to be able to turn the prayer of petition of the "Fukushima 50" into a prayer of thanksgiving, we need to substantiate our presence with these workers, with Japan. Only when we use the time that they have given to us to respond – in practical terms – to the suffering we all need to recognise, can we validate their sacrifice and call ourselves responsible. Sin is social denial of the suffering of the afflicted. Prayer is transformative contextualisation.

21
Monday
Feb 2011

Religion and Politics in International Relations: the Modern Myth

Posted by Timothy Fitzgerald in Critical Religion, University of Stirling

▌ 2 Comments

Tags

Critical Religion, global, international relations, politics, religion

One classic collection of essays by anthropologists on the definition of religion which was required reading in the course at King's College, London on anthropology of religion was Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion (1966) edited by E. M. Banton. Though this is now an old book it contains interesting and influential essays by Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, Melford Spiro and others which are still frequently referred to, especially the one by Geertz. However their overall effect has been, I would argue, to reinscribe and validate 'religion' into the general academic discourse on which they have had considerable influence. While raising and discussing many of the problems of applying a Europhone category in the

context of radically different languages and cultures, these essays did not interrogate the ideological power dynamics behind the discourse itself. The category 'religion' and its demarcation from the social or secular was not systematically questioned; only the best way to define religion for research purposes.

For example, Geertz famously defined religion as "[1] a system of symbols which acts to [2] establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations…by [3] formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and [4] clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that [5] the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic". But this definition arguably straddles all dominant ideologies, and does not tell us how a religious ideology differs from a non-religious one. Nor does it sufficiently draw attention to the power of dominant institutions (such as preaching, courts, persuasive theories by educated elites, advertising or the media) to protect these symbols, and to promote the sense of their inescapable reality. A powerful analogy may be from feminist analysis of the way dominant gender categories become transformed into inescapable facts of biological nature, disguising the power relations inherent in the representations. The assumption that there is some essential distinction between religious and non-religious domains – which is still today a globalizing discourse – is an ideological construct which takes on an appearance of naturalness and inevitability.

Spiro's definition was a sophisticated reworking, in the context of his own interesting ethnography of Burmese Buddhism, of E. B. Tylor's definition as belief in gods or superhuman agents. However, one of the problems with a definition in terms of gods or the supernatural or the superhuman is that these terms themselves are difficult to translate into many non-European languages. Even within European Christendom the meaning of God has been policed and contested by powerful theological agencies, and it is not at all clear that the Trinitarian God of the Aristotelian-Thomist synthesis is equivalent to

what Calvin understood by God. The stretch may be even further to the conceptions of Unitarianism or Deism. Muslim theologians who believe in Allah have held that the Christian Trinitarian God is itself a form of idolatry.

What anthropologists and others now sometimes refer to as 'gods' has been used historically by Christians in the sense of false idols, pagan heresies, demons and devil worship. These theological misrepresentations of other people's concepts do not engender confidence in their use as neutral descriptive and analytical concepts. This point is strengthened by the fact that, even today, some evangelical missionaries still hold these beliefs and still use this kind of language. For example, a Protestant mission in Mexico was motivated by the desire to save people from their pagan village economies and "raise the rate of return on conversions".

To take just two examples of non-European languages, Sanskrit and Japanese: it is problematic to claim that gods provides a neutral translation for Indian categories such as Brahman, deva, devata or Bodhisattva; or into Japanese categories such as kami, hotoke, or bosatsu. It is equally problematic to attribute belief in the 'supernatural' and its supposed distinction from the 'natural' to non-European languages and cultures around the world. Some writers have substituted the term 'superhuman' as a way to resolve this problem of the 'supernatural' while retaining the term 'religion' as a distinct form of life. But if the term superhuman has any advantages, it tends to erode a distinction between 'religious' and 'non-religious' domains. In some Indian conceptions there is no ultimate distinction between the human and the superhuman, as the practice of kissing the feet of enlightened gurus and powerful politicians suggests. Many sadhus are believed to be 'living gods' in the sense that they have become one with the divine reality which permeates what we illusorily experience as a mundane world. This is not a pedantic distinction; the veneration given to a sadhu or a living bodhisattva is part of a total system of representations that defines the identity of

billions of people.

It is astonishing that experts in International Relations believe they can classify these complex ideologies without any real knowledge in simplistic English categories and then advocate foreign policy decisions on their basis. In Japan the Emperor was *ikigami* (usually but perhaps misleadingly translated as 'living god') at a time when the Meiji Constitution of 1889 constituted State Shinto as the Japanese equivalent of the secular State. In 1946 the US Occupation forces rewrote the Constitution which declared that State Shinto cannot legally exist and that shinto is really a religion and should be classified as such; and that the Emperor is no longer Ikigami but something more like a British Constitutional Monarch. Here it is clear that power decides what gets classified as a religious belief and what gets classified as a secular one.

Extract from T. Fitzgerald, <u>Religion and Politics in International Relations: the Modern Myth</u>, (Continuum Press, 2011 forthcoming, <u>hardback</u>, <u>paperback</u>).

14
Monday
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Performative prayer and 'comparing' religion

Posted by Michael Marten in Critical Religion, University of Stirling

🗋 **Comments Off**

It is often acknowledged that Christian tradition in what we commonly call 'the West' was transformed after the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian: what had been a subversive and marginalised practice originating with a poor man at the insignificant edge of the Roman Empire became part of the imperial power

Tags

Christian, Critical Religion, Egypt, global,

structures. This intimate connection of Christian belief with the exercise of power persists: think, for example, of Anglican bishops exercising power in the British House of Lords (even that connection with *lords* is deeply problematic for many). Christian complicity with power has often been criticised for underpinning patriarchy, colonialism, racism and other forms of oppression. Stanley Hauerwas and others describe this as 'Constantinian Christianity'.

One of the consequences of Constantinian Christianity is what we might call the privatisation of belief, by which I here mean that only forms of practice supportive of existing power structures can take place in the public sphere, whereas practices that might question such power are repressed and consigned to the private sphere. For example, whilst in Britain both Houses of Parliament are routinely opened with prayer, attempts to engage in prayers of protest outside nuclear submarine bases often result in arrests. Such connections with power – and resistance to it – manifest themselves in other contexts too, as we have had the opportunity to witness these last few days in Egypt. Egypt's revolution has not been an 'Islamic revolution', but Islam has been used by some protesters as a powerful tool to subvert the dominant paradigm.

Though direct comparisons between 'Constantinian Christianity' and the situation in Egypt are extremely problematic (as I'll explain below), it is not unreasonable to note the 'Constantinian' nature of Mubarak's regime, which, building on measures by his predecessors Anwar Sadat and Gamal Abdul Nasser, sought to control every area of public life, including the mosque and the church. For example: Ahmed al Tayeb, the head of Al Azhar, one of the world's premier institutions of Sunni scholarship, was a loyal Mubarak supporter and senior member of the National Democratic Party (none of the three claimed attributes in that name were in any way connected to reality), and both Tayeb and his predecessor, Sheikh Mohammad Sayed Tantawi, had been appointed by the president, resulting almost automatically in a certain measure of complicity with the

regime.

Despite these factors, after the internet in Egypt was turned on again after several days of disconnection, reflections on resistance from within Al Azhar began to emerge. This short text regarding an appropriate response to the protests is clear about the way in which Muslims could respond to the protests:

> A person may ask "How can we help them when some of them (who are protesting) are not religious?"
>
> The principles of this religion, particularly enjoining the good and forbidding the evil, proves that we should be in the aid of anyone who works towards establishing a good or eradicating an evil, even if they are corrupt themselves. This is because we all, collectively, are included in the statement of Allah: "And cooperate in righteousness and piety, but do not cooperate in sin and aggression." (Qur'an, 5:2)

The revolution has been notable for the diversity of the participants, but resistance has at times incorporated Muslim practice, perhaps building on opinions such as that from Sheikh Muhammad Abdul Maqsood quoted here. This video clip of protesters in Cairo overcoming the armed security services is well worth watching to the end (it's just under 10 minutes long). Note the use of prayer beginning at about 3:25: even though the might of the forces railed against the protesters (including the violence of the water cannon) may have led them to feel a need for prayer, in this setting it is anything but a 'privatised' action. It is a performative act that serves to temper the aggression of the security forces who are directly facing the praying protesters, even as they are being attacked by the water cannon. Towards the end of the video, from about 8:15 onwards, the protesters successfully take the bridge, and many of them engage in renewed prayer.

For those seeking to compare Christian and Muslim prayer using examples such as these, many traps await, from Orientalism and racism, to methodological dead ends and intellectual dishonesty. The suggestion that we can equate what Christian and Muslim prayer means and does in these contexts is far from helpful in trying to understand what is taking place here. The parallels we *can* observe centre most dramatically on the extent to which these power structures seek to claim for themselves hegemony over all areas of life, and the creative ways in which such claims might be subverted. Whilst in no way seeking to diminish the power of the prayer for the participants, the performative nature of the Cairo protest perhaps works because the security forces recognise what is happening and it undermines the connection between the power they represent and the (supposedly) privatised practice that Muslims are expected to engage in. We are likely to understand such situations more readily by examining the social and political pressures involved for both the protesters *and* the security forces, rather than seeking to make broad statements equating Christian and Muslim beliefs and practices.

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