

Secularism, Modern State, and *Homo Religiosus* Societies

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After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics

By Erin K. Wilson

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 232 pages, £61, ISBN 9780230290372

Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival

By Christopher Marsh

London: Continuum, 2011, 288 pages, \$130.00, ISBN 9781441102294

Globalization and Islamism: Beyond Fundamentalism

By Nevzat Soğuk

Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011, 200 pages, \$79.00, ISBN 9780742557505

Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam

Edited by Qamar-ul Huda

Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2010, 336 pages,
\$24.95, ISBN 9781601270603

Religion has always been an overriding theme among social scientists, politicians, diplomats and laymen. While the importance attached to it has changed over the course of time; its significance has never ceased for society and states. Although the paradigm of secularism or secularization has been prominent and prevalent in the social sciences, religion has recently gained strong momentum in western academia. Furthermore, scholars of international relations have increas-

ingly focused their attention on the role cultural elements and religion play in politics, foreign policy, and international relations, especially after the 9/11 attacks. It has also resulted in a renewal of the “clash of civilizations” debate, which had dominated the discourse on the role of religion in our contemporary world and in the context of terrorism, violence, and religious-extremism.

Recently, a new genre of academics has initiated an effort to outline

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Insight Turkey
Vol. 17 / No. 3 /
2015, pp. 217-225

a “grand theory” with regard to role of religion and culture in IR, but so far their efforts have not produced the expected outcome. Moreover they mostly fall in the trap of “empirically driven puzzle-solving.”¹ However, their contributions have been very important in two ways. First, they rightly emphasized that religion is “an *overlooked* element” in IR thus requires more attention.² Second, they have started a new debate among scholars about the role of religion at a theoretical level within IR. Consequently, they have motivated newly interested students on the importance of pursuing a line of investigation in this area both for academic and practical purposes. Taking on four new books on religion and politics, this review intends to evaluate the theoretical and practical discussion over the role of religion in politics, IR, and global politics. It also sets out to critically analyze and assess their contributions to the newly developing literature on religion, politics, and IR.

The books at hand don't start off the same way and they don't begin with the same question. However, what is interesting is that their conclusions are very similar; they concur that religion is becoming an important factor in politics whether it is in peace-making or in policy-making. Methodologically, they also have different approaches. Marsh and Soğuk's books are comparative in nature but they each look at two different religious traditions, Christianity and Islam respectively, and in two different countries. Their focus also differs

from each other. For example, while Marsh analyzes state policies toward religion, Soğuk explains the results of interaction between state and religion in a historical context. Similarly, both Huda and Wilson's books are centered on a single issue – the influence of religion in conflict resolution and its role in politics.

Erin K. Wilson's *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* is an overall theoretical book on the current state of religion and state relations and the role of religion in IR. In that sense, it is one of the latest attempts to provide a theoretical tool to analyze religion in IR and global politics. Starting with a usual critic of the secularism thesis and its repercussions on our understanding of world politics, she argues that “dominant conceptions of secularism have catalyzed the emergence of an understanding of religion based on dichotomies – institutional/ideational, individual/communal and irrational/rational” and that this understanding resulted in a definition of religion as institutional, individual and irrational.³ She further argues that such a dichotomist understanding is very much dominant in current international relations literature and provides us only a limited understanding of religion. According to Wilson, IR scholars should go beyond this understanding if they really want to capture the phenomena of religion today. To do so, Wilson suggests a framework to analyze questions regarding religion and global politics, which she calls, “relational dialogism.” This

understanding is based on “the interconnections and fluidity within and across religion and politics in the west and globally.”⁴ According to relational dialogism, religion “can be *both* institutional *and* ideational, *both* individual *and* communal and *both* irrational *and* rational.”⁵ Wilson tests her framework in the case of the US, analyzing the six State of the Union Addresses from turning points of history and claims that “the religious elements ... directly influence US identity and policy”⁶ because, as one can see, all those dichotomist elements persist in the State of the Union Addresses.

After Secularism is a very ambitious and courageous book. However, it lacks in originality and it is repetitive, as it essentially follows the basic arguments of other works with regard to the role of religion in IR.⁷ It tries to legitimize that religion is important in IR and global politics, but again it does not fully address the issues related to politics and religion, and does not at all deal with “*when* does religion matter and *how?*,” as correctly put by Bellin. This book falls within the categories of recent studies that aim to integrate religion into IR theory, but it is relevant because its basic argument is that religion is important. Scholars of IR do need innovative thinkers that can formulate new paradigms to understand how religion influences IR. Unfortunately, Wilson’s book falls short. Still, it is an important work because it engages in wide-ranging and extensive approaches to current debates, thus it is likely to pave the way for the types

of research that scholars need in IR today.

Crescent and Dove: Peace and Conflict Resolution in Islam is also theoretical piece. However, it is very policy-oriented, as both scholars and practitioners refer to religion in general and Islam in particular with regard to conflict, war, confrontation, and terrorism. It is a collection of essays edited by Qamar-ul Huda to create an interesting and informative reading for peacemakers and anyone interested in conflict studies. The authors elaborate on Islamic approaches to nonviolence while bridging the gaps between economic thought, political science, religious texts, and spirituality.

In many aspects, this is a timely contribution to the nascent field of Islamic-inspired peacemaking and conflict-resolution studies, offering both intellectual and practical applications for those interested in engaging in this difficult but important task. The volume is divided into two sections and contains ten chapters. Part one presents theoretical discussions, which contextualize notions of peace and conflict resolution from Islamic textual sources and analyzes the concepts of peace, jihad, war, and martyrdom within the Islamic tradition. The second part is more empirical and profiles case studies from human-rights activists, peacemaking organizations, and the work of prominent Islamic thinkers. It also has a glossary of conflict-resolution terms and four appendixes, which provide useful resources. This volume ad-

dresses three areas: the ethics of violence in Islam, nonviolence in the Islamic tradition, and contemporary efforts at Islamic peacemaking.

According to contributors of the book, Islamic teachings have a lot to offer on the questions of nonviolence and peace building; and this has both theoretical and practical foundations within the Islamic tradition. These authors are very candid in their presentations and are willing to be even more critical of their own traditions.

When we consider these two theoretical books, it is interesting to see that one claims that religion has a role in American society and identity, so it should be taken seriously because of its impact. The other confidently explains the existence of a clear religious influence on certain outcomes on peace building and peacemaking. In that sense, while one is at the beginning of introducing religion to society, the other discusses the outcomes. Nevertheless, both advocate that religion is not really a destructive force as many claim; rather it is also a positive one to consider. They also share the common premise where they are both challenging the influence of the secularization thesis by defending religion.

Apart from these theoretical studies reviewed above, Soğuk's and Marsh's books deal with practice. How religion has been managed in "developing" countries, such as Turkey, Indonesia, Russia, and China is not purely an intellectually interesting debate but also brings many insights into

understanding how religion plays out in the non-western world.

In terms of its starting point and overall approach, Nevzat Soğuk's *Globalization and Islamism: Beyond Fundamentalism* is very similar to *Crescent and Dove*. Both intend to speak to and provide readership to academics and policy-makers, in terms of its focus and orientation. Both are aimed at drawing on the positive aspects of Islam and Muslim experiences in an environment where Islam has been portrayed as a negative force in global politics.

Globalization and Islamism is a general survey and analysis of Islamic politics in Turkey and Indonesia – two countries that testify and demonstrate the possibility of co-existence, between democracy and Islam in the Muslim world and they are combined to create a new societal mixture. The main aim of Soğuk is to explore the non-Arab Islamic orientation in history and to show that Islam is much more tolerant, flexible, and pluralistic than many people think today. After situating Islam and Islamism globally and historically within the broad areas of tensions between the west and the east, Soğuk contextualizes and treats them as "historical processes and ideological projects."⁸ After a brief discussion on Orientalism and defining it as a "cultural ideology and historical method,"⁹ Soğuk tries to define an Islam that revolves around a humanism that Muslims have articulated and advanced in history, which cannot be explained neither through Orientalism nor fundamentalism.¹⁰

According to Soğuk, “the west’s history, (...) is thoroughly intertwined with Islam’s journeys through the ages, and is thus essentially Islamic. In the same fashion, Islam is Western.”¹¹ His reading of history as “transversal” and cosmopolitan have been explained through the *Mutazilite* thinkers in Islamic history, and the transformation of knowledge from the Islamic world to Europe during the Middle Ages. He concludes that during the late Ottoman Empire, due to rise of Wahhabism, the Muslim world went into stagnation, but later on led by several Muslim intellectuals, like *Ali Shariati* and *Cemil Meric*, rationalism has once again gained prominence in the Muslim world.

Soğuk’s *tour de horizon* of Muslim and western history is indeed very selective and descriptive. His choice of themes and intellectuals are also very precise. Most likely, he chose thinkers that agree and support his arguments. Thus, Soğuk’s intention, whether on purpose or not, is to write a new historiography of Islamic-Western interaction and explain the reasons behind the current developments. He contests the form of analysis and methodology that scholars commonly use to make sense of current developments. His basic concern seems to be finding the correct approach to the study of Islam and the Muslim world. His case studies, Turkey and Indonesia, are illustrative of his broader argument that there is a tolerant and peaceful Islamic understanding, which has been the main trend throughout Islamic history. Other more radical interpretations

represent a minority in the history of the Muslim world. Therefore, the correct analysis should be to focus on this aspect more tolerant model of historiography.

From a technical and editorial point of view, the very poor editing of Soğuk’s book stands out. Especially the usage of basic acronyms has been employed without any standard, even in the case of one paragraph. For example, the current ruling party in Turkey, *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party, has been abbreviated to “the AKP,” the “AK Party,”¹² and even “JDP.”¹³ This may confuse some readers who are not very familiar with Turkish politics.

If Turkey and Indonesia represents the “bright” side of history in the state-religion balance, China and Russia reflect the exact opposite. They epitomize the brutality and repression of state over religion. However, as compared to China, the interaction between church, state, and belief in modern Russia is much more complex and dynamic. Because Russian Orthodoxy does not only constitute a spiritual tradition, but also remains central, even today, to Russian national identity and culture. In China, religion has been less salient in the past, but today religion is considered part of Beijing’s new identity, and has been promoted as part of cultural opening to the world, as exemplified by the opening of Confucian Centers in more than 100 countries. Russia and China represent how religion can be popularly invoked and

experienced but is ever-changing and remains highly contested.

Christopher Marsh's *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* is a close examination of state–religion relations in Russia and China tracing the history of the suppression, survival, and ultimate revival of religion. Comparing state–religion policies, the book focuses on failed attempts at establishing an atheist society in Russia and China. In that sense, it makes a significant contribution to secularization and de-secularization theories.

Following the introductory chapter, which provides succinct definitions of the main concepts and outlines of the structure of the book, the first chapter traces the theoretical roots of forced secularism and militant atheism and their establishment as state policy. The next six chapters are divided into two parts focusing on Russia and China, respectively, and organized chronologically. After giving a short historical tour of state–religion relations in the pre-communist societies of Russia and China in Chapters Two and Five, Marsh delves thoroughly into an explanation of various phases of the development of oppressive policies on religion by the communist regimes of these countries. In Chapters Three and Six, which mirror each other, the author gives a masterly depiction of survival strategies of religious groups, enriching them with courageous personal accounts of believers who did not trade their faith in God when faced with severe per-

secution, torture, imprisonment and long years of exile. Chapters Four and Seven further examine the revival of religion in these post-atheist regimes.

Marsh's book compares antireligious policies in the Soviet Union and Communist China and seeks to explain why faith survived into the post-Communist period despite the repression of religious institutions and the attempt to eradicate belief in the supernatural. In doing so, Marsh aims to contribute to the development of a “neo-Bergerian” theoretical literature on desecularization.¹⁴ He points to the resurgence of faith after the end of communism in Russia and China and argues that this demonstrates conclusively the failure of forced secularization. For Marsh, it proves that humans are essentially *Homo religiosus*, innately given to belief in the supernatural, and that political regimes, no matter how vigorous their attempts, cannot bring about an atheist society.

The core argument of the book revolves around the different interpretations and implications of the Marxist–Leninist concept of religion, particularly Marx's famous assertion that religion is “the opium of the masses.” The Chinese believed that religion would die a natural death “in accordance with a natural law of growth, development and extinction, and in response to the exigencies of socialist construction.”¹⁵ The Russians, on the contrary, did not believe in any “law of development of religion” and thought that a conscious and expanded atheist campaign was needed to

eradicate religion (p. 160). In Russia, forced secularization was a process of gradual restriction: Lenin began with an approach of relative tolerance that gradually yielded to more severe repression, which Stalin continued. Yet religion has survived.

Historically, China borrowed many policies and mirrored many economic, political and social models from the Soviet Union in building a socialist society. However, as Marsh shows, what makes the case of China different is that it constructed an independent policy on religion. Initially considered as a weapon of the West to intoxicate and subdue China and its people, with the revival of religion in the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, religion turned into an anesthetic to help "alleviate pain during difficult procedures"¹⁶ of the further development of socialism in China. This shows that historical background and experiences may be much more influential, or may show variations, in shaping the elaboration of a country's policy towards religion, rather than state ideology. Historical background should also be considered as an independent variable in the elaboration of state religion relations.

Generally, in the studies of religion and politics, there is still no theory of non-western understanding of religion, which intends to develop a local understanding of the religious phenomena with a theoretical focus in an academic setting. All the theories to understand religion in politics (secularism and others) have been

developed in a Eurocentric manner and, curiously enough, they are being implemented and used to analyze the developments in the non-western world. Partly because of this, while most of the studies on the subject focusing on religion and politics in the western world are gradually becoming more theory-oriented, those studies focusing on the non-western world are usually case-studies or/and historical studies. There is little intention to theorize within its own context. The books reviewed here are no exceptions to this general rule. However, Huda's book has the potential to deepen a specific issue within one religious tradition. Although it still falls into the trap of "case-studies" and empirical analysis, the contributors provide the beginnings of a possible theoretical output. Today, in social sciences research, we are leaving the legacy of a uni-disciplinary approach to issues behind and moving in the direction of developing a multi (or trans-) disciplinary approach. The books that are discussed here are products of this approach, and thus they may draw the interest of many experts from different fields, such as sociologists, theologians, historians, and political scientists, as well as a wider group of academic and non-academic readers who are interested in state-religion relations in the 21st century.

When we consider all the books reviewed here together, one can make at least four points. First, all of the books discussed here claim that secularization theory, as a process, failed in social life with some degree of suc-

cess in political life. Religion is making a strong a very visible comeback. In that sense, all these works contribute to the desecularization thesis and re-interpretation of the religion-politics nexus.

Second, these studies show that historical, cultural, and political context matter in shaping state-religion relations. Therefore, variations in different understandings of secularisms¹⁷ or different regimes of state-religion relations are also important factors in shaping the attitudes of political parties and leadership toward religion. This is even the case in various western countries, as they take differing positions on the same issues, such as the headscarf debate in Europe. It is also true in the non-western world. As Marsh shows, despite parallels of ideology and history, the content and the implementation of policies on religion in Russia and China remain distinct. Soviet repression was always more systematic and committed, while the PRC's policy on religion was more subtle and long range. One can observe that variations in Turkey and Indonesia have also differed due to historical and political developments.

Third, a state's policy toward religion may not be same even within the same country and can change for different religions. For example, Gorbachev's policy of Glasnost (openness), allowed for the re-emergence of religion, both Christianity and Islam, in post-Soviet Russia. However, the primary beneficiary of this has been the Russian Ortho-

dox Church, which, as Marsh suggests, "stands next to the state as its own equal."¹⁸ This cannot be said for any Islamic association or grouping in Russia. Despite its secular status and regulations to laws on religion and constitutional provisions, Russia have provided a greater space for religious expression for Muslims today, in comparison to the Soviet era, but many consider it as neither enough, nor achieving international standards. The same applies for China's treatment of Muslims in Xinjiang and Buddhists in Tibet.

Fourth, the most common underlying point of all the books reviewed here is that religion *is* dominant and *will* likely be dominant in the future. This, of course, has some policy implications for leaders and states. Marsh's final line in his book may not only be indicative in that sense, but also serves as a good advice for future leaders: "A regime, no matter how secular in its official ideology, would be well advised not even to waste its resources on such an effort [of eradication religion from social life]."¹⁹ This point is also related to sharing experiences and learning from each other. ■

Endnotes

1. Eva Bellin, "Faith in Politics: New Trends in the Study of Religion and Politics," *World Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 2, 2008, p. 338. Examples of such studies are, among others, Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzipoulos (eds), *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Transformation of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The*

Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

2. See Jonathan Fox, "Religion as an Overlooked Element in International Relations," *International Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (Fall 2001), pp. 53-73; Fox and Sandler, *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, pp. 9-33.

3. Erin K. Wilson, *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 4.

4. *Ibid*, p. 92.

5. *Ibid*, p. 92, *emphasize in original*.

6. *Ibid*, p. 178.

7. For example, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jack Snyder (ed), *Religion and International Relations Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

8. Nevzat Soğuk, *Globalization and Islamism: Beyond Fundamentalism*, (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011, p. 4).

9. *Ibid*. p. 13.

10. *Ibid*, p. 26.

11. *Ibid*, p. 31.

12. For example see, *Ibid*, p. 101.

13. *Ibid*, p. 117.

14. Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival*, (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 16.

15. *Ibid*, p. 161.

16. *Ibid*, pp. 216-217.

17. Mona Kanwal Sheikh and Ole Wæver, "Western Secularisms: Variation in A Doctrine and Its Practice," in Arlene B. Tickner & David Blaney (Eds), *Thinking International Relations Differently*, (New York and London: Routledge: 2012), pp. 275-298.

18. Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival*, (London: Continuum, 2011), p. 140.

19. *Ibid*, p. 267.