

Excerpts from
THE RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF HUMANE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

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Among the surprises of the last several decades has been a multifaceted worldwide resurgence of religion as a potent force in human affairs. From the perspective of humane governance, this religious resurgence has a double-coded message: portending the hopeful possibility and necessity of transcending the constraints of economistic secularism, but also simultaneously disclosing a range of regressions in the form of extreme variants of inhumane governance that arguably, in certain instances, make the repudiation of secularism a terrifying descent into repression and violence.

On the negative side, I have in mind what religion has brought to such countries as Iran, Afghanistan, Algeria, and to some extent, India and Sudan in recent years, but also religious cults such as Heaven's Gate and Aum. Historically it would appear that the outer limits of secularism are giving rise both to transformative possibilities that lead in the direction of humane governance, and to regressive potentialities that mix in various ways the most severe deficiencies of pre-modernity with the most frightening sequels to modernity.

It is, of course, difficult to give an account of this religious resurgence that adequately situates it within the framework of the present, but it seems closely related to an exhaustion of the creative capacity of the secular sensibility, especially as it is embodied in the political domain. It is within this domain, of course, that modernity has been so closely associated with the preeminence of the territorial sovereign state. Such a preeminence has been virtually unchallenged in this century with respect to the organization of governance in international society. Even the innovations associated with the establishment of the League of Nations and the United Nations were deeply rooted in a statist system of world order.

But although this statist world order validated many patterns of abuse, either by way of immunizing domestic political order from scrutiny or through the interventionary and exploitative behavior of dominant states, it also gave rise to important normative ideas: limitations on the legitimate use of force, human rights, humanitarian intervention, criminal accountability of leaders. These normative ideas were often subordinated to geopolitical manipulations of various sorts, but they provided some encouragement for liberal perspectives that were imbued with the idea of progress in human affairs, and anticipated a gradual evolution of this statist world in the direction of peace and harmony. This approach to humane global governance was associated with the "democratic peace" hypothesis, which asserted that the spread of constitutional democracy brings an assurance of peaceful relations among democratic states, and thus if the whole world could be made to consist of nothing but democracies, then it would be a peaceful world, and if buttressed by an effective international law of human rights, it would fulfill the requirements of humane governance for the planet without requiring either disarmament or the centralization of political authority in international institutions.

The world order difficulty with this approach to humane governance is that it neglects the social impact of economic globalization as enacted in an ideological climate shaped by neoliberalism. As earlier discussed, the overall cumulative impact of economic globalization, despite its positive aspects, is to predispose world order toward third-millennium forms of inhumane global governance. And what is

more, the influence of the economic world picture upon governing political elites and the mainstream media is such as to condition and constrain the action of states. States, as now oriented, lack the will and capacity to safeguard their own autonomy, much less to fashion the ingredients of a just and peaceful world order. In this regard, it is notable that it is political elites that are most enthusiastic about institutionalizing the economic worldview at regional and global levels, as seen, for instance, in the political controversies associated with the World Trade Organization, NAFTA, and Maastricht, despite the fact that such advocacy means that governance responsibilities are transferred from the level of the state to incipient supranational actors.

Expressing this interpretation in the context of this paper, then, is a matter of understanding that the secular imagination is dependent upon the problem-solving capacities of the state, and that these have relinquished their initiative to the main arenas of economic authority (that is, Davos, G-7, WTO, and so on). One possible development with relevance is the degree of territorial backlash that might conceivably reverse this political energy and restore the role of the state as an autonomous source of authority, becoming potentially capable of creating a new social equilibrium between human needs/public goods and the logic of the market. In the nineteenth century, a kind of social equilibrium emerged out of the backlash against market-led industrialization, partly as an effort to coopt or at least moderate working-class discontent. It was essentially a secular reaction that had its revolutionary expression in the Communist movement spearheaded by Marxism/Leninism/Maoism, which was avowedly atheistic and aggressively anti-religious.

Of course, there was an important insight in the assault on the role of religion, as religious institutions were generally aligned with ruling elites, and even otherwise radical religious leaders (e.g. Luther, Calvin) were at the same time hostile to the claims of the poor and of underclasses generally. But beneath this social line of criticism was the more fundamental spirit of modernity, with its search for truth in the realms of secular knowledge, illustrated here by the Marxist insistence that its interpretations were based exclusively on social laws and that the resulting normative outlook was one of "scientific socialism," as contrasted with "utopian socialism," which was scorned. That is, the acute social tensions of the early industrial revolution were addressed within the frame of modernity and secularism, relegating religion to positions of either irrelevance or antagonism..

From Religion -- What?

Having identified forms of religious expression inimical to the quest for humane governance, let us now consider the potentially helpful contributions of religion. In setting forth these contributions, it is necessary that we allow considerable cultural space for a wide spectrum of interpretations of specific implications, and that we acknowledge that humanist styles of thought are also capable of reaching parallel points of reference but lack the foundations of religion in the collective memories and experiences of peoples of varied backgrounds to arouse widespread adherence. The relevance of religion cannot be separated from its persistence in human consciousness and its role throughout history in the social construction of human nature. Religion is understood here as encompassing both the teachings and beliefs of organized religion and all spiritual outlooks that interpret the meaning of life by reference to faith in and commitment to that which cannot be explained by empirical science or sensory observation, and is usually associated with an acceptance of the reality of the divine, the sacred, the transcendent, the ultimate.

It is also necessary to admit that the account of religious relevance offered here is intended only to be suggestive, and is designed mainly to stimulate discussion, reflection, and dialogue on the positive roles of religion in the context of a global democratic movement for humane governance. To avoid any possible confusion, a series of contributions by religion will be identified and listed, without elaboration, and absent any consideration of intercivilizational variations:

Taking suffering seriously: the religious impulse is strongly associated with an acknowledgment of "the last man (or woman)," the lowliest class, caste, and race, and a central commitment to lift up those who suffer acutely. **Civilizational resonance:** whereas secular transformative thought tends to appeal mainly to alienated intellectuals, religious revolutionary language and aspirations have deep roots in popular culture, and possesses great mobilizing potential. **An Ethos of Solidarity:** closely related is the unitive feature of religious consciousness, the oneness of the human family, giving rise to an ethos of human solidarity, and with it the sense of both the wholeness of human experience and the dignity of the individual. **Normative horizons:** responding to suffering and affirming human solidarity imply a belief in normative horizons that define human potentialities in a manner that contradicts present conditions, with their neglect of many forms of acute human suffering and their tendency to elevate the claims of the part or fragment over those of the whole.

Faith and power: a belief in the transformative capacities of an idea that is sustained by spiritual energy, and hence is receptive to nonviolent forms of struggle and sacrifice, thereby challenging more materialist views of human history as shaped primarily by warfare and command over military technology. **Limits:** a profound humility in relation to human thought and action that is sensitive to human fallibility, if not sin and evil, and appreciates the limited capacity of the inquiring mind to grasp the fullness of reality or to claim the truthfulness and correctness of any particular interpretation of what needs to be done in the world, thereby remaining open at all stages to dialogue with strangers and apparent adversaries that can serve to correct mistakes.

Identity: a realization that identity can emerge from many sources, and that it is existentially being reshaped by overlapping appeals to aspects of human nature and experience, but that the era of exclusive subjection to the expectations of loyalty to the state is being surpassed both by various modes of reexperiencing the deepening reality of the whole and by the increasing sense of the yet unfulfilled future -- an emphasis that can be highlighted by replacing the idea of "citizen" with that of "citizen pilgrim." **Reconciliation:** the realization that diverse ways of knowing are alternative means of coping with the effects of human finitude and the impingement of limits, thereby clearing away obstacles to a needed reconciliation of science, reason, and spirituality.