

UNITING *for* P E A C E - SPRING CONFERENCE 2019

RELIGION as a KEY FACTOR in GLOBAL POLITICS

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THE GLOBAL CONTEXT:-

The Cold War binary competition of two super-powers was replaced by the brief period [1990s] of US monopoly dominance. This gave way to today's situation of competitive rivalries of a range of major powers - USA, Russia, China, India, EU, with regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa, also important. Putin is now asserting a 'Make Russia Great Again' policy after Russia was appallingly treated by the West in 1990s, especially NATO's expansion. President Trump's isolationist nationalism is weakening established systems of global cooperation. Yet USA is now in a time of relative decline - notably compared with China's rise as an economic superpower. ISIS, defeated militarily in Middle East, is now 'going underground' to menace Western Europe. Like Al-Qaeda it has expanded with affiliated groups [eg. Boko Haram] into North Africa and is now at war in the Sahel with US and French forces. The latter are not winning. ISIS and Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram and Al-Shebab, and others, *are expressions of the violent misuse of religion.*

MISUSE OF RELIGION: ONGOING CHALLENGE: *Re-emergence of religion as a key factor in global politics has been transformative in 21st century.* The above-mentioned groups are all impelled by visions of extreme Islamist political hegemony - geographically from North Africa to Afghanistan, even to Indonesia and Philippines. Fiercely anti-West politically and culturally, their ideological roots are the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamism of radical theorist Sayyid Qutb; they appeal to the marginalised, the poor, and alienated middle-class elements e.g. the very many educated

unemployed. The dysfunction of global neo-liberal capitalism is causing huge, unprecedented inequality. This system has indeed lifted millions out of poverty in China and east Asia, but great inequality has resulted: China has 150 billionaires. "Wealth buys influence, but leads to mass resentment and anger" - Prof. Paul Rogers [Bradford University - Peace Studies]. His view is terrorism, community violence and wars with non-state groups will persist while gross inequality and economic injustice afflict much of the world. Such groups also express deep anger and resentment against Western intervention in, and political-economic exploitation of, the Middle East and elsewhere, with revenge a powerful motivation.

Muslim jihadism is major current threat, but "misuse of faith for violence by extremists is a danger in all world religions": e.g. Hindu violence against other faiths in India, Myanmar Buddhist violence against Rohingya Muslims. [This, and previous violence in Sri Lanka, has ended the erstwhile customary equation of Buddhism with peace and non-violence].

The West is too little aware of the crucial significance of the Israel-Palestine conflict for peace in Middle East and globally. Primarily a dispute over territory, and Israel's human rights' abuses against the Palestinians, in recent years this originally secular dispute has become increasingly charged with religious sentiment. The controversy over Temple Mount in Jerusalem; Israel's rising self-identification as 'Jewish' in religious as well as racial/cultural terms; Israeli settlers' land-grabs justified Old Testament era history and theology - all are examples. Religious extremism hinders solutions: in USA, Christian Zionists with millennial beliefs back Trump's pro-Israel policy and lobby against solving the conflict [wanting Temple rebuilt to hasten Christ's Second Coming]; in Israel, extreme Zionists urge expulsion of all Palestinians to east of the Jordan.

For Islam, violent extremism did not start with 9/11 - though that cataclysm made the world, notably the West, take notice - but with **1979 Iranian Revolution** under Ayatollah Khomeini. Strong

reverberations were felt in the **Balkan and Caucasus Wars** of 1980s-1990s - yet misuse of faith as a driver was not fully grasped then. **With the collapse of Communism, secular regimes in Middle East also became discredited: faith filled the psychological-political vacuum:** *Islam is having genuine spiritual revival, with many positive features e.g. social welfare programmes; violence is a minority preoccupation.*

The Islamist Revival is part of a **worldwide resurgence of religious belief, practice and allegiance.** Today, **Christianity has 2.3 billion adherents, Islam 1.8 billion; there are 1.1 billion Hindu adherents, Buddhism half a billion. There are 10 million Jews and some 40 million adherents of pagan & folk religions e.g. in Africa.** Many adherents are nominal or not very active, yet for many, religion helps define identity - and generally all these faiths currently enjoy global resurgence. Only Western Europe, impacted by surging secularism, 'scientism', agnosticism [and media anti-faith bias], has rejected its 2000-year Christian heritage. [Legalising same-sex marriage, contrary to age-old Christian teaching, is clearest example]. Yet worldwide, Christianity, like Islam, grows apace - especially in China, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Korea, etc. Christianity alone has a world-recognised leader - the Pope. Post-Communist East Europe is mostly seeing great revival of faith - Catholic Poland [Church strongly backs the conservative Law & Justice Party], Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia are key examples. Russian Orthodox Church is enjoying an astonishing revival - symbolised by rebuilding of massive Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in central Moscow. Re-affirming Orthodox belief and heritage is a central theme of Russia's post-Soviet revival - moral, cultural, religious, political - and linked with patriotic pride. It cannot be stressed enough: Western Europe is 'odd man out' in lacking this resurgence of faith. [Most East European states self-identify as 'Christian states', and see the West as 'morally decadent'].

Resurgent Christianity has varied political-social expressions: African churches promote welfare programmes, sometimes broker peace

processes, and may oppose dictators; East European Catholics support right-wing parties upholding traditional family values and opposing 'genderist' agendas [Hungary bans gender studies]. Brazil's strong Pentecostal churches backed Pres. Bolsonaro, especially because of his anti-gay attitudes. In Turkey, Erdogan's rise began with grassroots Muslim groups providing social welfare. Politics of social conservatism backed by religious forces often provide generous welfare to the poor and traditional families [e.g. Poland, Russia]. The relationship between religion and political action is complex.

The current global situation is one of: widespread political instability, clashes of cultures, economic division, and many causes of instability and uncertainty. In this volatile context, religion is a powerful force: *EITHER for exacerbating divisions & inciting violence OR for building bridges, nurturing harmony and engaging in community and global peace-building*. On the negative side, we can see that misuse of religion, extreme nationalism and issues of ethnicity can come together with justified economic and social grievances, in extreme programmes promoted by authoritarian and populist leaders. For example, Prime minister Modi of India, a populist Hindu nationalist, appeals to its poor masses by playing on fervent Hindu devotion and popular nationalism, with promises of greatness of a resurgent 'Hindu India'. Such perversions of faith are likely to continue as long as neo-liberal globalised capitalism produces the current gross inequalities and alienation. Fundamental reform of the system, to increase economic justice, is essential to remove breeding-grounds for religion-related violence.

CONCLUSION: Major negatives in the global picture of religion are clear - notably misuse of Islam by violent jihadism - but there are many positives, often unsung. Christian and Muslim agencies like Christian Aid, Islamic Relief, benefit many with development and humanitarian aid; churches in Africa help post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation; church groups were very important in Northern Ireland Peace Process; across UK, many inter-faith groups work

tirelessly for community harmony; in Israel, over 200 Christian-Jewish-Muslim groups do grassroots reconciliation; Russia's Council of Religions unites Orthodox, Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists and other faiths to promote tolerance and community unity among different faiths and nationalities. From Vatican's quiet peace diplomacy and Pope's public statements, and Astana inter-faith symposiums in Central Asia, faith bodies are everywhere active for peace. Perhaps best thing they can do for peace - especially Christians and Muslims as world communities - is to help spread global awareness, moral responsibility and compassion for all, among the whole human family.

Rev. Brian Cooper - 6 April 2019

