

Political Religion

Secularity and the Study of Religion in Global Civil Society

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1. Introduction: Will Global Civil Society be Secular?

The former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, himself a committed Christian, remarked in the late seventies: “You can’t run a country by the Sermon on the Mount”. Yet, referring to the fraught situation in the Middle East, with its continual demonisation of the enemy and endless tit-for-tat killings, my German colleague Heinz-Günther Stobbe observed around the same time: “The Sermon on the Mount is the most realistic text in the New Testament”. The two comments neatly sum up the dilemma of religions in the public arena: one could make the case that their idealism, their promise of transforming society by transcending it, is indispensable to public morality and good government. Yet when such aspirations are turned into a programme, suspicions arise: in India the *dharma* is being proposed in the form of the Hindutva ideology as the only viable basis of the state, while radical Muslims claim that only the implementation of the *shari’a* can solve the problems of society and establish a just polity. These examples suggest how politically dangerous it could be to put religion *in the place of* politics. ‘Political religion’, then, is a term loaded with ambiguities: may religion allow itself to be instrumentalised by politics, or must it keep itself completely apart from the political sphere? Or is it rather the case that religions of whatever type are constitutively political in their different ways, such that their political orientation will always come to light given the free space of some kind of public sphere (May 1999)? And if any of this is true, how does one study it as a student of religion?

We would thus do well to be cautious about addressing the topic of ‘political religion’, whether in the context of Religious Studies, which some see as an

illegitimate child of Christian theology, or International Relations, which might be characterised as extending the study of the political institutions of nation states to include the relations between states themselves. The inherited presupposition of both disciplines is that the secularisation and consequent privatisation of religion are fundamental to modernity, that any deviation from this canonical view represents a threat to the normative principles of liberal democracies, and that the politicisation of religion, its re-entry into civil society as a public actor, is some kind of distortion or anomaly whose study can safely be left to those whose interests run to social deviation and sectarianism (in International Relations, this is known as the ‘Westphalian presumption’, see *Petito and Hatzopoulos 2003*).

The problems involved in taking for granted that secularity is an indispensable precondition for both the study of religion and the conduct of international affairs are becoming apparent. Our task is thus to investigate in what sense religion can legitimately be political (1), to consider the implications of this for International Relations (2), and to ask whether the coming global civil society will in fact be secular in the same sense as its nation-state predecessors (3), adverting throughout to the consequences of our reflections for Religious Studies.¹

2. The Pitfalls of Trying to Yoke ‘Political’ to ‘Religion’

In indigenous societies such as those of Melanesia there is no real distinction between economic, political and ‘religious’ activity; it may also legitimately be asked what sense the concept of secularisation makes in civilisations such as the Chinese and Japanese, in which religion was always a this-worldly affair and continues to be so under conditions of rapid and thoroughgoing industrialisation and technological innovation. Where more other-worldly religions such as the great monotheisms have aspired to rise above politics and purify themselves of secular concerns, they have

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generally failed, even where they have striven to convince themselves otherwise. In its attempts not to be, religion usually finishes up being political; religions that have voluntarily withdrawn from the public arena, such as the Anabaptists of the left-wing Reformation and many varieties of contemporary fundamentalism, whether Christian or Islamic, as well as those which have tried to dominate it, such as the Catholic Church at certain stages in its history and Islam from the very beginning of its, have become political actors in so doing. Religions may choose to shun the public arena because they cannot dominate it or because it defines them in a way with which they disagree, but these are *public* acts by *social* actors in a *political* forum, in much the same way as the mere mutual awareness of two or more conscious subjects already constitutes communication; even if the persons in question wish to avoid communicating explicitly, it is this that they are communicating! In Martin E. Marty's laconic formulation: "Not to decide about religion in public life is to decide" (Marty 2005: 162).

There is considerable tension today between religious beliefs and practices forged in cultural settings such as ancient India and Palestine or medieval Europe and Arabia and their status in pluralist – which is taken to mean *ipso facto* secular – societies, not to mention the emerging global public sphere. One of the taken-for-granted orthodoxies of modernity is the 'privatisation' of religion once 'secularliberal democracy' has been established. The secularisation of society itself, we are told, inevitably decouples religion from politics and makes it a matter of personal preference and interior conviction. In this (now classical) 'liberal' view of society, religion has no business in the public sphere. Reason is public, but not religion; scientific theories and the evidence for them, like political decisions and the interests they represent, are properly matters of public debate, but not religious rituals and their mythological rationales, because there is no agreed medium in which they can be expressed apart from that imposed on them from without by secular reason. In the new public space created by globalisation and the 'real virtuality' (Castells 1996: 410-418; May 2003b, 2005) of electronic communications media, it is not so much the *privatisation* (retreat into interiority) of religious convictions as the *individualisation* (isolation in autonomy) of the culturally uprooted and disorientated that is making possible the new universalisms of the 'next Christendom' (Jenkins 2002) or the 'virtual *ummah*' (Roy 2004): cut off from ties to community and place by

social mobility or emigration, individuals absorb the shock of individualisation by identifying with idealised, ahistorical versions of all-encompassing religious worldviews such as those of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. The obverse of this globalisation of the religious is the consolidation of localised groups of true believers who demand space in the public sphere to be exclusively themselves.

It is at this point that the question of how to study religions in global public space becomes interesting. The founders of *Religionswissenschaft* took their scientific stand on comparativism and phenomenological method, a heritage which is indeed foundational for our discipline, but in the context defined by orientalism and post-colonial theory this is increasingly regarded as a Western perspective which prematurely universalises 'religion' and approaches the religions as Christianity's 'religious others' (King 1999; Masuzawa 2005). The reluctance of the social sciences, including both International Relations and Religious Studies, to react to the global resurgence of religion exposes flaws in social science methodology which are becoming intellectually counterproductive and are stifling the contributions the study of religions could make to world peace. In such a context, 'political religion' becomes not only a proper but an urgent topic for Religious Studies.

The more unambiguously religious the religions are, the greater their potential to become political factors: this is my first proposition. If it can be substantiated, another follows: the complicity of Religious Studies in the ideology of neutrality towards its subject matter may have to be revised, for under these auspices there is a danger that students of religion will miss the very elements that make religions 'religious' and *consequently* 'political'. The stance of strict abstention from judgements of truth about religions is itself part of a practical-political programme stemming from the Enlightenment with its differentiation of science and art, politics and economics as autonomous spheres emancipated from religious control, in other words: 'secularised' (Casanova 1994: 214). This emancipation was the indispensable presupposition of modernity, and wherever it occurs there is tension with the religious traditions which previously presided over these spheres (though in East Asia, as we have seen, one may ask whether it ever made sense to speak of secularisation in this way). The proper place of religions in specifically 'modern' societies and their polities is to

remain outside the public sphere in which rationality obtains, and hence beyond the possibility of political intervention.

The fascinating aspect of the new developments is that religions, in their fundamentalist and neofundamentalist forms, are eagerly placing *themselves* in this extra-social, a-political, de-culturated position. There is a sense in which anyone who expresses a firm conviction in public these days is liable to be labelled a fundamentalist; but it is also the case that there are fundamentalist movements which are well aware of their own political impact, thereby making calculated use of the secularisation of societies: the rise of *Hindutva* in secular India, the influence of the New Christian Right on neoconservative politics in the US and the tensions generated by radical Islamists in Europe are cases in point. The *study* of religions, at least as it is still institutionalised in most of our universities, continues to restrict itself to the intrinsic interest of the religions as historical and social phenomena, bracketing out any implications they might have for personal religious commitment or the public role of religion. Hence my question: Is this a sufficient rationale for the study of religions in a world where the religions have once again become both political actors and personal identity markers on a global scale? Some scholars of religion are calling for the deployment of the resources of the religions themselves in the study of religion, in much the same way as heavily camouflaged Protestant Christian assumptions used to define the parameters of Religious Studies (Cabezón 2006; Cabezón and Davaney, 2004).

3. The 'Westphalian Presumption' and the 'Return of Religion' in International Relations

It is said that within days of 11 September 2001 copies of the *Qur'ān* were sold out across America. The fact that 'they' attacked 'us' is not the purest of motives for a renewed interest in the world's religions, but there is no denying that the radicalisation of militant Islam has shaken many in the West out of their complacent assumption that the religions are the politically irrelevant expression of private convictions. Islam's emotional hold over its adherents and the sheer spiritual power it

is capable of mobilising worldwide can be exaggerated (Roy 1995; 2004 offers a necessary corrective), but the realisation that religion, *as* religion, can be a power factor – more than the New Age, the spirituality market or the new sympathy for indigenous peoples – has accelerated the revision already under way of the theories of ‘secularisation’ that dominated the social sciences for more than a generation (Berger 1999; Wuthnow 1992). It is becoming apparent that secularisation can affect different aspects of society and its political and administrative structures in different ways: it can mean the differentiation of autonomous spheres such as science and politics from religious tutelage, thus rendering them ‘secular’; the decline of religious belief and practice, as can be observed particularly in Europe; and the marginalisation of religion by confining it to the private sphere (Casanova 1994: 211). These can occur either separately or together in various combinations. Secularisation is thus contextual, involving quite different dynamics in different historical and cultural situations. This discussion involves us immediately in a reassessment of certain aspects of the Enlightenment and their normative status for education and culture in the West.

Once the signatories of the Peace of Westphalia had conceded that the Church was no longer coincident with society, as it had been in the form of ‘Christendom’ throughout the Middle Ages, and that the now divided Christian churches could enter into various political allegiances without thereby necessarily providing grounds for conflict (*cuius regio, eius religio*), the churches had unwittingly started down the road that was to see them become mere ‘denominations’ in secular pluralist states, and the states themselves had just as unwittingly set the stage for an international order of competing ideologies, in which at least some nation-states are organised as societies that explicitly recognise ideological pluralism. The outcome of both processes was that “the religious sphere became just another sphere” (Casanova 1994: 21) in the ideologically neutral public forum in which worldviews interact and compete. Precisely this is now happening to Islam as it makes the painful passage from its cultural homelands to the multicultural societies of the West. The social sciences, whose foundational theorists such as Weber, Durkheim and Troeltsch wrestled with the relationship between religion and society, eventually took it as axiomatic that the privatisation of religion – in other words, secularisation – is the inevitable outcome of processes of modernisation and industrialisation and the indispensable presupposition of pluralist democracies and the rational conduct of public affairs; even Thomas

Luckmann's 'invisible religion' and Niklas Luhmann's redefinition of it as a 'contingency formula' make this assumption (Casanova 1994: 35). As these processes proceed apace under the aegis of global economism, something like the universal 'end of religion' should be the result.

But it is now becoming apparent that in many contemporary situations – we may think of liberation theology in Latin America, black consciousness in South Africa or engaged Buddhism in Southeast Asia – religion has made the transition from being a 'dependent' to an 'independent' variable (Gill 1975; 1977). Large numbers of people can be simultaneously both secular and religious; in other words, *the privatisation of religion is not normative* as either the presupposition or the outcome of processes of industrialisation and democratisation (Casanova 1994: 38-39), and religions, even those such as neofundamentalist Islam that repudiate culture and politics, are paradoxically becoming cultural and political factors in their own right. The salient point is that, in the case of religion, *both privatisation and deprivatisation can be voluntary*. There may, then, be "legitimate forms of 'public' religion in the modern world" which can *both* offer rationally grounded criticism of public policy while *also* allowing "for the privatization of religion and for the pluralism of subjective religious beliefs":

In order to be able to conceptualize such possibilities the theory of secularization will need to reconsider three of its particular historically based – that is, ethnocentric – prejudices: its bias for Protestant subjective forms of religion, its bias for 'liberal' conceptions of politics and of the 'public sphere', and its bias for the sovereign nation-state as the systematic unit of analysis. (Casanova 1994: 39)

Far from remaining corralled in the private sphere to which the theorists of modernity had confined it, religion has insisted on 'going public', making more and varied use of the space opened up by 'civil society' as an alternative either to co-opting the state or taking refuge in the privacy of face-to-face relationships. Hence,

...religion and politics keep forming all kinds of symbiotic relations, to such an extent that it is not easy to ascertain whether one is witnessing political

movements which don religious garb or religious movements which assume political forms. (Casanova 1994: 41)

We are thus confronted with “attempt[s] to indigenize modernity rather than to modernize traditional societies” (Thomas 2003: 22). The distinction between private and public spheres is being continually redefined by the religions themselves at all levels of society, from the family to the state, but most especially as actors in the ‘open space’ of civil society – even where they vehemently reject it. Religion may be ‘political’ even though it does not determine forms of government; the separation of church and state, or of the purely religious from the merely political, does not necessarily entail either the privatisation of religion or the secularisation of societies. All this holds good, however, under the one precondition which is the Enlightenment’s greatest legacy to modernity and which religions from traditional Catholicism to contemporary Islam have found hardest to accept: the state’s right and duty to protect the individual’s freedom of conscience *from* religion, for

...from the normative perspective of modernity, religion may enter the public sphere and assume a public form only if it accepts the inviolable right to privacy and the sanctity of the principle of freedom of conscience. (Casanova 1994: 57)

The Catholic Church, for example, refused to accept freedom of conscience in matters of faith and morals right up to the proclamation of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Religious Liberty, in 1965. The tensions set up by the growing presence of Islam in Western societies promise a repetition of the same drama under different religious auspices, for from the very beginning there has been an assumption in Islam that religion *should* determine a society’s laws and politics (Nagel 1981). Where this proves impossible, some Muslims, unconvinced by attempts to advocate Islamic convictions in the public forum and create new Islamic institutions in civil society, are determined to follow the *sharī’a* in religious ghettos, if need be, cut off from the surrounding *jahiliyya* society of the ‘ignorant’ but bound to all other true believers in an imagined global *ummah* (this is the thesis urged perhaps too insistently by Roy, 2004; for a somewhat more balanced view, see Ehteshami 2005, who sets out to “unravel the ways in which Islam ... has become politicised,

and has been deployed as a political tool in the hands of political actors who use Islam as their political ideology”, 2005: 33). On the other hand, various initiatives of the Roman Catholic hierarchy in both North and South America, from the US bishops’ pastoral letters on peace and the economy to the solidarity of their Latin American counterparts with liberation theologians, show that even the most conservative of religious traditions can play a constructive political role. It remains to be seen whether so-called ‘progressive Muslims’ will eventually bring forth comparable initiatives from the rich resources of Islam (see Safi 2003).

In the light of this discussion, I suggest that neither Religious Studies nor International Relations is at present adequately equipped to disentangle the complex relationships between religion and politics. There has been much progress in creating an enhanced awareness of the interaction between researcher and subjects in anthropology and, since the work of the ‘ethnomethodologists’ Goffman and Garfinkel, in ‘constructivist’ sociology and political science (McSweeney 1999: chapters 6, 8), but each discipline has characteristic inhibitions when confronted with ‘theology’, or its equivalents in non-theistic religious traditions. By this I mean the intellectual labour of self-interpretation, the hermeneutic immanent within each identifiable tradition by which it continually explains itself to itself, thereby maintaining the continuity of its identity from generation to generation. Such activity, especially when it is the immediate inspiration of attempts to become active in the public sphere, is instinctively regarded by the liberal consensus as illegitimate because non-rational and therefore non-viable in the public forum. Whatever else it is, Religious Studies must be ‘not-theology’ and must never admit to any kind of normative presuppositions (Griffiths 2006). The ‘politics of religious studies’ thus becomes a sub-species of ‘political religion’ (Wiebe 1999: chapter 10, on van de Leeuw’s “subversion” of the scientific study of religion; Segal 1989: 5-36, on Eliade’s “religious” study of religion). The question could perhaps be re-stated thus: Is political religion *real* religion, or is it merely the instrumentalisation of religion for extraneous political purposes; and is such politicised religion genuinely political, or is it rather the illegitimate subversion of politics by anti-rational and anti-democratic interests? (May 1995). The question then becomes: Can the religions’ potential for peace be made politically operative; and the subsidiary question remains: Can

Religious Studies legitimately identify this transcendental and liberating potential of religion and successfully mediate it to International Relations?

4. Towards an ‘Engaged’ Study of Religions in Global Civil Society

I suspect that the sense of ‘political religion’ I am striving to elucidate is just as intellectually unwelcome in Religious Studies as it is in International Relations, though attitudes are changing. On the side of Religious Studies, the sterile debate which pits ‘theology’ and other confessional commitments against the ‘scientific’ study of religions is gradually being overcome (see the many-sided debate in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, 2006; May 2004), and on the side of International Relations the ‘return’ of cultural identity and religious commitment to the purview of international politics is belatedly being proclaimed (Petito and Hatzopoulos 2003; Lapid and Kratochwil, 1996; Johnston and Sampson 1994, with detailed case studies). This welcome conjuncture urgently needs further intensive study from both sides, however. Religious Studies, as an aspiring social science, is most comfortable with the study of religions as phenomena, or, as we might say today, ‘data’ – institutions, symbolic structures, behaviour – as abstracted from the evidence of religious actors. In the eyes of some, this involves rigorous generalisation from a standpoint which is *not* that of those being studied (‘the natives *don’t* know best’; the most uncompromising proponent of this view is Segal 1992; 2006; and see the review of McCutcheon 2003 by Albinus 2006). Even in cases of self-reflective participant observation and empathetic description researchers are faced with the problem of whether or not to accept as ‘true’ the meanings and intentions that religious actors themselves attribute to their actions. It is precisely these implicit meanings that are made explicit and ‘objectified’ when exposed to the pluralism of the – now global, but not necessarily secular – public sphere, thus initiating a crisis of meaning for many religious traditions. For many religious people it is an unfamiliar spectacle to see their cherished convictions become the premises of practical-political arguments with others whose interests and convictions differ radically from their own.

Dialogue is interreligious communication, and this can be theorised; in fact, it is the reality of difference in religious interaction that makes Religious Studies interesting to International Relations. The religions are significant actors on the international stage because they invoke values and lay claim to truth: they are interesting because of, not in spite of, their commitments. Mere comparison of data is not enough to bring this out; it needs to be ‘comparison for dialogue’ (a theme that runs through the *JAAR* 2006 discussion) in order for us to detect the dynamics that underlie specific religious commitments, which only become fully explicit in the act of communicating themselves to religious ‘others’. This is especially important when we remember that it is precisely these commitments that become individualised and ‘objectified’ when called into question outside their native cultural milieu, as is now happening in the case of neofundamentalist Islam (see Roy 2004 on Islamist websites, which reveal the agonising of uprooted Muslims whose religion, for the first time, has become a problem for them in the secular environs of the West – and is then propagated by them as *the* solution to *all* problems). There is a sense in which conflicts such as those in Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka and the Middle East are interchangeable, whatever religions happen to be involved – but this is true only up to a point. When we move beyond recurring grievances like land loss, economic deprivation and racial discrimination, it may make a considerable difference whether a problem to be debated in the public forum is being approached from Buddhist, Christian or Muslim perspectives, so that the religious reasons that make political strategies and ethical positions ‘ours’ and not ‘theirs’ may become politically relevant.

The difficulty posed by the religions could be mitigated if two conditions were met: if the religions could learn to accommodate one another’s truth claims nonviolently, which would seem to presuppose the deconstruction of their absolutisms; and if this could be done as a contribution to the shaping of a global public sphere. Though a global public sphere is already taking shape as electronic communication collapses time and space into a continuous present, this is by no means the same thing as global civil society, but at best a presupposition for it. The very possibility of a ‘global civil society’ is contested.² Civil society presupposes a civilised state in which it can

² In September 2005 the Irish School of Ecumenics (Trinity College Dublin) and the Centre for Theology and Public Issues (University of Edinburgh) held an international conference in Edinburgh

flourish under the protection of legal guarantees (freedom of speech, blasphemy and libel laws), but at the global level no such entity is in sight; indeed, the prospect of any kind of global government is alarming (Falk 2001: 138, 161 advocates a “normative refocusing of energy” in order to bring about a “new, non-violent approach to international security”; see Falk 1999: chapter 11; Herbert 2003; Beyer 1994). Yet discussion is already under way on the relative merits of ‘cosmopolitanism’ and ‘communitarianism’, not only as structures for global communication, but as substructures of an ethic that would be explicitly global in its range (Dower 1998; Attack 2005; Schweiker 2004). Despite attempts to isolate ethics from religion – another part of the Enlightenment heritage – it is becoming apparent that the cultivation of what Falk calls ‘religious civility’ is indispensable if global civil society is to be viable. The autonomy of ethics as a rational enterprise in its own right is to be respected, but there are distinctive ethical traditions, each anchored in a religious context of origin which has been its historical context of validity. Something similar applies to the various ways of structuring societies politically; each one – including democracy! – *is* a tradition, has its own cultural and religious context of origin, and is therefore substantive and determinate, not formal and neutral (this has been beautifully argued by Stout 2004, though see the critical review by Cady 2005). The all-important point is that the problems we face are undeniably global, and our challenge is to develop a pluralism which is not secular by definition and does not simply abandon itself to relativism but welcomes many substantive theories, although and because they have their origins in different ‘religious cosmologies’ (Galtung 1996), seeking to test them against the problems identified as having global importance. The immense efforts of Max Weber to show how distinctive economic ethics may flow from different religious worldviews must now be developed to address the sources of political ethics in religious traditions, with results which could be fed into the global public discussion (Casanova 1994: 232).

Can the religions, then, learn to communicate non-violently with their respective ‘others’, even and especially when they are enemies? The liberal ideal of tolerance,

on “A World for All? The Ethics of Global Civil Society”. Speakers such as John Keane and Max Stackhouse, from political and theological points of view respectively, addressed the topic positively, but Kimberly Hutchings was sceptical about ‘civilising the international’ as a feasible project.

with its Christian and European origins, has made an indispensable contribution to civilising international and interreligious relations, but it is inadequate to deal with the passions and tensions, the economic injustice and ecological destruction now erupting on a global scale, just as it proved unable to contain the forces unleashed by racism, nationalism and colonialism in the past. In the words of Richard Falk:

It is this possibility of a religiously grounded transnational movement for a just world order that alone gives hope that humane global governance can become a reality. ... this resurgence [of religion] seems closely related to an exhaustion of the creative capacity of the secular project, especially as it is embodied in the political domain.(Falk 2003: 190-191)

This thought, at once sobering yet encouraging, leads us to our conclusion.

5. Conclusion: From Data to Dialogue

Materialist, positivist and otherwise reductionist rationales for the study of religions are not the antidote to ideology but are themselves ideological; this much is becoming clear. It is equally clear that religious faith itself, and not just its rationalisations in various 'theologies', can perform ideological functions. This is a challenge to both Religious Studies and International Relations. Neither discipline is comfortable when exposed to commitments, but it is commitments that make actions moral, and one step further back it is religious commitments that at the very least provide contexts of origin – and as a rule contexts of validity as well – for moral conviction. Ethics, though logically autonomous, is pragmatically in need of motivation and ideationally in need of 'plausibility structures', which the religions have historically provided – albeit sometimes by dubious means (threats of eternal damnation, denigration of earthly pleasures) – and continue to provide. This is not to recommend a 'religious' study of religions, simply to note that students of religion are deceiving themselves if they think they can ignore 'theology', understood as the religions' own critical reflection on their practice and experience. In today's multireligious context, this

involves entering into *interreligious* relationships as the religions experience them, thereby gaining access to their crises of self-understanding and their attempts to accommodate otherness within the constraints of their own ongoing efforts at self-definition.

The alternatives are sobering. For the religions, if they fail to rise to the challenge of global pluralism and constructive interrelatedness, there is the bleak prospect of a plethora of rigid fundamentalisms, incapable of accommodating otherness and unable to enter the public sphere except to reinforce their obsessions and do battle with all who differ from them. For international relations, the consequences would be even more disastrous than they are proving to be at present. For the study of religions, the ultimate outcome of a sterile ‘science envy’ would be a steady loss of plausibility and legitimacy, ending in irrelevance and confirming Paul Griffiths’ pessimistic forecast: “This [assumption] makes the future of the nontheological academic study of religion just what it should be: bleak” (Griffiths 2006: 74). The admittedly large claim being made is that the empathetic study of religions in their interrelationships can make a political contribution to warding off the threat of fundamentalism while providing international relations as a *praxis* with some purchase in its attempts to establish the bases of civilised behaviour in the global public forum. A negative outcome is not inevitable if Religious Studies, short of becoming somebody’s particular ‘theology’ but also without succumbing to a dis- and uninterested scientism, can renew itself by coming to grips with the ethical and political challenges the religions must now meet in the emerging global civil society. Richard Falk expresses this in words that I can make my own:

It is my contention that this effort to construct a democratic global civil society is informed by religious and spiritual inspiration, and if it is to move from the margins of political reality and challenge entrenched constellations of power in a more effective way, it will have to acquire some of the characteristics and concerns of a religious movement, including building positive connections with the emancipatory aspects of the great world religions. (Falk 2003: 193)

The religions can confront politicians and the powerful, nationally but now also internationally in the inchoate global order, with serious questions about the

normative presuppositions of their policies. Declarations of war, ecological destruction, economic imbalance, the wanton elimination of languages and cultures – all these and many other evils of globalisation may no longer be rationalised with spurious ‘liberal’ justifications (freedom of choice, economic growth, competition). When asserting the dignity of the human, the inviolability of nature and the common good, the religions – at their best – are bringing to bear on these problems historically rooted and communally tested value orientations. What might be termed their ‘future nostalgia’ – what Christian theology calls their eschatological vision – makes the religions factors to be reckoned with as the new global order of civil society takes shape. Both Religious Studies and International Relations – preferably in an explicit intellectual exchange – would be reinvigorated if this were recognised and integrated into their methodologies. Can we students of religion rise to this challenge while preserving the integrity of our discipline? This is not a soft option for idealists, but a hard intellectual and political task, and the way we go about it, I am convinced, will determine the future credibility – and fundability – of our discipline.

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