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Political Religion

Studying the World's Religions in Global Civil Society

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*In memory of Victor C. Hayes, tireless promoter of Religious Studies and co-founder
of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions*

The former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, himself a committed Christian, once remarked: “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 something like this actually happens, suspicions arise: in India the *dharma* is being proposed in the highly uncharacteristic form of the Hindutva ideology as the only viable basis of the state, while radical Muslims claim that only the exclusive 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?¹ And if any of this is true, how does one study it as a student of religion?

¹ I explored this possibility in J.D. May, “Contested Space: Alternative Models of the Public Sphere in the Asia-Pacific”, Neil Brown and Robert Gascoigne, eds., *Faith in the Public Forum* (Adelaide: Australian Theological Forum, 1999), 78-108.

We would thus do well to be cautious about addressing the topic of ‘political religion’, whether in the context of religious studies or political science. The inherited presuppositions of both disciplines lead us to believe that the secularisation and consequent privatisation of religion belong to the fundamental presuppositions of 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.² This is ironic, because the great political thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Locke, Rousseau and de Tocqueville, though they approved of the separation of church and state, did so in the name of religious toleration, for they believed that religious liberty and political liberty were allies, not adversaries, and that underlying what Rousseau called ‘civil religion’ was not only a ‘natural religion’ but a properly theological issue of human wholeness and moral conscience.³ It is this ambivalence of the linkage between politics and religion that leads me to address the problems raised for the study of religion in the highly – or differently – politicised environment now generally referred to as ‘globalisation’.

1. Introduction: The Pitfalls of Trying to Yoke ‘Political’ to ‘Religion’

² Under the heading ‘the Westphalian presumption’, this theme runs through the stimulating collection edited by Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

³ See Noel B. Reynolds and W. Cole Durham, Jr., eds., *Religious Liberty in Western Thought* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1996); Andrew Fiala, *Tolerance and the Ethical Life* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005). The point is made forcefully by Scott M. Thomas in his substantial contribution to Petito and Hatzopoulos, *Religion in International Relations*, “Taking Religious and Cultural Pluralism Seriously”, 21-53:

Because of the Westphalian presumption, ‘virtue-ethics’ are contrary to the approach of Western governments and development agencies, which argue that ‘religion’ gets in the way of helping the poor or promoting development. What has to be remembered is that there is a close relationship between religious freedom and political freedom, and religious toleration often has been the beginning of political toleration, civil society, and democracy. (45-46)

In indigenous societies such as those of Melanesia there is no real distinction between economic, political and 'religious' activity. Where religions have aspired to rise above politics and purify themselves of such worldly concerns, they have generally failed, even where they have striven to convince themselves otherwise. Even 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.⁴

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 societies, not to mention the emerging global public sphere. One of the taken-for-granted orthodoxies of modernity is the 'privatisation' of religion once 'secularliberalpluralism' has been established. The secularisation of society itself 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' (Manuel Castells)⁵ of electronic communications media, it is not so much *privatisation* as the

⁴ In much the same way, 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!

⁵ See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Vol. I (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 410-418, and my use of his ideas in J.D. May, "God in Public: The Religions in Pluralist Societies", *Bijdragen. International Journal in Philosophy and*

individualisation of the culturally uprooted and disorientated that is making possible the new universalisms of the ‘next Christendom’ (Philip Jenkins) or the ‘virtual *ummah*’ (Olivier Roy):⁶ cut off from ties to community and place by social mobility or emigration, individuals absorb the shock of individuality by identifying with idealised, ahistorical versions of all-encompassing religious worldviews such as those of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

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’.⁷ 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 religions themselves could make to world peace. In such a context, ‘political religion’ becomes not only a proper but an urgent topic for Religious Studies. The problems involved can perhaps be made clearer by turning for a moment to art and literature, which face a similar dilemma. Here again, the juxtaposition of art and politics points up the paradox: as the history of censorship under repressive regimes shows, it is precisely by being absolutely committed to the demands of their art that painters, writers and musicians can have a subtle but pervasive influence on politics.⁸

Theology 64 (2003), 249-264, and “Alternative a Dio? Le religioni nella sfera pubblica globale”, Antonio Autiero, ed., *Teologia nella Città, Teologia per la Città* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2005), 95-109.

⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004).

⁷ See Richard Kind, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the ‘Mystic East’* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸ In Ireland recently we mourned the loss of John McGahern, one of the most ruthlessly honest and finely sensitive writers of his generation; his novels such as *Amongst Women* or *That They May Face the Rising Sun* could scarcely be more intensely ‘local’ while at the same time exploring instantly recognisable dimensions of the human. Fellow-novelist Colm Toibin recalled how McGahern, in the

Something similar – exactly what and how, we are not yet sure – applies to the beliefs and practices of the religions: the more unambiguously religious they are, the greater their potential to become political factors, though the term ‘religious’ confronts us with a whole gamut of possibilities and the term ‘political’ is not unambiguous either.⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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, for example, we 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 ‘in the sacristy’, as politicians like to say when criticised by clerics; that is, 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, thereby unwittingly underlining their own political impact whilst actively contributing to the secularisation of societies; the

course of a heated discussion in France about the writer and politics, contributed just one comment: “It is a writer’s job to look after his sentences. Nothing else”. Yet in an article right alongside Toibin’s the journalist and critic Fintan O’Toole remarked of McGahern: “He changed Ireland, not by arguing about it, but by describing it”.

⁹ *Mystik und Politik* became a favourite theme of the ‘political theology’ of Dorothee Sölle and Johann Baptist Metz in Germany; see the contribution of Marianne Heimbach-Steins to T. Hausmanniger, ed., *Christliche Sozialethik zwischen Moderne und Postmoderne* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1993).

¹⁰ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 214.

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 themselves 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.¹¹ The term ‘political’, too, deserves a moment’s reflection. Politics is problem-solving, not the application of ready-made theories to practice, which facilitates the creation of ideologies. This can become a significant temptation for religions, for it tends to politicise and instrumentalise and ultimately to falsify them, even when they vehemently reject any such politicisation.¹² In this framework, then, my reflections are not purely disinterested but try to envisage a future in which the study of religion will become more ‘engaged’ while preserving its ‘scientific’ integrity.

2. The ‘Westphalian Presumption’ and the ‘Return of Religion’ in International Relations

¹¹ See the instructive discussion in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74 (2006), especially the exchange between José Ignacio Cabezón and William Schweiker, 21-46.

¹² The situation in Northern Ireland, of course, is a veritable laboratory for the study of such instrumentalisation, as my years with the Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics taught me; see J.D. May, “Instrumentalisierung des Christentums durch die Politik? Das Beispiel Nordirland”, *Una Sancta* 50 (1995), 141-150. Andreas Hasenclever and Volker Rittberger, in their contribution to Petito and Hatzopoulos, *Religion and International Relations*, “Does Religion Make a Difference? Theoretical Approaches to the Impact of Faith on Political Conflict”, 107-145, state that “the causal pathway is unambiguous: The politicisation of religions leads to the escalation of given disputes and never to their de-escalation” (113), and in the same volume Carsten Bagge Lausten and Ole Wever, “In Defense of Religion: Sacred Referent Objects for Securitization”, 147-180, are even more unequivocal: “*Religion plus securitization equals ideology*” (165) and “*Ideology is quasi-religion, not religion per se*” (166).

It is said that within days of 11 September 2001 copies of the Qur'an 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,¹³ but this realisation, 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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

¹³ The work of Olivier Roy, especially *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1995) and *Globalised Islam* (2004), is a necessary corrective in this respect.

¹⁴ See Peter Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); Robert Wuthnow, *Rediscovering the Sacred* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

¹⁵ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 211.

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”¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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. As these processes proceed apace under the aegis of global economism, something like the universal ‘end of religion’ should be 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.¹⁸ 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,¹⁹ 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

¹⁶ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 21.

¹⁷ As Casanova shows, *Public Religions*, 35, Thomas Luckmann’s identification of the ‘invisible’, i.e. privatised religion of secular societies and Niklas Luhmann’s reformulation of it in terms of systems theory still presuppose as axiomatic that secularisation is the inevitable consequence of modernity.

¹⁸ Terminology helpfully introduced by Robin Gill, *The Social Context of Theology: A Methodological Enquiry* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1975); *Theology and Social Structure* (London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1977).

¹⁹ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 38-39.

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.²⁰

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.²¹

We are thus confronted with “attempt[s] to indigenize modernity rather than to modernize traditional societies”.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 religion’s privatisation.²³

²⁰ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 39.

²¹ Casanova, *Public Religions*, 41.

²² Thomas, “Religious and Cultural Pluralism”, 22.

²³ 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

In short, one could say that the publicness of religion sets up a dialectic of relationships between power, freedom and truth which generates tensions and sometimes open conflict between the religious community as such, its institutionalised form in the larger society and the beliefs and practices of its individual members. The Catholic Church 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 1965.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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 *shari'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*.²⁶ 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

...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, *Public Religions*, 57)

²⁴ I explored the threefold relationship of power, freedom and truth in this context, using Indonesian Islam as an example, in J.D. May, "The Politics of Dialogue: *Nostra Aetate*, Interreligious Relations and Democracy" (a paper delivered at a conference on *Nostra Aetate* after forty years at the Gregorian University, Rome, in September 2005, to appear under the editorship of John Borelli of Georgetown University). On the Catholic tradition of freedom of conscience, see the comprehensive study by Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000).

²⁵ See the magisterial study by Tilman Nagel, *Staat und Glaubensgemeinschaft im Islam. Geschichte der politischen Ordnungsvorstellungen der Muslime*, 2 Vols. (Zürich-München: Artemis, 1981).

²⁶ This is the thesis urged perhaps too insistently by Roy, *Globalised Islam*; for a somewhat more balanced view, see Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Islam as a Political Force in International Politics", Nelly Lahoud and Anthony H. Johns, eds., *Islam in World Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 29-53, 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" (33).

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.²⁷

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 anthropology²⁸ and, since the work of Goffman and Garfinkel, in 'constructivist' sociology and political science,²⁹ 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 is 'not-theology' and must never admit to any kind of normative presuppositions.³⁰ The 'politics of religious studies' (Donald Wiebe) thus becomes a sub-species of 'political religion'.³¹ The question could perhaps be re-stated thus: Is

²⁷ See Omid Safi, ed., *Progressive Muslims on Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).

²⁸ See, for example, Robert Borofsky, ed., *Remembrance of Pacific Pasts: An Invitation to Remake History* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000); K.R. Howe, R. Kiste and Brij Lal, eds., *Tides of History: The Pacific Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).

²⁹ See Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁰ A thesis trenchantly argued by Paul J. Griffiths, "On the Future Study of Religion in the Academy", *JAAR* 74 (2006), 66-74, whose conclusion is: "This makes the future of the nontheological academic study of religion just what it should be: bleak" (74).

³¹ See Donald Wiebe, *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflict with Theology in the Academy* (London: Macmillan, 1999), especially chapter 10 on van de Leeuw's 'subversion' of the scientific study of religion; and Robert A. Segal, *Religion and the Social Sciences: Essays on the*

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?

The American Christian ethicist Donald Shriver has argued that “the complex dialectic of forgiving and forgetting” amounts, in the end, to the “political form of the forgiveness of sins”, because “forgiveness is interdependent with repentance” in bringing about reconciliation.³² The ‘practice of transcendence’ that characterises all genuine religion can fail to be itself in all kinds of destructive ways, as I have experienced in Northern Ireland and as is painfully evident in situations of conflict from the former Yugoslavia to the Middle East and from India to South Africa.³³ At the same time and in the same contexts, there are numerous documented examples of religious individuals and communities rising above their ethnic and national allegiances to work towards reconciliation based on repentance and forgiveness, thus demonstrating the liberating potential of the very same religious traditions.³⁴ Marc Gopin calls this the ‘pro-social’ potential which he claims is invariably present in the ethical substrate of any tradition worthy of the name ‘religious’, though evoking and realising it can be a painful process.³⁵ Mediators and conflict resolution specialists

Confrontation (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989), where Eliade is accused of “endorsing the believer’s point of view” and practising the ‘religious’ study of religion, 5-36.

³² Donald W. Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 185, 210, referring to Martin Luther King; see my discussion in J.D. May, “A Rationale for Reconciliation”, *Uniting Church Studies* 7 (2001), 1-13, and the perceptive reviews by Brian Lennon SJ in *Studies* 85 (1996), 381-387, and Kyle A. Pasewark, *Christian Century*, July 5-12, 1995, 683-685. For a comprehensive survey of the literature on forgiveness, see Nigel Biggar, “Forgiveness in the Twentieth Century: A Review of the Literature, 1901-2001”, Alistair McFadyen and Marcel Sarot, eds., *Forgiveness and Truth* (Edinburgh and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 181-217.

³³ I developed this theme in J.D. May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003).

³⁴ Both sides of this ambivalence are documented with detailed case studies by R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), and David Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society: Rethinking Public Religion in the Contemporary World* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

³⁵ For what follows, see Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); *id.*, *Holy War*,

may play constructive roles (though sometimes the foreignness of their theories and methods can exacerbate the fear of difference which is at the root of the conflict), but in the end reconciliation can only be achieved by the parties to the conflict themselves as their distinctive religious views of the world encounter one another, for these at one and the same time *rationalise* the conflict and *transcend* it by rediscovering their own resources and reasons for accepting the enemy's otherness. In the given situation, in which the conflict is irretrievably public and political, *both* the legitimization of the enmity that fuels the conflict *and* the ability to let go of this and confront oneself and one's enemy free of caricature and self-delusion are inseparably political *and* religious. The question then becomes: Can this 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?

3. 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,³⁶ 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.³⁷ This welcome conjuncture urgently needs further intensive study from both sides, however. Religious Studies, as

Holy Peace: How Religion Can Bring Peace to the Middle East (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁶ See *JAAR* 74 (2006), already referred to, and J.D. May, "The Dialogue of Religions: Source of Knowledge? Means of Peace?", *Current Dialogue* No. 43, July 2004, 11-18.

³⁷ In addition to the many-sided discussion in Petito and Hatzopoulos, *Religion in International Relations*, see Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil, eds., *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1996), and – especially valuable because of its detailed case studies – Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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’).³⁸ Even in cases of self-reflective participant observation and empathetic description there remains a reticence about accepting as ‘true’ the meanings and intentions that religious actors themselves attribute to their actions. Yet it is intentional actions (*Handlungen*) that constitute truth by their implicit requirement that they be meaningful and that their meanings be discernible and, if need be, defensible, so that actions can be approved of as ‘right’ because they conform to what is taken to be ‘true’. If language is the continuation of action by other means,³⁹ then it is meaningful actions themselves – that is, behaviours *and* the meanings attributed to them by actors – that are the basic units of the study of religions.

It is precisely these implicit meanings that are made explicit and ‘objectified’ when exposed to the pluralism of the – now global – public sphere, thus initiating a crisis of meaning for many religious traditions. As Mary Douglas insisted, all meanings are social meanings, and “the known cosmos is constructed for helping arguments of a practical kind”.⁴⁰ But 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. In such circumstances, it is undoubtedly advantageous for the social scientist to maintain an intellectual distance between the researcher and the truth claims being advanced by

³⁸ The most uncompromising proponent of this view is perhaps Robert A. Segal, see his *Explaining and Interpreting Religion: Essays on the Issue* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), and his contribution to the *JAAR* discussion, “All Generalizations are Bad: Postmodernism on Theories”, 157-171, in which he takes to task scholars such as Mark C. Taylor, Tomoko Masuzawa and even Russel McCutcheon.

³⁹ See H. Hörmann, *Meinen und Verstehen. Grundzüge einer psychologischen Semantik* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1978).

⁴⁰ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), xix; see 5, 8, 75, 122. I made use of her interpretation in J.D. May, “Consensus in Religion: An Essay in Fundamental Ecumenics”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 17 (1980), 407-431, and *Meaning, Consensus and Dialogue in Buddhist-Christian Communication: A Study in the Construction of Meaning* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1984), chapter 6.

subjects, but this need not entail that the student of religion must adopt an exclusively ‘outsider’ perspective.⁴¹ Perhaps it is the dawning realisation of this that is leading some scholars of religion with religious commitments to ‘come out’ and declare themselves ‘religious’ (though this is more likely to be the case when so-called ‘Eastern’ religions are in question).⁴² It has been argued that it is only by adopting the ‘insider’ perspective of those whose views of the world are at issue in situations of conflict – by ‘becoming’ in some real sense what we study – that we are able fully to understand the vehemence that characterises religiously motivated conflicts.⁴³

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’⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ There is a sense in which conflicts such as those in Northern Ireland 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

⁴¹ For a wide range of approaches to this problem see Russel T. McCutcheon, ed., *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1998).

⁴² As documented with relish by Cabezon in his *JAAR* article, 32-33.

⁴³ One of the boldest advocates of this approach has been Raimundo Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999, 3rd rev. ed.), but see also Donald Swearer, *Dialogue: The Key to Understanding Other Religions* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977).

⁴⁴ A theme that runs through the *JAAR* discussion.

⁴⁵ Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam*, graphically illustrates this point by his survey of Islamist websites, which reveal the agonising of uprooted Muslims whose religion has suddenly become a problem for them in the alien environs of the West – and is then propagated by them as *the* solution to all problems.

perspectives, so that the religious reasons that make political strategies and ethical positions ‘ours’ and not ‘theirs’ may become politically relevant.⁴⁶

If the ‘nation state’ is intrinsically local and ethnic (even if increasingly multicultural), the ‘market state’ which is now superseding it is orientated to a global economy which disregards cultural and geographical differences. The model of civil society developed by the democracies to frame the interests, initiatives and commitments of citizens in the public forum presupposes both a private sphere of face-to-face interaction and a public sphere neutral to all ‘comprehensive doctrines’ (Rawls) and devoid of ‘metaphysical thinking’ (Habermas). It is its very secularity that enables it to contain the comprehensive but distinctive ‘views of the world’ being represented in public debate by religious actors, though the forms now being taken by fundamentalist Islam and Christianity are receding into a global space of their own, detached from the public sphere in which real-world politics is carried on. Can there be – or need there be – any equivalent ‘secular’ context at the global level, with reference to which a ‘global civil society’ could take shape? Though defined by their cultures of origin and largely confined to the geographical areas to which they have spread, the religions, including the so-called ‘primal’ traditions of indigenous peoples, all make claims to definitive truth, are cosmic in scope and are intentionally universal – which is precisely why they now pose such a problem in international relations. The difficulty could be mitigated if two conditions were met: if the religions could learn to accommodate one another’s truth claims nonviolently, and if this could be done as a contribution to the shaping of a global public sphere. Religious Studies is more at home with the first of these, and as we have already dealt with it briefly we shall leave

⁴⁶ As an example, the case of ecology may be considered; see J.D. May, “Buddhists, Christians and Ecology”, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, ed., *Buddhism, Christianity and the Question of Creation: Karmic or Divine?* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 93-107; “‘Rights of the Earth’ and ‘Care for the Earth’: Two Paradigms for a Buddhist-Christian Ecological Ethic”, *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology Society* 21 (1994), 48-61; another example may be found in conceptions of human dignity and human rights, see J.D. May, “Human Dignity, Human Rights and Religious Pluralism: Buddhist and Christian Perspectives” [forthcoming in a volume edited by Donald Swearer in memory of David Chappell]; Linda Hogan and John D’Arcy May, “Constructing the Human: Dignity in Interreligious Dialogue”, Regina Ammicht-Quinn, Maureen Junker-Kenny and Elsa Tamez, eds., *The Discourse of Human Dignity* (London: SCM, *Concilium* 2, 2003), 78-89.

it aside here; it is the second condition, which is of more concern to International Relations, that now demands our attention.

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.⁴⁷ Civil society presupposes a civilised state in which it can 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.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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

⁴⁷ 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 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.

⁴⁸ For a constructive approach to the “normative refocusing of energy” needed to bring about a “new, nonviolent approach to international security”, see Richard Falk, *Religion and Humane Global Governance* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 138, 161; see also Falk, *Predatory Globalization: A Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 11; Herbert, *Religion and Civil Society*; and Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage, 1994).

⁴⁹ See Nigel Dower, *World Ethics: The New Agenda* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998); Iain Aitken, *The Ethics of Peace and War: From State Security to World Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); William Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

origin, and is therefore substantive and determinate, not formal and neutral.⁵⁰ The all-important point is that the problems we face are undeniably global, and our challenge is to develop a pluralism which does not simply abandon itself to relativism but welcomes many substantive theories, although and because they have their origins in different religious cosmologies,⁵¹ and seeks to test them against the problems identified as having global importance. The immense efforts of Max Weber to show how distinctive economic ethics may be correlated with (not: caused by!) 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.⁵²

This prospect, too, faces students of religion with the question: What is it, then, that makes religion not just a media event but a creator of lifeworlds, a determinant of what people are and how they act, both in private and in public? This gives rise to a still more urgent question: Can the religions learn to communicate non-violently with their respective 'others', even and especially when they are enemies? The liberal ideal of tolerance, indispensable as its contribution to civilising interreligious relations has been and continues to be, is inadequate to deal with such issues on a global scale, just as it has proved unable to contain the forces unleashed by racism, nationalism, gender injustice or destructive economic 'development'.⁵³ 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

⁵⁰ The point has been beautifully argued by Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), though not without controversy: see the review article by Linell Cady, "Secularism, Secularizing, and Secularization: Reflections on Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*", *JAAR* 73 (2005), 871-885.

⁵¹ A term deployed by Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict, Development and Civilization* (London: Sage, 1996).

⁵² Casanova, *Public Religions*, 232.

⁵³ See the thought-provoking article by Karl-Wilhelm Merks, "Toleranz – Minimalmoral oder Strukturmodell interkultureller Ethik?", Hamid Reza Yousefi and Klaus Fischer, eds., *Interkulturelle Orientierung. Grundlegung des Toleranz-Dialogs. Teil II: Angewandte Interkulturalität* (Nordhausen: Traugott Bautz, 2004), 223-244, especially his "Konzept einer gemeinsamen öffentlichen Ethik", 227.

exhaustion of the creative capacity of the secular project, especially as it is embodied in the political domain.⁵⁴

This sobering yet encouraging thought leads us to our conclusion.

4. 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. But besides being methodologically faulty such approaches are increasingly seen to be irresponsible. If nothing else, the ethical dimension of globalisation needs to be identified, thematised and agreed, and 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’ and its equivalents. 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.⁵⁵ These are ethical questions, implicit in the very notion of dialogue, and they cannot be solved in the abstract, from outside, but only in a practical engagement

⁵⁴ Richard Falk, “A Worldwide Religious Resurgence in an Era of Globalization and Apocalyptic Terrorism”, Petito and Hatzopoulos, *Religion in International Relations*, 190-191.

⁵⁵ As Cabezón puts it, varying a theme of J.Z. Smith, the Other may be problematic “when he is TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US, or when he claims to BE-US”, but “it is equally true that the Other becomes problematic when *we* claim to BE-THEM”, “The Discipline and Its Other”, 33.

with otherness as it touches truth. One might venture to call this an ‘ecumenical’ study of religions in a sense that would acknowledge the problem-solving and conflict-resolving potential implicit in the very fact of interreligious relations.

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 of a bleak future. 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 with some purchase in its attempts to establish the bases of civilised behaviour in the global public forum. 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.⁵⁶

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

⁵⁶ Falk, “A Worldwide Religious Resurgence”, 193.

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 the 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. The study of religions in Australia is well placed to give a lead in meeting this challenge.

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