

# “Religious Expansion” and Foreign Policy

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The very name of one of the programs implemented by the Carnegie Moscow Center, “Religion, Society and Security,” symbolizes the strange and contradictory nature of the processes taking place in the world. The West was stunned by the sudden awakening of Islam at the end of the last century. At the start of the new century, religion (not only Islam, but also Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism) has become a legitimate factor in political activity, thus reminding us that it is more than simply another component of the landscape of civilization on which history has taken place.

Recalling the Middle Ages, religion has become a part of worldly affairs more than ever today. The secular approach is no longer seen as the one and only road to follow. Stable channels of communication have taken shape between religion and political and public events. Religion intervenes in foreign policy. “Faith-based diplomacy can be a useful tool of foreign policy,” former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said. “The resurgence of religious feeling will continue to influence world events.”<sup>1</sup> Religion is present in civil society, and almost every country declares its loyalty to religion. Whether in the Muslim East or the Russian Federation, it plays an important part in ensuring stability and also in giving the authorities their legitimacy. The Russian Orthodox Church is an unofficial but influential player on the Russian and broader Eurasian political stage. From time to time the Russian Orthodox Church practically performs specific tasks for the secular authorities (although the church officials would never admit this).

Over the last two decades, mankind has been undergoing the “test of globalization,” which many see as a threat to individual ethnic cultural and religious identities. Cultural differences have become blurred and the information tidal wave and computerization have contributed to mutual cultural penetration. Globalization implies the development of a universal system of values and views.

It appears, at first glance, as though all religions would take a wholly negative view of globalization with its universalist thinking that is the antithesis of individual religious tradition. The one exception is Protestantism (particularly, its American variant), which encourages globalization. However, in reality the situation is more complex. Catholicism, Buddhism, and Hinduism all have their own mechanisms for joining and cautiously mingling with the globalization current. These religions are not unambiguously negative in their response to the universalist challenge. Such is not the case of Islam and Orthodoxy, which intrinsically reject globalization, seeing it above all as political and cultural expansion by the West, which they think pursues the strategic aim of subjugating the Muslim world and Russia and therefore needs to first distort and then destroy their religious identities.

Muslim ideologues have responded with their own globalization vision based on Islamic tradition, which in their view will sooner or later become global as all the peoples of the world come to embrace Islam, in accordance with Islamic teaching.

The challenges of globalization and the responses offered by the different religions are becoming an axis of humanity’s political and cultural existence. Elements of the notorious “conflict of civilizations” are evident here, but more than anything else what has emerged is the complex and contradictory interaction of traditions, in which each individual religion is forced to adapt to globalization, while at the same time adapting globalization to its own vision.

Protection of human rights is one of the pillars of globalization, which is inconceivable without the priority of the individual. The Muslim world, confronted with this issue, too, responded by coming up with its own Islam-

based solution, proclaimed in 1990 in Cairo. The ideologues of Orthodox Christianity are also looking for their own version of human rights.

Religion often becomes a means for expressing social and political protest. This takes its most acute and consistent form in the Muslim world. In practically every Muslim country or region where Muslims live, there is a religious opposition covering the whole spectrum from moderate to extremist. Political Islam offers an alternative for organizing the state and society and engages millions of Muslims in its fight. This alternative has various national and regional variations, but they all share the ultimate goal of establishing a system based on the principles of the Koran and the Sharia law.

Political Islam is primarily radical and its followers are always ready to enter into conflict with the governments in power, which in their eyes have betrayed the tenets of Islam. Islam has become one of the most powerful and effective tools for social mobilization, as we have seen in numerous cases over the last thirty years, from Iran to Russia's North Caucasus and from China's Xinjiang province to Europe, where the number of Muslims now approaches 30 million.

Relations between Muslims and the West have become more complicated. Muslims' relations with Russia and China are also far from simple. At the epicenter of the contradictions are the Middle East, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. A tense situation has prevailed in the North Caucasus for almost twenty years now, and the situation in Central Asia is also complex. Zbigniew Brzezinski once drew a "crescent of instability" on the geopolitical map of the world. Today's pattern of instability has long since spread beyond the crescent and taken on a much larger form. Understanding the complexities of these various crisis situations is impossible without an adequate dialectical understanding of the religious factor.

Of course, the confrontations taking place in and around the Muslim world do not arise from religion alone. The conflicts in Southern Asia, the Middle East, and the countries of the former Soviet Union all have their own causes, but religion is an important tool for the different politi-

cal forces involved, and its use inevitably spreads these conflicts further and makes them more serious.

There are various interpretations of the ongoing conflicts in the Muslim world. Many Muslims place the blame for *all* conflicts and tension in their lands on the West, the Soviet Union, and then Russia (for provoking the wars in Chechnya). In reality, however, the causes of these various conflicts go much deeper and are rooted not just in external intervention, but also in internal factors – the political and socio-economic situations in Muslim countries and societies.

The internal crisis in Islam became much more acute at the turn of the century. Rival interpretations of Islam and the struggles between the various Islamic ideologues have aggravated the situation in the Muslim community. These debates are taking place everywhere. In Russia, they are extremely acute and painful in the North Caucasus. The internal crisis in Islam cannot be dissociated from Islam's relations with the West: supporters of modernization are labeled hypocrites – *munafiq* – (an accusation that has been around since the times of the Prophet Mohammed) and are condemned for deforming “true Islam” and abandoning the faith's dogmas.

Each conflict has its own specific nature, but we can ascertain the existence of a single conflict-related field, which can be compared to a system of connecting vessels. The internal conflict in Afghanistan, for example, is one of the links in a long chain. The conflict in Afghanistan in turn creates tension in the southern region of Central Asia. The Taliban movement is now threatening Pakistan. The rise of radical Islam in Pakistan worsens that country's relations with India. The crisis over Iran heightens tension in the Middle East, and the situation in Iraq has a negative impact on relations between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. Those are only some of the examples.

It is not possible to come up with a single strategy to resolve all of these different conflicts, but it is possible to formulate a general strategic vision of the situation in the Muslim world and, in particular, to understand the nature of Islamic radicalism, which is the ferment actively

flowing through the connecting vessels, in order to determine the extent to which it is an objectively inevitable phenomenon, and to identify the circumstances in which it is being used as a tool.

Understanding Islamic radicalism is the key to understanding the nature of terrorism and finding effective solutions that will *prevent* it. I deliberately italicize this word because the fight against terrorism as such can only have limited success.

Despite the widespread belief, September 11, 2001, did not fundamentally change the situation in the world. The main thing the terrorist attack did was to suddenly wake people up to the fact that world had changed. However, the world began changing long before tragedy struck New York. Its historical and cultural roots go back a long way. The seeds of imminent transformation were sown in the 1970s, when, one after another, Muslim countries faced the failure of economic reforms drawn up by foreign consultants and advisers, and it became clear that simply imitating foreign models was not going to work. The changes could be said to have begun with the Islamic revolution in 1978-1979 in Iran. Many at that time saw the fall of the seemingly stable and successful regime led by the Iranian shah and the rise to power of Ayatollah Khomeini as a break with the established pattern of African and Asian countries' development. The same goes for the Islamicization of the Palestinian resistance movement, which culminated in the election victory in 2005. The Hamas Islamic freedom movement, periodic flare-ups of activity by Hezbollah in Lebanon, the 1990-1991 civil war in Algeria, and the Taliban victory in Afghanistan in 1996 – all were accompanied by the excesses of terrorism, which gradually became a familiar weapon in the political struggle.

Comparisons of today's terrorism with past examples – Irish or Basque terrorists, or the terrorism of Russian revolutionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – are possible but inaccurate. Today's international terrorism is a new phenomenon. This terrorism pursues geopolitical goals, and its ideology is built on the most radical interpretations of religion. International terrorist organizations have taken shape, and there is a “terror-

ist environment” united by a common international religion, which some specialists think now embraces hundreds of thousands or even millions of people. Terrorists – the ideologues and the executors – see themselves beyond the framework of politics, the laws of war, and morals, because they are convinced that they are responsible before God alone, who authorizes them to carry out even the cruelest acts. This feeling of sacred responsibility gives them a special status in their own eyes, but it also demands their readiness to sacrifice themselves, and this in turn produces the phenomenon of suicide terrorists. Those who try to depict these people solely as “thugs and drug addicts” fail to understand the real problem of terrorism and are therefore unable to develop efficient strategies for fighting it.

Is this terrorism a temporary and transitory phenomenon, or will it soon become a familiar, “routine” form of political action? This is a critically important question. Given the protracted and seemingly endless nature of the conflicts and crises connected to the situation in the Muslim world and the rapid increase of Muslim penetration into non-Muslim environments, we can suppose that, unfortunately, terrorism still has considerable reserves on which to draw. Fears are growing that terrorists could use weapons of mass destruction. This is all the more dangerous as “countries had not been able to adapt quickly to the new challenges that were being brought about due to the accelerating pace of globalization, such as rapidly developing cross-border trade and the availability of nuclear materials, technology, information, and expertise, as well as the increasing prominence of non-governmental entities, including corrupt groups, organized crime, and terrorist organizations.”<sup>2</sup> One of these entities is international terrorism, which today is at the very least already able to threaten the use of weapons of mass destruction and tomorrow might turn words into action.

We could describe what we are witnessing today as a sort of an “asymmetrical response” by Muslims to their failures in the economic and political competition with America, Europe, and to some extent Russia. Islamic radicalism offers compensation for the Muslim community’s disadvantages in world affairs. Finally, it is becoming a means of self-affirmation for the

Muslim immigrants who are penetrating ever deeper into Europe.<sup>3</sup> It is not by chance that some radical Islamic ideologues think that the new Islamic inspiration, the "Islamic call," will reach the Muslim world from Europe.

A greater religious awareness and a growing level of political activity under religious slogans manifest themselves in crisis situations. Some Eurasian countries, including the countries of the former Soviet Union, are going through a process of the demodernization of society, the economy, and the education system. Relations in society are increasingly regulated by traditions, both ethno-cultural and religious. This is the case in the Central Asian countries and in the Russian North Caucasus. Religion offers people a way out of their difficulties. It is noteworthy that secular governments are also turning now to religion and trying to use it for their own purposes. In Russia and the CIS this is most noticeable in Chechnya and Tajikistan. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon both display elements of religious charisma in their behavior.

Along Russia's southern borders a new Muslim enclave is gradually forming, in which social relations are increasingly shaped by traditional ethno-religious norms. The clergy, loyal to the authorities, and the Islamic opposition both support the same goal of establishing Sharia law in society and do so increasingly openly. Some prominent secular politicians speak up in favor of the observance of Islamic laws and codes of behavior. The topic most often discussed in this respect is polygamy, which is a widespread practice among well-off Muslims.

The current crisis is likely to lead to a strengthening of the Russian Orthodox Church's influence in Russia. The public trusts the church as an institution far more than they trust the State Duma or the ruling United Russia party. The Orthodox Church makes no secret of its desire to influence society and the state, proposing its own blueprint for the country's organization and defending the idea that Russia has its own path (reminiscent of the "Islamic alternative"). Clearly, if social tension increases, and the authorities have a reason to fear this, the church could absorb the discontent and act as a mediator between the ruling establishment and society.

Furthermore, the state authorities can benefit from interaction with the Russian Orthodox Church, unofficially gaining additional legitimacy from it. However, at the same time, such closeness is unlikely to increase respect for the church, which could come to be seen as the ally of the very administrators and bureaucrats in whom the public have lost faith.

In this context, one cannot help but notice the level of activity of Patriarch Kirill, who, following the example of President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, spends much time travelling around the country and abroad, speaking with various groups of the population, senior government officials, and military bosses, effectively breaking down the barrier between social and political activity and religious service. The patriarch is becoming the symbol of the church's politicization, though he publicly denies this.

The Russian Orthodox Church's close relations with the state cause hidden (and sometimes open) irritation among Russia's Muslims, who feel that the country is not observing the principles of separation of church and state, and equality of the different religions.

At the turn of the century, people became increasingly aware of their ties to particular religious traditions and cultures. Islam sparked this return to religion, to a large extent triggering the religious revivals underway in Europe and America. The West had lost much of its religious identity, but when faced with the threat of a different religious force, that of Islam, it responded to the challenge by attempting in an almost instinctive way to revive its own religious identity. It is interesting in this respect that many Muslims do not see the conflict with Europeans and Americans as a conflict of civilizations, but consider it a conflict between Islam and the "Godless" West, or between Islam and *kufr* (non-belief). They have made well-known calls for Europeans to return to their own religion.

The religious revival in the countries of the former Soviet Union was a response to Soviet atheism. It was very active at first, but by the start of this decade had lost some of its energy. However, the last few years have seen religion once again growing stronger, but now this is



not so much a religious revival as a “religious expansion” – religion’s encroachment into all areas of life, and this is a process that could go significantly farther.

## Notes

- 1 M. Albright, “Faith and Diplomacy,” *The Rev. of Faith & Intern. Affairs* 4, № 2 (Fall 2006): P. 9.
- 2 A. Arbatov and V. Dvorkin, eds., Carnegie Moscow Center *At the Nuclear Threshold* (Moscow, 2007), P. 69.
- 3 See: M. Emerson, ed., *Ethno-Religious Conflict in Europe: Typologies of Radicalisation in Europe’s Muslim Communities* (Brussels: CEPS, 2009).

