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Global Religious Forces and Conflict Resolution: A Book Review

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Review article of two books:

1. Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, 248 pp., USD 29.95, hardcover).
 2. Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011, 276 pp., USD 25.95, hardcover).
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Abstract

In Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict, author Ara Norenzayan tracks the rise of religion in human communities, from the small deities of hunter-gatherer tribes to the big gods of more-modern societies. He argues that while the development of moral supernatural agents was a large contributor to our cooperative, mainly anonymous way of living, their influence is now waning in the face of secular institutions. In God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics, authors Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah maintain that religion is alive and well, especially in politics, where it has enjoyed a resurgence in the last 40 years. This review compares and contrasts these two books, presenting a discussion of their main points as well as what we should know about religion when formulating conflict resolution strategies and developing international policy.

Keywords: *Big Gods*; *God's Century*; cooperation; religious resurgence; conflict resolution

1. Introduction

Religion has become a much-debated topic in recent years. Some argue that religion is resurging,¹ some argue it is declining,² and certainly, there has been an obvious and documented increase in religion-related conflict in at least the last decade.³

Ara Norenzayan, author of *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, notes that although “most people in most societies in the world still are, and always have been, deeply religious,”⁴ religiosity has decreased in certain regions, namely,

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¹ For example, Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

² For example, Nigel Barber, columnist for *Psychology Today* and *Huffington Post*, in *Why Atheism will Replace Religion: The Triumph of Earthly Pleasures over Pie in the Sky* (Kindle edition, 2012).

³ “Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High,” Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, accessed August 6, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>.

⁴ Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 2.

in democratic, modern, Western societies. Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, authors of *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, claim that religiosity is increasing, and state that as of 2000, 64 percent of the world adhered to Catholic and Protestant Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (an increase of 14 percent from 1900), and that about 80 percent of the world believes in [a] God.⁵ Interestingly, they suggest that the factors Norenzayan lists as contributing to religion's decline are the very same that are facilitating its resurgence.

Believing in God, however, and behaving in ways that show God matters to you are not the same. Ronald Inglehart (chair of the World Values Survey, which compiles social data from 80 countries) concurs: How important God is in someone's life "makes a lot of difference, not just on immediate attitudes on abortion, divorce, etc., but on national pride, child rearing, attitudes toward authority and many other things that are not obviously linked, but empirically are very strongly linked."⁶ For example, many people who would say they believe in God still might not attend worship services, or they might choose to get married by a state official rather than by a religious official. For strong believers, however, their faith informs everything they do.

Exploring faith's global effects and how it can be such a powerful force for change provided part of the motivation for this review, as did an interest in conflict resolution. Due to the concerns of space and time, however, this review provides only a general overview of some of the concepts in *God's Century* and *Big Gods*; interested readers are urged to follow up with readings and research of their own.

Regardless of whether religion is declining or resurging, one cannot ignore its extreme ability for positive and negative change in the world. The authors of both books assume, as do I, that democracy (despite some flaws) and equal rights for all are general conditions to aspire to, and both *Big Gods* and *God's Century* document religion's role in working toward (and against) these goals.

Ara Norenzayan, author of *Big Gods*, states that as countries become more modern, democratic, and industrialized, society changes from needing religion for encouraging cooperation among large groups (prosociality) to depending on trustworthy secular institutions like the justice system to achieve this purpose. "These societies with atheist majorities – some of the most cooperative, peaceful, and prosperous in the world – climbed religion's ladder, then kicked it away."⁷ Others before Norenzayan have supported the 'secularization thesis' (which, developed in the 1960s, maintains that modernity and secularization go hand in hand) – notably Peter Berger (who later renounced it)⁸ and Steve Bruce (who still upholds it),⁹ but Norenzayan is not arguing for or against that theory. Instead, he posits and convincingly shows that large-scale religion, through its moral supernatural "watchers," contributed to the emergence of large cooperative groups, which ultimately developed into modern society.

Recently, however, democracy, modernization, and globalization (DMG henceforth)

⁵ Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2011.). Duffy Toft et al. actually give two percentages for this figure: on p. 2, they say that 79 percent of the world believes in God and on p. 219 they say that over 80 percent believes in God.

⁶ "Is There a Global Resurgence of Religion?" Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, accessed August 4, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/05/08/is-there-a-global-resurgence-of-religion/>.

⁷ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 9.

⁸ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1967) and Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999).

⁹ Steve Bruce, *Secularization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

have contributed to religion's waning influence in public life in some regions of the world, especially Scandinavia. In regions where people cannot trust their institutions, citizens tend to retain their religious beliefs. One exception to this pattern that both books note is the United States, where separation of church and state is written into its constitution, yet where religion still heavily influences politics. They explain that this situation exists because the separation between rich and poor (that is, those who are struggling to survive and those who are not) in the US is wide compared to that separation in Northern European countries.

Duffy Toft, Philpott, and Shah also hold that the DMG factors are exactly what have strengthened religion, especially in the last four decades. Using data from Freedom House (and other sources), a global organization that promotes democracy and human rights and rates countries on a scale of 1 to 7 as Free, Partly Free, and Not Free, the authors of *God's Century* conclude that as countries become more democratic and religion becomes less (consensually or conflictually) entwined with the state, religion can develop a more independent voice to win people to its teachings, do good works, and participate in public life, including politics. And when religion is more able to express its views publically and politically, it can do so in ways that do not lead to the violence born of repression. "When religious actors are given substantial independence from the state, they are given the capacity to perform a range of positive functions in society."¹⁰

Both books present excellent accounts of religious history, *Big Gods* tracing its cultural development and *God's Century* its political development. The former chronicles the emergence of (mainly) monotheistic religions, which usurped the small deities of hunter-gatherer tribes as a way to encourage collaboration and trust among larger and more-agrarian societies. The latter chronicles the enmeshment of church and state until about the 1700s, then a three-century decline in religious influence on state and society, and now a religio-political resurgence in the last 40 years, sparked mainly by the Iranian Revolution.

Duffy Toft et al. argue that this resurgence shows no sign of abating because the DMG factors that stimulated it continue to spread across the world. They offer four themes of religious resurgence:

1. Religious people and communities have transitioned from private devotion to public engagement.
2. The crises brought on by secular ideologies (repression, food and goods shortages, dictatorships, civil war, poverty) have led people to return to religion.
3. Religious communities were/are seeking more freedom through a separation of church and state.
4. Religious communities have embraced/are embracing DMG forces.

Another concept central to *God's Century* is the level of *independence* of religious authority and political authority, which is key to how religion comports itself vis-à-vis the state (these days, interactions usually follow that dynamic, compared to centuries ago, when the state often had to be concerned with how to comport itself vis-à-vis religion).

Norenzayan summarizes his arguments into eight principles,¹¹ and *Big Gods*' chapters are generally presented in that order:

1. Watched people are nice people.
2. Religion is more in the situation than in the person.

¹⁰ Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, 217.

¹¹ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, xiii.

3. Hell is stronger than heaven.
4. Trust people who trust in God.
5. Religious actions speak louder than words.
6. Unworshipped Gods are impotent Gods.
7. Big Gods for Big Groups.
8. Religious groups cooperate in order to compete.

He then includes a chapter on religious cooperation and religious conflict, and one on cooperation without God.

Each book approaches its research and arguments differently. In addition to historical data, *Big Gods* makes substantial use of data from experimental data, such as game theory, much of it conducted by Norenzayan with others, to determine how people respond to religious issues, often without knowing the experiment is studying religion. *God's Century* relies more on historical data, such as the increase in suicide bombings or accounts of church-state interaction in the Middle Ages, and the authors often use this data to present their arguments and conclusions in tables and diagrams. Each book also discusses why some religions are active in pro-democracy and human rights movements, why some are not, and why some even actively work to oppose such efforts.

While I am cognizant of and concerned about strife in other parts of the world, this review focuses mainly on discussion of conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), a region whose struggles seem more urgent, and lately, certainly more deadly. Similarly, although both books explain the history of many religions in most parts of the world, this review focuses on their discussions of Islam and Christianity, as interaction within the MENA region, and between MENA and Western countries, is of great concern today. The hope is that international policymakers and those working in conflict resolution will consider the books' suggestions on how to resolve, or at least mitigate, religious conflict. *Big Gods* and *God's Century* are rich with examples of countries and societies that have followed religious and non-religious trajectories, all of which give compelling evidence that regardless of whether one believes religion is waning or winning, it has been, is now, and shall be – for the foreseeable future at least – a major force in human culture.

2. Discussion

2.1. Religion's ascendance, à la Big Gods

Norenzayan of *Big Gods* posits (although he cautions that the research is preliminary) that belief in big gods gained ascendancy because of the following five factors:

1. belief in moral supernatural monitoring,
2. credible displays of sincere faith,
3. synchrony in ritual dance and music,
4. cultivation of self-control, and
5. fictive kinship.

These factors helped create strong, prosocial communities of believers whom others gained trust in, and who in many cases joined that faith. Norenzayan also discusses the cognitive aspects of belief, but in this review I focus on the cultural ones, because understanding those aspects will help us better understand and thus hopefully reduce religious conflict.¹²

¹² Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 114-115.

The first two factors are the most important in how big-god religions grew, claims Norenzayan. Our original societal groups (small hunter-gatherer tribes) developed deities that were essentially unconcerned about people's moral behavior because people monitored each other within their small circles, and would hold each other accountable for transgressions. About 12,000 years ago, communities became more agricultural and thus larger because they had a dependable supply of food. Around the same time, the concept of supernatural watchers emerged, and Norenzayan posits that this was to keep people in line in these larger societies, where contact with human watchers (that is, people who knew each other) might occur less frequently.

Norenzayan suggests that more and more people came to believe in these big gods partly because of what his colleague Joseph Henrich calls "credibility-enhancing displays," including acts of devotion involving self-torture, elaborate rituals, and adhering to restrictions on behavior.¹³ This line of thinking essentially follows the notion that 'actions speak louder than words,' and that religious actions like the ones above are potent signals that people who participate in such displays are sincere believers. This sincere belief also signals that 1) such people can be trusted and 2) perhaps there is merit in their beliefs.

While it may be difficult to fathom that practices involving painful rituals such as multiple piercings would be willingly followed, Norenzayan (and others he cites) hypothesizes that such sincere displays of faith — especially by group leaders — helped spread the religion.¹⁴ While not all believers of all religions participate in such extreme rituals, virtually all religious adherents follow various guidelines on sexual behavior, food, dress, and/or appearance — guidelines that can also be viewed as socio-cultural influences that may be unexamined assumptions about how one lives in society.¹⁵

Regarding Norenzayan's third factor, synchrony in ritual dance and music, other data backs up his claims about their cohesive attributes. Evidence shows that music reduces signs of stress,¹⁶ and most people have likely had experience with music engendering strong emotions. Combine such effects in a shared-belief setting, and it is not surprising that people join in solidarity whether for religion, a social cause, or war. Norenzayan cites research that links synchrony to greater self-regulation, the fourth factor. "[S]elf-control processes are an important element of social cohesion,"¹⁷ and religion is a social phenomenon. If the people in your religious community are (or are not) doing something, you likely will (or will not) either—partly because your faith instructs you so, but also because you are experiencing social pressure to follow the same norms. This factor also links back to factor two (credible displays of sincere faith), and thus the factors of pro-social belief seem to be mutually reinforcing.

Social cohesion also relates to *Big Gods'* last aspect of successful prosocial religion, fictive kinship. This concept essentially means that we consider non-related people that we have intense prolonged contact with as sisters and brothers. Fictive kinship could apply to close friends (one often hears the term "She [or he] is like a sister [or brother] to me.") or to religious associates (in many languages and religions, the word for members of the

¹³ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 98.

¹⁴ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 99.

¹⁵ I thank Erin Wilson for her insight on this issue.

¹⁶ For example, Christine Carter, *Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2010), 98.

¹⁷ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 116.

same religious group is ‘brother’ or ‘sister’). Norenzayan posits that fictive kinship “reminds believers of the proper social norms to follow when [interacting with] others.”¹⁸

Since those first permanent agricultural settlements of hundreds or thousands, human communities have grown to millions strong. “Total strangers regularly depend on each other for livelihood, economic exchange, shelter, and defense,”¹⁹ states Norenzayan. But strangers in continual contact can eventually become friends (or enemies; more on this later). People have always sought connections with each other; in fact, we suffer without it. Numerous studies have documented that even if babies’ physical needs are met, they do not thrive without social contact,²⁰ and studies on adult humans in isolation also show negative brain effects.²¹ Thus, although many of us likely only know a handful, if any, of the thousands of people who serve in our militaries, we are likely familiar with the staff at our local market. It is because of such desire for connection that Norenzayan cites customers’ increasing trust in travelling Muslim merchants as one reason for the spread of Islam.²² Continual interaction with the same people can often result in one party internalizing or adopting the other’s beliefs. As those beliefs spread, a prosocial community can emerge. Continual interaction can also generate conflict, however, as has been shown time and again over history.

2.2. *Religio-political interaction, according to God’s Century*

When a religion becomes powerful enough, it can challenge or be challenged by the state that houses it, and *God’s Century* documents that religion-state conflict has existed since the emergence of each as a separate entity. The progression of the relationship between religion and state around the world has been well studied, thus I do not elaborate on it here. Central to this review, however, is Duffy Toft et al.’s argument that how a religion participates (or not) in promoting democracy and equal rights depends on its level of independence from the state. The authors present four types of religio-political interaction: *high and consensual*, *high and conflictual*, *low and consensual*, and *low and conflictual*, all of which incorporate varying levels of independence and all of which are subject to change as political, religious, and social dynamics change.

The first type of relationship, *high and consensual*, is characterized by most modern states in the Americas and Europe, as well by New Zealand and Australia, where “a liberal democratic constitution [exists] that institutionalizes freedom of religion and disestablishment.”²³ The authors also include in this category some mid-twentieth-century Latin American states where Catholic churches were allowed consensual independence but not Protestant churches. As an example of the second type, *high and conflictual*, the authors cite Muslim-majority Turkey, which became officially secular with the formation of the Republic in 1923, and implements restrictions on all religions, although it has loosened these to some extent in the face of potential EU accession. Duffy Toft et al. also place in this category Indonesia under former president Suharto.

Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are examples of *low and consensual* religious and

¹⁸ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 117-118.

¹⁹ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 4.

²⁰ http://thebrain.mcgill.ca/flash/capsules/histoire_bleu06.html

²¹ John T. Cacioppo, Louise C. Hawkey, Greg J. Norman, and Gary G. Berntson, “Social Isolation,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, accessed on August 5, 2014,

<http://psychology.uchicago.edu/people/faculty/cacioppo/CHNB2011.pdf>.

²² Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 58.

²³ Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century*, 39.

political independence, where “the dominant religious community [benefits from] extensive legal prerogatives, while the religious body legitimates the authority of the state.”²⁴ Note the word “dominant”; other religions also exist in these countries, but they do not enjoy the same privileges, and in fact may be actively suppressed. In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist *sangha* is the favored son. The last type of church-state independence in Duffy Toft et al.’s analysis is *low and conflictual*, such as between most Arab governments today and conservative Muslim groups, as well as between Communist states and Orthodox Christian sects. In these cases, “states have dominated and altogether subordinated religious actors, depriving them of any meaningful autonomy.”²⁵

In explaining religious and political separation, *God’s Century* stresses that “the independence of religious and political authority should not be confused with the influence of religion on politics or with contact between religion and state.” For example, the US “is simultaneously the state where religious authority is arguably the most independent in the world and the state whose religious actors are some of the most politically influential.”²⁶ According to US legislation, a “church” (and its leaders) cannot engage in “substantial lobbying” or donate money to political campaigns, but a “religious organization” can. But because the legislation is vague, the US Freedom from Religion Foundation (FFRF) reports that it receives continual complaints of churches engaging in political activity.²⁷ Interestingly, the US government had not been pursuing violations of this sort, and was engaged in a court case with the FFRF to resume doing so. In early August 2014, the FFRF won its case, and the Internal Revenue Service, responsible for tax collection and tax law enforcement in the US, will once again be investigating “tax-exempt churches that engage in illegal electioneering.”²⁸

2.3. *Who supports democracy, à la God’s Century*

The forces of democracy have been greatly assisted in many cases by religious leaders and their congregations. Duffy Toft et al. explain that religions in a *high and conflictual* situation are most likely and best able to work for positive change; indeed, the autonomy they enjoy has often been achieved “only through [their] firm resistance to a state that is determined to suppress [them].”²⁹ (In a *high and consensual* situation, high levels of democracy and human rights already exist, and in a *low and consensual* or *low and conflictual* situation, religions are either too repressed or too entwined with the state to offer (or want to offer) much resistance to anti-democratic actions.) Note also that a religion that is supported in some countries may be suppressed in others, which is why religious activism varies greatly within and among regions and religions. As an example of this situation, Duffy Toft et al. highlight South America, where some Anglican and Catholic churches supported democratic movements and some did not.

²⁴ Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century*, 41

²⁵ Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century*, 42

²⁶ Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century*, 38.

²⁷ See the FFRF’s “State/Church FAQ”, at <http://ffrf.org/faq/state-church/item/14005-churches-and-political-lobbying-activities>. The FFRF is a self-described “nontheist” organization that works to protect “the constitutional principle of the separation of state and church,” (yet displays various atheist slogans and promotions on its website). For succinct definitions of the terms in this paragraph, see Joanne Fritz, “What’s the Difference Between a Church and a Religious Organization?” <http://nonprofit.about.com/od/faqsthebasics/a/The-Difference-Between-A-Church-And-A-Religious-Organization.htm>, which also provides a link to the relevant legislation. Both webpages accessed on August 7, 2014.

²⁸ See “FFRF Anti-church electioneering victory is final,” accessed August 18, 2014, <http://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/21076-ffrf-anti-church-electioneering-victory-is-final>.

²⁹ Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century*, 39.

Level of independence is not the only reason religious actors do or do not support pro-democracy movements; political theology is another. *God's Century* devotes much of its discussion to explaining how religion has resurged because religious actors are reinterpreting what it means to be a believer. Religious people the world over are engaging in more-politically and -civically involved practices, as instructed by their leaders or religious texts. As one of a number of examples, the authors discuss the Second Vatican Council, convened between 1962 and 1965 (during secularization's ascendance, interestingly), when Pope John XXIII gathered his bishops from around the world to discuss the Catholic Church's relationship to modern society. As a result, the Church "proclaim[ed] human rights, peace, and economic development [and religious freedom] with an authority, force, and philosophical and theological foundation that [it] had not previously applied to these concepts."³⁰ Three things led to this sea change: the Catholic Church's experiences of religious freedom in the US, European countries easing up on their religious suppression after World War II, and new thinking about religious freedom among Catholic scholars — previous to 1962, the Catholic Church still officially held its (literally) medieval philosophy that Catholicism was the only legitimate religion.³¹ Then, because the Church wielded a global influence through its bishops, these new beliefs were transmitted internationally relatively quickly, although with varying levels of success, depending on the level of religio-political interaction and leaders' own level of agreement with the new goals. These days, technology also plays a large role in mobilizing a populace. By now, it is well known how Twitter and Facebook contributed to the Arab Spring uprisings, and recently, there has been discussion of how terrorist groups are using social media to attract new followers.³²

After Vatican II, pursuit of the new goals was aided considerably by Pope John Paul II, which brings us to a third, less-discussed factor in how religions (or any group) mobilize around an idea: a leader's charisma. While acknowledging the numerous religious actors who have challenged established regimes in fighting for democracy and human rights (e.g., Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, El Salvadorean archbishop Oscar Romero), Duffy Toft et al. give only passing credit to the leaders themselves, focusing more on the effects of their respective theologies. But ideas (good or bad) need engaging leaders to carry them out, and both *God's Century* and *Big Gods* lack discussion on the characteristics of an enigmatic leader. A political situation also contributes to how and whether people will mobilize around a leader, and more discussion of the interplay between a religious actor, an ideology, and social circumstances would have been enlightening.

2.4. *Who Agitates for Change, à la God's Century*

Partly because of Catholicism's revised theology, but also because of its sheer numbers and spread around the globe, Catholics have been the most active of all religious actors in fighting for democracy and human rights. Duffy Toft et al. compare the faiths of leading religious actors who worked for positive global change between 1972 and 2009, and Catholics come out on top by far: 36 Catholic actors played a leading or supporting role in countries undergoing democratization, compared to 19 Protestant, 12 Muslim, four Orthodox, and one Hindu actor(s).³³

³⁰ Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, 111.

³¹ Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, 112.

³² "Terrorist Group al-Qaeda Launched Twitter Account," *The Daily Mail*, accessed August 19, 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2436497/Terrorist-group-al-Qaeda-launched-twitter-account.html>.

³³ Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, 101.

Compared to Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, there is not much discussion of Judaism in either book, especially in *God's Century*, and its authors explain why. Israel is the world's only Jewish-majority state, and regardless of its other issues, has been a democracy since its inception in 1948, and categorized by Freedom House as "Free" since then. Jews in the rest of the world reside mostly in France and the US – stable, democratic countries. Therefore, simply because of where they live, Jews have generally not been part of groups agitating for social justice.³⁴

Although *Big Gods* and *God's Century* authors do discuss atheism (with Norenzayan citing research noting that if one "considered [atheists] a 'religious' group, they would be the fourth-largest one in the world"³⁵), there is no discussion in either book about what could be called 'spirituality' or a general 'search for meaning.' There is anecdotal evidence in non-religious circles of increasing interest in such things as meditation, energy work, or chakras, a surge that Ronald Inglehart also notes: "So, where we find, in the World Values Survey, declining emphasis in the rich countries on traditional religious beliefs, we find growing concern for the meaning and purpose of life."³⁶ Peter Berger notes this too, calling such inquiries "part of the phenomenon of religion, of what is clearly religious but outside the doors of the church."³⁷ Although such 'New Age' seekers may not be agitating for democratic change as an organized group, a mention of these types of beliefs would not be remiss in books documenting the history and discussing the currency of religious forces and beliefs.

2.5. *Religious Conflict, à la Big Gods and God's Century*

Big Gods and *God's Century* authors stress the fact that religion and its actors can both promote peace and cause conflict. Norenzayan gives three ways the latter can occur:

1. Varying levels of distrust of people who do not share one's belief system.
2. The social cohesion of one religious group excluding/being intolerant of other groups.
3. Ignoring or being unaware of a religion's sacred values.³⁸
4. In today's conflicts in MENA and in this region's conflicts with the West, all three paths seem well trodden, and all three also reflect Duffy Toft et al.'s view that suppressing religion can result in violence. Despite (or perhaps because of) the coverage of events in MENA of late, I think that many people in the West do not understand how repressive many of the governments in the MENA region actually are of religion, including Islam. Anecdotally, a group of university-educated, engaged Canadian citizens showed that a high percentage believe that most or all governments in MENA are strongly supportive of Islam – in a way that could be categorized as consensually integrated. This thinking, however, ignores the political reality:

"Before the Arab Spring, government restrictions on religion and social hostilities involving religion were higher in the Middle East and North Africa than in any other region of the world. Government restrictions in the region remained high in 2011 [and 2012, the latest year studied], while social hostilities markedly increased."³⁹

³⁴ Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, p. 104.

³⁵ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 70.

³⁶ "Is There a Global Resurgence of Religion?," Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/05/08/is-there-a-global-resurgence-of-religion/>, accessed August 4, 2014.

³⁷ Charles T. Mathewes, "An Interview with Peter Berger," *The Hedgehog Review* (Spring and Summer 2006): 155, accessed August 4, 2014, <http://iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/AfterSecularization/8.12PBerger.pdf>.

³⁸ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, p. 160.

³⁹ "Arab Spring Adds to Global Restrictions on Religion," Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, accessed August 6,

In exploring what *facets* of religion may lead to violence, Norenzayan's studies in the Middle East show that increased religious attendance results in more – and more support for – suicide bombing, while increased prayer (alone or with others) does not⁴⁰—support for his second way that religion can lead to conflict. Duffy Toft et al. explain that religions with a political theology of reconciliation are more likely to peacefully work towards change than those with a more-violent theology. While religious terrorists have emerged from all faiths, Islamic actors disproportionately use religion to justify violence.⁴¹ The authors attribute this prevalence to “the dominance of...Salafi-jihadism, [a violent theology] described as ‘the guiding ideology of Al Qaeda’,”⁴² as well as to *low and conflictual* and *low and consensual* levels of independence between Islamic actors and the state.

2.6. Conflict Resolution, à la Big Gods and God's Century

Importantly for our time, *God's Century* and *Big Gods* both counsel the necessity of understanding, acknowledging, and factoring in the applicable religious belief(s) when formulating foreign policy and engaging in conflict resolution strategies. For example, Sufism is a contrasting interpretation of Islam to Salafi-jihadism noted above, and can be defined as “the intention to go towards the Truth, by means of love and devotion” and “a way of being that is the actualization of the attributes of God.”⁴³ The *God's Century* authors view Sufi practitioners as “natural allies of moderate regimes,” and suggest that connections could be made and fostered with Sufi groups to enlist their aid in decreasing conflict.⁴⁴

In discussing conflict resolution in a religious arena, Norenzayan urges us to consider the source of most of the research, research subjects, and theories about human behavior in Western countries: WEIRD people – that is, Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. “Much of WEIRD public policy [(national and international)] is grounded in the idea that material or instrumental values are the key drivers of human actions,” which is the *rational actor* model.⁴⁵ However, in the non-Western—that is, more-religious world—he maintains that many people operate from sacred values, which

“involve strong moral convictions that are better seen in the framework of a *devoted actor* model.... A wide range of apparently irrational aspects of human behavior, such as falling in love, emotional attachments...to objects and places, and why it is so easy for terror groups to recruit young men for suicide missions...make much more sense in a devoted actor framework.”⁴⁶

He then discusses findings by Jeremy Ginges and a team who studied how considering sacred values (or not) affected hypothetical peace negotiations between real Israelis and Palestinians. The researchers discovered that having one's core values acknowledged, even if (and I would say *especially if*) they are not shared, makes people more open to compromise.⁴⁷ Therefore, policymakers and negotiators should take note that discounting or ignoring others' sacred values, as Western leaders often do, usually intensifies conflict.

2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/06/20/arab-spring-restrictions-on-religion-findings/>.

⁴⁰ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 164-165.

⁴¹ Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, 128.

⁴² Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, 128.

⁴³ This definition is taken from the website of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order, accessed on August 10, 2014, <http://www.nimatullahi.org/what-is-sufism/>.

⁴⁴ Duffy Toft et al., *God's Century*, 173.

⁴⁵ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 166.

⁴⁶ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 167.

⁴⁷ Jeremy Ginges et al., “Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104 (2007): 7357-7360, in Norenzayan, *Big Gods*.

There may be some problems, however, with such a simplistic division between West and non-West,⁴⁸ and scholars and policymakers must take care not to push examples of “devoted” behavior into a convenient category without fully exploring the myriad factors behind such behaviors. Many Western actors also exhibit devoted behaviour, and the aforementioned strong presence of religiosity in US politics arguably informs much of that country’s foreign policy. Note that a “sacred value” is not necessarily a religious value; it simply means something that is deeply important. For example, democracy is likely a sacred value for most Canadians. Also note that the opposite of “rational” in this case is not “irrational.”

Because of the political focus of their book, Duffy Toft et al. go into much more detail on conflict resolution, giving “Ten Rules for Surviving God’s Century”:⁴⁹

1. Acknowledge that religious actors are here to stay.
2. Do not assume that the activism of religious actors can or should be confined to a “private sphere.”
3. Learn to live with the fact that the issue is not whether, but when and how, religious actors will enter public life and shape political outcomes.
4. Do not exaggerate the power of religious actors in public life, thereby replacing secularization with sacralization...
5. ...but expect religious actors to play a larger and more pervasive role than conventional wisdom anticipates.
6. Accept that the more governments try to repress or exclude religion from public life, the more such efforts will be self-defeating.
7. Acknowledge that the more governments permit religious actors to be autonomous social actors in a system of consensual independence, the more religion will serve as a “force multiplier” for important social and political goods, including democratization, peacemaking, and reconciliation.
8. Take the religious beliefs and political theologies of religious actors seriously because they interact with political structure and context to explain much of the political behavior of religious actors.
9. Accept that if governments fail to respect the institutional independence of religious actors, especially through systematic repression, the more these governments will encourage pathological forms of religious politics, including religion-based terrorism and religion-related civil wars.
10. Appreciate that there is strategic value in pursuing religious freedom in the conduct of foreign policy.
11. Duffy Toft et al. stress that “states that fail to address the grievances and expectations of religious actors within their borders contribute to the globalization of terrorism.”⁵⁰

3. Conclusion

Despite Norenzayan’s assertion that as countries experience the forces of modernization, secular institutions replace big gods, he does not predict that religion will die out. In fact, he states that religion may triumph simply because of a demographic fact: religious people have more children.

⁴⁸ I thank Zeki Sarigil for noting that such a view may be problematic.

⁴⁹ Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century*, 207-222.

⁵⁰ Duffy Toft et al., *God’s Century*, 123.

“For example, data from 82 countries reveals a linear relationship between the frequency of religious worship and number of children, with those who worship more than once a week averaging 2.5 children compared to 1.7 (below replacement!) for those who never worship.”⁵¹

Inglehart also explains that secularization leads to cultural changes that bring a huge decrease in fertility rates.⁵² Duffy Toft et al. make similar statements, citing high fertility rates as one of the reasons for religion’s tenacity. Peter Berger himself cites “the weight of evidence” as why he changed his mind about modernity leading to secularization, saying that

“it may – and it does in certain parts of the world among certain groups of people – but not necessarily. On the other hand, I would argue that modernity very likely, but not inevitably, leads to pluralism, to a pluralization of worldviews, values, etc., including religion, [which... changes] the character of how religion is both maintained institutionally and in human consciousness.”⁵³

The above quote seems to highlight why there has been increased conflict in and with the MENA region: the forces of modernization, government, and religion are clashing – in a struggle for superiority, yes, but more importantly, in a struggle of how to define and redefine themselves and each other in a changing world.

Before reading *Big Gods* and *God’s Century*, I wondered whether there might be a political resurgence of religion but not a private one—if there was indeed a resurgence at all. I might now be convinced that privacy and politics can not be separated for long; the issues that fuel national and international debate and conflict are often the same issues that spark arguments at home. “The personal is political,” a phrase popularized in the 1970s, refers to the US women’s liberation movement; however, it could just as easily refer to religious movements in the world today. Author Carol Hanisch explains that the theory behind that phrase “came out of struggle...against those who were either trying to stop the movement or to push it in directions they found less threatening.”⁵⁴ This comment reflects Duffy Toft et al.’s argument that countries that repress religion will likely end up fueling violence; it also echoes Norenzayan’s contention that policymakers who ignore sacred values do so at their peril.

Ronald Inglehart’s view of religious forces in the world today combines Norenzayan’s and Duffy Toft et al.’s main arguments (and mine) with some points of his own:

“The world is changing in a way that is clearly not going back to the old-time religion in which a priest tells you how to live your life. But it is a world in which spiritual concerns are becoming more important... In this broader sense, spiritual concerns are growing, not shrinking, and a different kind of religion may be playing a bigger role. A simplified view would be that religion is resurging all over the world. It’s simply not true. But the politics, even of advanced industrial societies, is shifting to one in which religions [*sic*] issues are more relevant and value questions are much more central.”⁵⁵

Throughout history, societies have responded in various (often violent) forms to other ways of seeing and doing things. Berger defines his above-noted pluralism as “the coexistence

⁵¹ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 152.

⁵² “Is There a Global Resurgence of Religion?” Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, accessed August 4, 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/05/08/is-there-a-global-resurgence-of-religion/>.

⁵³ Mathewes, “An Interview with Peter Berger,” 152-153.

⁵⁴ Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political: The Women’s Liberation Movement Classic with a New Explanatory Introduction,” 2006, accessed August 19, 2014, <http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>,

⁵⁵ “Is There a Global Resurgence of Religion?” Pew Research Religion and Public Life Project, <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/05/08/is-there-a-global-resurgence-of-religion/>, accessed August 4, 2014.

in the society of different worldviews and value systems under conditions of civic peace and under conditions where people interact with each other.”⁵⁶ If civic peace is the goal (even if we do not all yet accept different worldviews), many countries have a long way to go. But *Big Gods* and *God’s Century* give us some direction on how to proceed.

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