theories and methodologies

Organized Religions in Our Global Modernity

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SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHERS WHO ASSUMED THAT MODERNITY WOULD BECOME PROGRESSIVELY SECULAR MAY HAVE GOT it wrong. Current history shows us that modern societies, including states, do not inevitably grow more secular. Nor are organized religions inevitably confined to narrower and narrower domains as modernity proceeds. In fact, the current period makes legible the variability of the spaces (institutional, ideational, tactical) of organized religions over time and their expansion into domains once off-limits to religion, domains as diverse as the liberal state, global finance, and cosmopolitanism. Indeed, new types of globality and cosmopolitanism are becoming visible in, and arising from, organized religions. They can coexist with regressive forces in those religions, signaling the complexity of the religions' organizational architecture.

These diverse trends unsettle the meaning of modernity. A key marker of early Western modernity is the rise of the secular state and, importantly, a state with secularizing capabilities. Yet in our current global modernity the state has withdrawn partly or fully from some spheres through deregulation and privatization, and other forces are ascendant, among them organized religions. Thus, several major and growing organized religions now have a larger or more consequential place, role, or potential in liberal democracies than we would have extrapolated from early modern trends—from actual history, not just theory. This rise of religion is often seen as anomalous from the perspective of modernization theory, akin to a state of exception that cannot last.

Here I want to argue that the rise of organized religions is structurally part of our complex global modernity, even when their doctrines are not modern. I make a similar argument about a range of diverse contemporary trends that we experience as regressive or as belonging to the past. This argument rests on my research about the partial and often specialized post-1980s disassembling of the nation-state as historically constructed in the West (Sassen). That disassembling produces structural holes, or blank spaces, in the older (secular) fabric.

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A key outcome of these tendencies is that the center, as constructed in modern history, no longer holds. That center found its most complex instantiation in the modern state. The disassembling made room, so to speak, for the rise of *older* complex assemblages that had been pushed out of diverse spheres of the polity and of social life through the expanded power of the secularizing modern state. Organized religions are a major example of these assemblages. They are also heuristic in that their high visibility helps us understand how old formations can resurface as part of new global organizing logics and thereby become part of our modernity. Whether the result is good or bad is a separate matter.

The disassembling of the national as the dominant condition of our global modernity also enables the emergence of *novel* types of assemblages at the global and the subnational scales. Among these are global financial networks that have little resemblance to traditional nation-state-centered banking. A different example is the complex organizational architecture of global civil-society struggles, such as the causes engaged by Oxfam, Amnesty International, and Forest Watch. The key organizational feature of these struggles is the linking together of multiple local (noncosmopolitan) efforts and their global projection through a major organization with worldwide recognition. The rise or global expansion of old and new organized religions also follows this pattern.

Further, the current multiplication of partial, specialized, and applied orders is unsettling the grip of the center—the state—and producing challenges in the still-prevalent world of nation-states. Can we think of some of today's major organized religions as also having undergone a reassembling of the components that historically constituted them as operational systems, in contrast to their status as belief systems? If so, the old doctrines can be part of our new modernity because they have shifted to novel organizing logics. One way of describing the shift is that the doctrines are now part of a different assemblage of elements, one that can include the old and the new, as in the debate in the Anglican Church about gay bishops. These assemblages are partly embedded in specific situations—thus, the Anglican Church in Africa is constituted through a somewhat different assemblage of elements than the one in the United States. Similarly, Islam's doctrines are today distributed across a range of such assemblages—across countries, across diverse communities in a given country, on to new types of settings, such as the South Side of Chicago, home to many black Muslims.

Distinguishing Our Global Modernity from Earlier Phases

Foundational change in complex systems is no easy matter. Such change is only partly legible, and hence interpretation is critical in the account of it. My effort in the larger project behind this essay was to examine the transformation beginning in the 1980s, commonly referred to as globalization, as an instance of foundational change. A premise of my work was that today's epochal transformation of critical structures and discursive domains cannot be adequately grasped through the standard account—the growing interdependence of nations and the formation of self-evidently global systems. Both of these are indeed happening. However, if the change is foundational, these two processes are only part of it.

A critical understanding of the change has to engage the enormous complexity, institutionalization, formalization, and centripetal force of the nation-state, the unit that has absorbed all major building blocks of society over several centuries. The nation-state is one of the major loci of the transformation, even when this role is not easily legible and seems to contradict features of the current epoch—that is, interdependence and globality. As the most formalized instantiation of the nation-

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state, the state apparatus is, then, changing fundamentally in one or another of its critical components, and this is one of the constitutive changes of the new global era.

My examination is not about history itself—the historical record—but rather consists of analytic incursions into specific periods as constructed by particular disciplinary forms of knowledge: history, law, geography, political science, sociology, and technology. The result in the larger project is excavations of a few historical formations that I see as critical in illuminating the processes whereby the national is assembled in the early modern period and then partly disassembled in our present modernity. I focus on periods when stable configurations and meanings become unsettled. Today the national state and organized religions are structurally less stable than they were in the earlier modern period, marked by the rise of the secular state and the separation of church and state—even though these movements were rarely, if ever, fully achieved.

Turning to the question of organized religions in our global modernity, I seek especially to detect whether there is a structural genesis for their changed position. The most commonly invoked feature of their new status is a growing transnationalism. And this is indeed significant. But it is not enough if the starting point is the structural blanks that result from the state's losing ground due to the shift from centripetal to centrifugal trends. Beyond the growth of transnationalism is the question of structural position inside the larger domain of nation-states.

The finding of a shift in the role of organized religions in the larger space once fully occupied or embodied by the state would indicate that their changed position is part of our complex global modernity and is not anomalous or a throwback to a premodern time. The age and character of the diverse religious doctrines are not issues for establishing this modernity. Rather, structural position is the relevant indicator.

When Old Capabilities Switch Organizing Logics

To capture the modern in what from the Enlightenment perspective might be seen as anomalous and, at worst, regressive or anachronistic, we need to recover the historicity—the particularity—of the assemblage of territory, authority, and rights represented by the nation-state and its modernism. The modernity of the state was centered in an overarching tendency toward the concentration of the power to legitimate (and to secularize) in a sovereign, the state. Today we see multiple minor centrifugal processes that dislodge bits of territory, authority, and rights from their nation-state encasements. Elements of territory, authority, and rights are reassembling into novel global configurations. The mutual interactions and interdependencies of these elements are thereby altered, as are their institutional encasements. The alterations include moves both within the nation-state—for example, the shift of components of state authority from the public sphere to the private sphere of markets—and to global levels.

The sharpening differentiation among domains once suffused in the national promotes a multiplication of diverse normative orders where the dominant logic formerly aimed at producing unitary national spatial, temporal, and normative framings. What was bundled up and experienced as a unitary condition—the national assemblage of territory, authority, and rights—now increasingly reveals itself to be less unitary and exclusive than is suggested in common representations of the modern nation-state. Thus, much of what is represented as the national today is more ideology and less structural grounding. In contrast, organized religions are increasingly recognized as more global than the old Enlightenment view allowed.

The phase that begins in the early 1980s is marked by the coexistence of multiple dynamics—the incipient denationalizing of

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components of the national, the renationalizing of others (notably, the politics rather than reality of global trade, global finance, and immigration), and the formation of self-evidently global entities. In some cases, we see surface discontinuities that obscure critical continuities, and in others we see the obverse—surface continuities obscuring critical ruptures. Ultimately, the explanation for these multiple, partial, and frequently illegible dynamics is that a new epoch can contain older formations, such as old religions, though they will have changed structural position in ways that may not be very legible—thus, old religions might be seen as anomalous in their current rise because their structural repositioning is not evident. Catholicism continues to be a strong global religion, but its center of gravity is increasingly shifting away from the global North and toward the global South and East. Islam has grown sharply and moved well beyond its Middle Eastern base and toward the West and the global North.

A critical proposition in my work is that old capabilities can become part of new organizing logics. The old capabilities of national states, such as the authority of the state or of the law, can be complex. Thus, I argue that the authority of the modern state, its *raison d'état*, originates partly in an abstract authority, the divinity of the sovereign, but does so by switching organizing logics—from kingdom to secular state (chs. 1 and 2).[1] Switching organizing logics meant secularizing an old capability: sovereign divine authority.

In the case of organized religions, doctrine is of course a sacred text, but analytically we can posit that it is also a complex capability in that it is often a synthetic account of key questions and answers about ethics, justice, and conduct. As a capability, doctrine can switch organizing logics. The structural shift of organized religions that makes them part of our global modernity, without necessarily modernizing their doctrines, can be explained in terms of this switch of premodern capabilities to contemporary organizing logics.

Looking at contemporary conditions through this lens takes the analysis beyond a privileging of the new and the self-evidently global.[2] Thus, even assemblages based on the latest technology are not simply new (Sassen, pt. 3). For instance, on electronic financial trading floors, trust, an older capability, is critical; likewise, older legal systems ensure guarantees of contract in electronic commerce.[3]

Conclusion

What does this type of analysis allow us to see about the structural shift of organized religions in the current period, when the expectation, historically and theoretically, was that they would be increasingly structurally confined by secularization? It points to a disintegration of the glue that for a long time held different normative orders together under the unitary normative order of nation-states. The proliferation of specialized orders arising not only from the structural repositioning of organized religions but also from the variety of global governance systems brings with it a remixing of constitutive rules.

The ascendance of organized religions and the loss of bits and pieces of state authority redraw the ideational and practical landscape. The grand norm of the modern state—its *raison d'état*—is a multifaceted system of diverse norms that cohere as a sort of master normativity. Multiple, often minor shifts are unsettling that master normativity. I mean this in a broad sense to include, for instance, shifts of the private-public division (Sassen, ch. 4) and microtransformations in the relation of citizens to the state and vice versa (ch. 6).

A second tendency is the multiplication of partial or simple systems, each with a small set of constitutive rules. For instance, what some scholars have described as the *lex constructionis* is a private agreement among the leading construction companies in the world,

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which includes a claim that host governments need to show that the companies are violating environmental regulations, such as those made mandatory in the Kyoto Protocol—a task that many governments cannot afford. Agreements like this one have narrow and self-serving constitutive rules. Others, such as the one that resulted in the new International Criminal Court, have more complex and justice-seeking rules. But both types of specialized orders are organized along a single rule and disembedded from state authority (Sassen, ch. 5). The thin and elementary character of these systems' norms becomes clear when we contrast them with those of the medieval manor or fief, which, although local and limited, was a complex world encompassing constitutive rules that addressed all of social life and multiple systems of authority—the king, the church, the local lord.[4]

These new orders, including organized religions, are often particular, partial, and without much internal differentiation. Not even the state can counteract their rules for governance (or norms). The rules tend to be wired into these orders, like those of free markets, and are not formal or meant to be explicated from outside the system.

The rise of organized religions, no matter how old their doctrines, is part of the proliferation of orders resulting from the sharpening differentiation among domains once suffused in the national or the supranational. Organized religions have shifted to a new organizing logic, one that accommodates the coexistence of old doctrine and a novel positioning. This combination makes them part of our complex global modernity.

Notes

This essay draws on the methodological, interpretive, and historical materials developed in my 2008 book. That book does not focus on religion, but the conceptual apparatus it develops is useful for understanding the structural position of organized religions in our complex global modernity. In the book the reader can find extensive bibliographic sources for the points and arguments made in this essay.

1. In the larger project, I interpret foundational change and the ascendance of novel formations as in good part a function of capabilities developed in the period preceding the one under examination. In the case of the ascendance of the modern secular state after the medieval period, these capabilities include the divinity of the ruler as the source of (legitimate) authority.

2. The interpretive practices I use generate a form of grounded theory (ch. 8). Different temporal and spatial orders can be shown to be wired into material practices, infrastructures, and institutional framings. Change can be shown as conditioned by capabilities developed in the period that is about to be left behind. Research strategies need to address thick environments, multisited local domains, and small worlds in global systems. Grounded theory helps neutralize state capture of the major historiographies since the 1600s as well as capture by abstractions such as society or economy. Finally, these interpretive practices help deconstruct master categories such as the nation-state and the global economy.

3. The dynamic explaining the outcome—in this case partial denationalization of the national as historically constructed—is predicated on the possibility that at least some of those earlier capabilities become lodged in novel organizing logics. Critical to such an analysis is a need to distinguish between the whole and its parts, as well as to decipher the tipping points that mark the switch (Sassen, ch. 1).

4. This also suggests how ill conceived is the common notion that globalization today is akin to medieval times in Europe, an issue I deal with at length (chs. 1, 2, and 9).

Work Cited

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