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and the Critique of Neo-Liberalism

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Making Religion Irrelevant: The 'Resurgent Religion' Narrative
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The past three decades have seen a spate of scholarly theorizing about the world's seemingly vibrant 'conservative' religions.¹ Various identified as 'new fundamentalisms', 'resurgent religion', and the like, much of this scholarship types radical Islam, nationalist Hinduism, and both Pentecostal and Fundamentalist Christianity as reactions to global modernity. In effect, it sees them as religious responses to social and theological dislocation: as revitalization movements that give their followers the practical and conceptual tools to reformulate their lives while allowing them to imagine that they are maintaining religious tradition.

Not all scholars take this view.² Enough do, however, to lend weight to the recent public discourse that identifies religion with an effort to restore an authoritarian past. Among other things, this discourse has demonized conservative Christians and Muslims³ and has made best-sellers of the recent books by the so-called "New Atheists".⁴ It has also driven moderates and progressive from the churches. As Michael Hout and Claude Fischer have shown, a growing number of Americans left organized religion in the 1990s because it had embraced a conservative political agenda.⁵ In effect, they said 'If that's religion, I want no part of it.'

It is not my purpose here to say whether anti-modern religion is surging, much less whether this is (or would be) a good or a bad thing. Instead, I am studying the consequences of the common belief that it is. This chapter places the resurgent-religion discourse in the context of the simultaneous growth of neo-liberal ideologies among both Western intellectuals and comprador elites in the global South. It asks what happens if religion is seen as a remnant of an ignorant and authoritarian past, resisting global progress. It argues that framing the choice as "Jihad versus McWorld" (to use Benjamin Barber's felicitously stark phrasing)) insulates neo-liberalism from religious critique. I do not claim that this is intentional; it does, however, let the world's dominant politico-economic ideology off the hook by destroying the credibility of any religiously based disapproval. This has tangible and unfortunate consequences for the conduct of public life.

The Conservative Religion Hypothesis

It is a well-known sociological trope that the founders of our discipline thought religion would vanish in the modern age. From Marx's comment about "the opium of the people" to Durkheim's identification of religion with the 'primitive' to Weber's frets about worldly disenchantment, mainstream sociology long thought that supernaturalist religions were on the wane. Secularization theory in its various forms presented a complex analysis of religious decline, which seemed to fit the European case rather well.⁶ For example, Bruce presented figures to show that religious membership in Britain dropped from 30% to 14% of the adult population between 1900 and 1990, while by the mid-1980s just 2% of Scandinavians attended weekly services.⁷ Grace Davie argued that lack of religious belonging does not mean a lack of religious belief, yet it does indicate a loss of institutional vitality.⁸ American Mainline Protestantism has been in similar decline since the 1970s.⁹ True, many people now favor non-institutional forms of religion, sometimes calling themselves "spiritual, not religious".¹⁰ Yet, as Bruce argued,

The road from religion embodied in the great European cathedrals to religion as a personal preference and individual choice is a road from more to less religion. From the Middle Ages to the end of the twentieth century, religion in Europe (and its offshoot settler societies) has declined in power, prestige, and popularity.¹¹

Notoriously, though, religion has not disappeared. Indeed, certain kinds of religion have now taken center stage, and not those with which Euro-American 'thought-leaders' are particularly comfortable. Resurgent Islam is in the daily news, but conservative Christianity is also growing and not just in the U.S. As Philip Jenkins wrote in his best-selling The Next Christendom, Christianity is attracting new followers around the world, especially in the developing countries, and they are of a particular type. In his words,

"The [Christian] denominations that are triumphing all across the global South are stalwartly traditional or even reactionary by the standards of the economically advanced nations. ... [They] have either been Roman Catholic, of a traditionalist and fideistic kind, or radical Protestant sects, evangelical or Pentecostal. ... In addition, rapid growth is occurring in non-traditional denominations that adapt Christian belief to local tradition [such as] "African indigenous churches".¹²

Such churches are supernaturalist, mystical, and often puritanical. "In this thought-world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith-healing, exorcism, and dream-visions are all basic components of religious sensibility".¹³ This is no secularized 'death of God' Christianity, nor a bloodless liberal deism. It is a vibrant, engaged, theologically conservative movement to save

souls and to improve believers' daily lives. For Jenkins, this is Christianity's future: within a few decades 75-80 percent of Christians will be traditionalists from the global South.¹⁴

The leading edge of Islam is similarly traditionalist and militant—though mostly not *jihadist*, as is commonly imagined in the West. Various described as "fundamentalist", "Islamist", or "Islamicist",¹⁵ recent socio-intellectual movements in the *Dar al Islam* have emphasized strict adherence to the Qur'an and the Hadith, which they see as records of the pure Islam practiced by Mohammed and his companions. *Salafis*, to use a common (if broad) Arabic term for one branch of the movement, oppose religious innovations in either theology or practice. *Wahhabis* (followers of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab) are even more puritanical. Neither is necessarily political, though both typically advocate the superiority of *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) for regulating human conduct. The vast majority of these Islamists reject violence, though the perpetrators of the various anti-Western massacres of the last two decades have identified themselves with Islamist views.¹⁶ Like traditionalist Christianity, traditionalist Islam is growing. The Pew Forum estimates that the world's Muslim population will increase by 35 percent by 2030, to about 26 percent of the world's people. Their survey of 25,000 African Christians and Muslims shows both groups to be (on average) equally religiously conservative, devoted to traditional beliefs and practices, and upholding traditional moral standards.¹⁷

Just reading the newspapers, one could similarly point to resurgent Hindu nationalism as embodied in the Indian *Bharatiya Janata Party* and the cultural movement for *Hindutva*, or to the role of militant Sinhalese Buddhism in the Sri Lankan civil war.¹⁸ Here, also, politicized religion is not the whole story. The root story is that militantly conservative, traditionalist religion seems to be a growing force in the contemporary world. Secularization theory did not expect this outcome.

Famously, advocates of the so-called 'market model' of religion did expect it.¹⁹ In their view, religion's strength depends on the structure of the religious 'market', in which churches compete for adherents. Two market factors weakened European religion as a whole: state support for a particular church—the legacy of the *cuius regio, eius religio* policy that ended the 17th century religious wars—and the recent abdication by those state churches of the supernaturalism that constitutes religion's chief appeal. In this analysis, American religion is more vital than Europe's both because America lacks a state church and also because its most vital churches emphasize a salvation-oriented 'old-time religion'. Market theorists say that American Mainline Protestantism has lost ground precisely to the degree that it has gone 'up-market', appealing to intellectuals rather to the masses while emphasizing social ethics over saving souls. Yes, there is room for liberal religion in the marketplace, but such religions are not

big sellers. Most people seek religions that put them on the right side of life's cosmic powers—however those powers are conceived in a particular cultural milieu.²⁰ So-called 'conservative' religions do this; market theorists expect them to grow wherever religions are free to meet people's needs.

There is, however, a third approach. At least since mid-century, some sociologists have explained the rise of militantly traditionalist religions as a direct response to modernity itself. Rather than modernity leading to irreligion, as secularization theorists claimed, modernity's trials produce a conservative religious reaction. Some examples illustrate this line of thinking.

Examples

The claim that modernity provokes a conservative reaction goes back at least to the early 20th century, when it was used as an explanation for American fundamentalism. As historian George Marsden described the matter,

A fundamentalist is an evangelical who is angry about something ... [or, more precisely,] who is militant in opposition to liberal theology in the churches or to changes in cultural values or mores, such as those associated with "secular humanism". ...

Fundamentalists are not just religious conservatives, they are conservatives who are willing to take a stand and to fight.²¹

Scholars from Stewart Cole to Richard Hofstadter argued that in America this anger is particularly strong across the rural/urban cultural divide.²² The shift in power to cities and away from small towns—everywhere part of the modernization process—led to increased religious strife. At root, Hofstadter attributed the fundamentalists' rancor to status anxiety:

By the end of the [19th] century, it was painfully clear to fundamentalists that they were losing much of their influence and respectability. ... [Their response] was shaped by a desire to strike back at everything modern."²³

Historian William McLoughlin similarly wrote that "fundamentalism represented the 'Old Lights' who always appear in a time of religious change".²⁴ The withdrawal of some fundamentalists from the northern denominations into their own sects only encouraged the sense that their time was passing. The dominant view was that "conservative religion would die out as modernity advanced".²⁵

That did not happen, but the effort to explain conservative religion as an attempt to turn back the clock continued. To take one famous example: in response to the 1980s rise of the Christian Right in American politics, the membership growth of conservative churches and the decline of the Protestant Mainline, and perhaps above all the Iranian revolution, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the University of Chicago undertook "The Fundamentalism

Project" to study those trends. Recognizing that non-Protestant groups were labeled "fundamentalist" by only analogy. Martin Marty, the Project's co-leader, described a "family resemblance" among militantly conservative religions, which included the following elements among others:²⁶

- "Fundamentalism is always reactive, reactionary."
- "Fundamentalisms engage in ... selective retrieval, picking and choosing certain "fundamentals", ... [which] always come from some earlier, ... normative stages in one's own sacred history."
- "Fundamentals are used for setting boundaries. ... The result is always an exclusive or separatist movement."
- "With absolutism comes authoritativeness and authoritarianism."
- "They take shape as reactions to moral relativism or the relaxation of standards of conduct."

In short, the "fundamentalisms" the Project would study were reactive, backward looking, and aggressively anti-modern, pushing back at what they saw as a world gone wrong.

Eight years, several conferences, and numerous volumes later, Marty affirmed these descriptors.²⁷ He found a growth in the number and strength of "primarily religious or religiously connected movements that were intense, impassioned, separatist, absolutist, authoritarian, and militant".²⁸ From the resurgent Protestantisms of Northern Ireland and the Americas through the Jewish and Muslim sectarian movements in Israel and the West Bank and the Sikh and Hindu eruptions in India to the various forms of radical Islam in the Arab world and elsewhere, militantly conservative religion sought to retake the world from secular modernity. Though the Fundamentalism Project's many detailed case studies overwhelmed any simplified summation, its overall results left the impression that resurgent religions wished to turn back the clock to a world that was both simpler and morally more certain than the one in which we all live. In Marty's words,

Anyone who is not a member of a fundamentalist movement ... will see that much of what goes on within such fundamentalisms is threatening—even devastating—to other kinds of fundamentalists, to more moderate coreligionists ..., to their neighbors and rivals, to governments, and to the idea of civil society.²⁹

There seemed to be no hope that such movements could peacefully coexist in a religiously plural world.

If Marty tempered his eloquence with an historian's sense that reality is always more complex than our explanations of it, Benjamin Barber's bestselling Jihad vs. McWorld drew a

starker distinction.³⁰ He described a world rent by two opposing forces: global commerce, which dissolves all traditional forms of life, and a renewed tribalism that seeks to reestablish a local purity purged of all modern complexities and accretions. The former, symbolized by transnational consumer capitalism (McDonalds, Hollywood, MTV, News Corp, and theme parks) erodes national boundaries. It undercuts democracy by removing people's control over their economic and cultural lives. The latter, actualized by ethnic warfare and religious sectarianism, lives "for anti-Western antiuniversalist struggle".³¹ It undercuts democracy by refusing to recognize the legitimacy of any force but its own. Both forces attack the contemporary nation-state, one dissolving it from without and the other fracturing it from within. Barber was not sanguine about democracy's ability to withstand this dual onslaught.

The collision between the forces of disintegral tribalism and reactionary fundamentalism I have called Jihad (Islam is not the issue) and the forces of integrative modernization and aggressive economic and cultural globalization I have called McWorld (for which America is not solely responsible) has been brutally exacerbated by the dialectical interdependence of these two seemingly oppositional sets of forces. ... Democracy is caught between a clash of movements, each of which for its own reasons seems indifferent to freedom's fate.³²

The image was clear: the "parochialism, antimodernism, exclusiveness, and hostility to 'others' ... that constitute ... Jihad"—which can be found in most world religions—arises from two forms of resentment.³³ On the one hand, McWorld trivializes and homogenizes all human values; on the other, it does nothing for "those mired in poverty and despair as a consequence of unregulated global markets and of a capitalism run wild because it has been uprooted from the humanizing constraints of the democratic nation-state" (Barber 2001: xii). "Jihad" is a religio-tribal reaction to these events. It is a moral and political crusade to revitalize a threatened way of life. It is, to use Anthony Wallace's label, a "revitalization movement"—a concept I shall examine in a moment.³⁴ First, however, let me cite one more scholarly example, this one a bit more complex.

In 2000, Mark Juergensmeyer published a prescient book about religious violence, entitled Terror in the Mind of God.³⁵ In it, he examined recent cases of violence in five religious traditions, from Christian bombers of abortion clinics in the U.S. to Jewish and Muslim suicide attacks in Israel and the West Bank to the Aum Shinrikyo attack in Tokyo's subways. He also interviewed some of the perpetrators: Rev. Michael Bray, who fire-bombed seven American clinics; Mahmud Abouhalima, the 'mastermind' of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing; the Sikh militant Simranjit Singh Mann; and others. He found, unsurprisingly, that these men saw

themselves at the center of a cosmic war. They saw themselves involved in a spiritual battle against the forces of darkness, one fraught with moral significance. Above all, their struggle was embedded in the social tensions of the present era. Radical religious ideas, in

Juergensmeyer's view,

have given a profound and ideological clarity to what in many cases have been real experiences of economic destitution, social oppression, political corruption, and a desperate need for the hope of rising above the limitations of modern life. The image of cosmic struggle has given these bitter experiences meaning, and the involvement in a grand conflict has been for some participants exhilarating. ... [It helps assuage] the sense of personal humiliation experienced by men who long to restore an integrity they perceive as lost in the wake of virtually global social and political shifts.³⁶

Here, militant religion provides a path forward to those seeking to escape social chaos and moral decay by turning back the clock to a purer era. It is not the only path available, but it is by no means rare in the contemporary age.

Revitalization Movements

Juergensmeyer, Barber, and the Fundamentalism Project describe militantly traditionalist religion as a means of defending a threatened moral universe. In their narrative, religious activists seek to renew that universe, to give it strength and clout against a world they think has gone bad. Activists oppose the evils of modern life, so they act to restore what they regard as the purity and goodness of former times—and they do so aggressively. Religion for them needs to reorder the world.

Anthropologist A.F.C. Wallace described several classes of such revitalization movements, which he defined as "deliberate, organized, conscious effort[s] by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture".³⁷ In his view, these movements occur at times of individual and social stress. People find themselves unable to continue their accustomed lives, perhaps as the result of war or economic dislocation, perhaps from encounters with new peoples and new ways of being, perhaps because technological changes have thrown their lives into confusion. In any case, their ways of making sense of the universe no longer work. In response, individuals may react regressively, seeking solace in "alcoholism, passivity and indolence, ... disregard of kinship and sexual mores, irresponsibility ..., states of depression and self-reproach".³⁸ These are, said Wallace, symptoms of a cultural disorder: the inability of established conceptual "mazeways"³⁹ to produce satisfying answers for how to live in the world in which people now find themselves.

If this behavioral and conceptual dislocation becomes widespread, Wallace wrote, entire groups can find their accustomed mazes inadequate. Such groups have several different options. Some may choose wholesale change, much as the adherents of the "Vailala Madness" (c1919-c1930), the John Frum Movement (c1930-c1960), and other Melanesian "cargo cults" threw out ancient practices and imitated Western ways.⁴⁰ More often, groups reorganize old ways of thinking, folding in new elements and a new sense of purpose while retaining a felt connection with the past. The Handsome Lake religion of the Seneca (1719-1815) and the Peyote Religion among the Navajo are examples from Native American history.⁴¹ Sometimes, as was the case with the Ghost Dance religion of the American Great Plains (Mooney 1896), groups re-embrace tradition, hiding the newness of their religious teachings beneath an ideology of returning to the old. The Ghost Dance taught adherents to turn their backs on White trade goods, reject cultural innovations, and refocus their lives on the tradition world. That, and dancing, would cause the Whites to leave. This was about as realistic as the accompanying belief that wearing "ghost dance shirts" would supernaturally stop Army bullets, but it did not keep Plains Indians from trying. The result was death and martyrdom—not unlike that of today's suicide bombers, who seek a similar unearthly reward.

Applied to our current topic, the various fundamentalisms examined by Marsden, Marty, Appleby, and their associates, Barber's tribally oriented "Jihad", and Juergensmeyer's religious terrorists see themselves as reviving a traditional, supernaturally valued way of life. In actual fact they are changing tradition, emphasizing certain parts and discarding others, then using the result to give themselves a meaningful way of engaging the world. American fundamentalist groups have become more political than had previously been the case, have aggressively sought to transform everything from public school systems to national laws, and have notoriously embraced cutting-edge technology to spread their message. Contemporary Salafis and Wahhabis have redefined ten centuries of tolerant Islam as "un-Islamic", have removed the traditional subtlety from Islamic law, and have created a global *jihad* to defend the borders of *Dar al Islam*.⁴² Hindu nationalists have tried to impose a belligerently purified Hinduism on the messy reality of traditional Indian religious life. In these cases, as in others, the combination of new and old gives adherents a revitalized cosmic vision.

At least, so goes the narrative. Seeing militantly traditionalist religions as revitalization movements highlights some key elements of those groups' worldviews and behaviors. It further explains why such religions have arisen in the contemporary world. Put simply, it attributes resurgent traditionalism to the massive social dislocations of the last many decades. Like secularization theory, it says that such changes have religious consequences, but unlike

secularization theory, it says that modernity can produce more religion as well as less. Modern stresses lead some people move from religious to secular mazeways; it leads others to reinvigorate their religious views, militantly. Resurgent religious conservatism is thus a way of coping with a changed world.

As noted above, it is not the point of this chapter to evaluate this way of understanding contemporary religious trends. I do, however, wish to point out some of the consequences of affirming this view. To do so, I must first review the socio-intellectual context that currently dominates world political and economic thinking.

Neoliberalism in the World System

As other contributors to this volume have noted, neoliberalism has been the leading economic discourse of the last 30 years. Neoliberal economists champion free markets, free trade, welfare reform, economic deregulation, and privatization.⁴³ These policies, advocates say, spur economic growth. They are also supposed to allow countries to prosper by producing those goods and services for which they have some comparative advantage. Low-wage, low-education countries contribute cheap manual labor; high-wage, high-education countries contribute scientific and technological innovation.

While well intentioned, these policies have done tremendous damage to poor people around the world. To mention a few examples: Swan and Vaitla showed how the International Monetary Fund's neoliberal-inspired "structural adjustment" policies created severe hunger in Niger where little had previously existed⁴⁴; Greenberg showed how these policies undercut agriculture in the Dominican Republic⁴⁵; my own fieldwork in Nicaragua revealed the connection between the loss of state subsidies and the growth in squatter settlements in the Managua city dump. By ignoring social structures and thinking only about markets, neoliberalism amounts to what former World Bank economist Joseph Stiglitz called "market fundamentalism".⁴⁶ This is the belief—against evidence—that all economic problems are the result of government regulation and that deregulation and free trade will always and everywhere generate wealth. Many observers thought that the market failures of 2008-2010 would have disproved this view⁴⁷, but the political rhetoric surrounding the 2011 U.S. debt crisis showed that it is still alive and well. More than that: neoliberal economic philosophy has set the terms of the current U.S. economic debate, while not leading to a solution.

In neoliberal theory, free markets maximize the growth of the total economic system, though not necessarily of every part of it.⁴⁸ The theory assumes, however, that all players have equal access to the resources, knowledge, and other tools necessary to play the economic game. Unfortunately, they do not. Stiglitz won his 2001 Nobel Prize in part for tracking the

consequences of unequal information access; he concluded that "unfettered markets often not only do not lead to social justice, but do not even produce efficient outcomes".⁴⁹ Government regulation is thus needed to rescue markets from themselves.

Neoliberalism also fails to consider the impact that power differences have on economic life. Rather than being a "flat" economic world⁵⁰, our international economy is dominated by a developed "core" of advanced capitalist nations, surrounded by a less developed "semi-periphery" and "periphery".⁵¹ Most trade flows between the core while peripheral regions possess fewer resources, have less complex trade relations, and thus have less opportunity to better themselves. The core dominates economically, militarily, and politically. To cite just one example, core countries can craft exceptions to their own calls for free trade, so they continue subsidizing their own farmers while insisting that peripheral and semi-peripheral countries stop doing so.⁵² Thus subsidized American rice exports drove Haitian rice farmers from their own domestic market, exacerbating poverty, hunger, and social tensions in that already poor country (Georges 2004).

Moreover, each nation has internal inequalities, which recent research has shown reduce social welfare in all types of political system.⁵³ Economic inequality has increased over the last 30 years in most of the countries listed in the OECD's 2011 annual report (2011: ch 6)—precisely the years in which neoliberalism dominated public policy.⁵⁴ The same pattern is present between countries: net capital flows from rich countries to poor countries dropped dramatically as international investment in poorer countries dried up.⁵⁵ Simultaneously, the richest 1% of the world's population has garnered an increasing share of both national and international wealth.⁵⁶

Neoliberalism predicts none of this, yet this is perhaps the biggest economic story of the last few decades. Why, then, has the neoliberal approach not been swept from the intellectual stage? Perhaps the answer lies in whom it serves. Neoliberalism has favored the world's richer countries and has favored the richest segments of those countries far more than others. If we had space and data, we could ask whether these groups have enough control over politics and intellectual life to keep neoliberalism on the intellectual agenda, despite its flaws.⁵⁷ That is not, however, the point of this chapter. It is time to return to the discourse of resurgent religious conservatism, to see what role it plays on this stage.

Religion as Ethical Critique

Religions are not just organizations specializing in the transcendent⁵⁸; they have are also sources of ethical critique. They tell individuals what is right and wrong; they also tell societies, governments, corporations, and religious organizations—their own and others—how they

should act in the world. Their moral authority stems from their role as arbiters of the divine, of life's purposes, or of whatever a given religion sees as its core concern.

Examples are not hard to find. The flight against human slavery was championed by religious people, from the 16th-century's Dominican Bartolomé de las Casas through the 18th and 19th century Quaker anti-slavery activists to the Protestant Abolitionists of the American pre-Civil War years. Lest we imagine this to be a purely Christian phenomenon, Yu Hyongwon (1622-1673) criticized Korean slavery on the basis of Confucian ethical teachings. Similarly, most of the major American activists for women's suffrage were religious⁵⁹; the African American Civil Rights movement was begun and largely run by clergy, whose position as church leaders gave their movement great moral power. Catholic social encyclicals, from Leo XIII's 1891 *Rerum Novarum* (on the conditions of the working class) through Benedict VI's 2009 *Caritas in Veritate* (on the problems of global development), have outlined a distinctive social agenda on matters of poverty and wealth, economics, society, and the state. Though grounded in both the Bible and in Christian tradition, those teachings are not simply rooted in the past. Their ethical insights evolve alongside the world to which they are applied—without, however, losing their capacity to criticize injustice.

None of this is news. Religion's ability to have its critiques taken seriously has been affected, however, by the growth of the discourse that I analyzed at the beginning of this chapter, which says that religion is increasingly conservative in the modern world, that religion seeks to turn back the clock to an earlier and more authoritarian age, and that it seeks to impose its moral and theological agenda on others.

To see how, let us start with a trivial example, Austin Cline's (n.d.) online review of Juergensmeyer's book on religious terrorists.⁶⁰ Posted at Cline's "Agnosticism/Atheism" website, the review is generally positive until it reaches Juergensmeyer's conclusion that the best antidote to religious terrorism is more appreciation of religion's role in "giv[ing] spirit to public life and provid[ing] a beacon for moral order".⁶¹ Cline dismisses this conclusion as misguided. 'Better' religion will not drive out 'worse' religion, he says, because all religions are "false at the very least and likely harmful or even dangerous." Other pages at the site make the same argument, all of portray religion as belief-centered, supernaturalist, and authoritarian. This site's image of religion is similar to what Hout and Fischer report motivates the increasing number of American "Religious Nones": resurgent conservative religion is seen as advocating a socially destructive, authoritarian agenda, and all religion is typed as such.⁶²

This discourse affects religions' ability to generate ethical critique in two ways.

First, it identifies religion with the past, usually typified as 'unenlightened'; religion is thus presented as lacking the scientific knowledge needed to evaluate the contemporary world. For example, American fundamentalism's long fight against biological evolution, its claims for the scientific inerrancy of the Bible, and the like have led many observers to distrust all religions' intellectual grasp of the world. Even religious scientists are reluctant to make public their own religious commitments, for fear that their colleagues will think less of their work.⁶³

Second, the discourse presents religion as at best authoritarian, typically intolerant, and at worst violent—none of which helps solve current problems. Europe's conflict between religion and reason was always overdrawn, but this opposition remains a cultural trope, feeding distrust of religious authorities who demand obedience instead of making reasoned arguments. The Inquisition remains a vivid image of what happens when religion controls state power. Post-revolution purges in clerical Iran, reports of Saudi religious police assaulting women, and the like reinforce this history. And Juergensmeyer's interviews bring us face to face with men (and some women) who will kill on behalf of their gods. Is it even safe to consider religious critique, if this is what religion entails?

It is relatively easy to see how these factors undercut religions' ethical voice. If religion is based in the past, and if its comments about science are ideological and scientifically uninformed, why should anyone suppose that its ethical pronouncements are any different? They become all too easy to dismiss—particularly for socio-political elites wishing to deal with their challenge. *Argumentum ad hominem* becomes *argumentum ad religiones*. All religions are tarred.

The Result

The net result of all this is to undercut religious criticism of contemporary political and economic practices. It is not just conservative religious criticism that suffers; all religious criticism finds itself isolated and dismissed. In the United States (to take the country I know best), the 1980s were the last decade that paid significant attention to mainstream religious critiques of governmental policy. The Nuclear Freeze Movement had church origins and support.⁶⁴ The Sanctuary Movement was a church-based network opposed to U.S. wars in Central America.⁶⁵ The Catholic Bishops' pastoral letters on peace and on economic justice engendered reasoned and thoughtful debate from opponents as well as supporters.⁶⁶ Since then, the growth of the Religious Right, the Catholic Church's turn toward abortion politics, and the clergy sex scandals—both Catholic and televangelist—have been the main religious news stories. The Freeze failed, the Central American wars ended, and the Bishops' letters have been forgotten.

There has been much religious commentary on public affairs, but it has gotten no significant traction. Neoliberalism reigns.

This is not to say that neoliberalism is free from critique. Stiglitz (2003) criticized neoliberal policies, as have other prominent economists.⁶⁷ Their analysis has been quite scathing, but it has been based on utility, not ethics. They point out that neoliberalism does not produce wealth (except for the few), it does not create stable economies, nor does it foster sustainable economic growth. Instead, it creates poverty, destabilizes poor countries, and produces misery among the less fortunate. They basically say that neoliberalism does not work. A religious critique—even a conservative one such as Nasr's⁶⁸—would challenge the neoliberal notion of "success" itself, by questioning whether untrammelled economic growth improves the human condition.

A few economists do question the established measures. Amartya Sen, among others, has called for better, more moral measures of economic success than mere growth.⁶⁹ His Nobel Prize came, in part, because he combined ethical reflection with his economic reasoning. His approach is rare, however, and it has not placed ethics at the center of his profession.

The point is: neoliberalism's continued intellectual hegemony stems not from its success at describing how economies work in the real world, but—at least in part—from the weakness of its natural opponents. Religious social criticism used to be taken seriously. The fact that it is not today says something about contemporary religion's loss of credibility. That loss, in turn, results in part from the popular image of religions as being rooted in the past, as being authoritarian, intolerant, and even violent. *Prima facie*, the discourse that I have described here, in which religion is seen as becoming increasingly conservative, traditionalist, and right-wing, has contributed to this trend.

NOTES

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