

RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND FOREIGN POLICY: A CONSTRUCTIVIST OUTLOOK

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ABSTRACT

Religion was entrenched if not in law then by some institutions of society for example in the customs of people and by the precept of the ruling class. However, the nature of past religious motivations and their tendency to be exclusive and domineering resulted in a number of unspeakable occurrences. The Jews in America seek the support of politicians on religious grounds of the restoration of the Holy Land to its people. However, it seems that religion is becoming more important in one part of the world (Middle East) rather than the whole. This is primarily because a large number of the examples, given by most scholars, originate in that part of the world. A large number of the examples, given by most scholars, originate in that part of the world. Also states especially westerners like the US still attempt to conduct international business in the absence of religious beliefs. American leaders for example, George Bush and Jimmy Carter, identify themselves with the religion of Christianity. However, maintains Spiegel they avoid policies in the name of Christianity so as to avoid discriminating against or marginalizing groups of people. The idea of public opinion rose to prominence in the nineteenth century in industrial societies and has been an important part of the foreign policy process in advanced industrialized states, even more so since the extension of the franchise to larger portions of the population.

KEYWORDS: Communication, Foreign Policy, International Relations, Public Relations, Religion.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important debates in the field of international relations has surrounded the issue of public opinion and its influence on foreign policy/policies. Essentially, scholars debate the ability of the ordinary man to contribute to issues that are not of everyday talk. The idea of public opinion rose to prominence in the nineteenth century in

industrial societies and has been an important part of the foreign policy process in advanced industrialized states, even more so since the extension of the franchise to larger portions of the population (Spiegel 2004). Simply put, public opinion is the range of views on foreign policy issues held by the citizens of a state (Goldstein 2004, Beasley et al 2001).

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Similar, but more comprehensive, is the definition by Spiegel et al. (2004). They define public opinion as the views and attitudes on national and international issues held by the people of a nation, with particular emphasis on the elite and media influence. Which begs the question, what about religion on foreign policy?

According to Wilson (1966) religious thinking, religious practices, and religious institutions were once the centre of the life of the western world, indeed of all society. Religion was entrenched if not in law then by some institutions of society for example in the customs of people and by the precept of the ruling class. However, the nature of past religious motivations and their tendency to be exclusive and domineering resulted in a number of unspeakable occurrences. As such the treaty of Westphalia, signed at the end of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) between the European Catholics and Protestants, signaled the first real attempt to keep religion out of the sphere of international relations (Appleby). This, Fox maintains, is the main reason international relations today is skeptical of religion and its inclusion in world affairs. However skeptic individuals may be there is a growing assertion that religion is regaining its prominence in the international arena.

PUBLIC OPINION DEBATE: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & FOREIGN POLICY

Risse Kapan (1991) raises some very important questions essential to understanding the impact of public opinion on foreign policy. He asks: who is in charge of the foreign policy making process in liberal democracies, the elites or the masses? Neack (2002) asserts that there are two basic views on this question. The first originates from the pluralist model of policy making and suggests that public opinion has a strong impact on foreign policy issues. This view, maintains Neack, is a “bottom up” approach which assumes that the general

public has a measurable and distinct impact on the foreign policy making process. The problem with this approach, states Risse Kapan, is that there are many cases in which crucial foreign policy decisions have been taken without the input of mass public consensus. A contemporary example of this is the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003. Though there are speculations on the actual opinion of the American mass, scholars are almost certain that it was not a contributory factor to the initial decisions made by President Bush’s and other political officials to go to war.

The second approach, purport Neack and Risse Kapan, suggests a “top down” process. This approach suggests that popular consensus is the function of elite consensus which trickles down to mass public opinion. Neack asserts that this view is consistent with the realist thought because it envisions a persistent national interest pursued by elites and a passive and acquiescent or inconsequential mass public. In other words, this approach assumes that the public is easily manipulated by political leaders because of low salience or significance of foreign and security policy issues when compared to democratic (Risse Kapan).

Holsti’s study of the impact of public opinion on American foreign policy in the World Wars and the Vietnam War, cautions that the relationship between foreign policy and public opinion is more complex than that which is suggested by the two views above. The general sentiment is that public opinion has greater influence on foreign policy in democracies than in authoritarian states (Goldstein, 2004). Neack states that pluralistic societies or democracies should exhibit more of a “bottom up” impact on foreign policy. This is because of the assumption that policy in democracies supposedly reflects the “will of the people” (Beasley et al). Though, policy makers in democracies take great pains to stay apprised of public opinion and frequently commission

and consult polls on foreign-policy issues, they do not merely respond to it and as such it does not necessarily influence the policy making process (Spiegel). In fact, public opinion is seen to have an indirect impact on policy making in democratic states (Goldstein) and according to Neack if often context-based.

On the flip side, non democracies should reflect the “top up” process. This is based on the notion that authoritarian governments in exercising immense control over its citizens tend to suppress public opinion. Public opinion then should be a non factor in foreign policy making of authoritarian states or should play, at best, an instrumental role for elites (Neack). However, this distinction is not as accurate or as clear cut as it may appear. No government can rule by force alone; it needs legitimacy to survive (Goldstein). As such, this need for support may cause even autocratic leaders to extend great effort on propaganda to win support for foreign policies. In Arab countries, for example, government legitimacy is derived not from elections but from the mass public perception of the given regimes adherence and faithfulness to powerful transnational symbols (Neack). Should the public perceive its government to be weak in their most fundamental beliefs, street protests and rioting may result and social movements opposed to the governing regime may take root. Thus, Beasley et al. hold that despite the fact that non-democracies may not be “of the people, by the people” the people may still impact on the government’s foreign policy.

Hence, maintains Holsti (Nacos et al 2000) the most difficult and elusive answers about public opinion concerns its impact on foreign policy makers. There is ample evidence that policy makers differ in their sensitivity to, perception and assessment of various indicators of public attitude. Thus even the most sophisticated quantitative analysis and survey of data will not provide adequate answers to the query about

whether, under what circumstances and how strongly they may affect leaders and thus foreign policy.

There are a number of reasons why it is hard to be unequivocally sure of the role that public opinion plays in foreign policy. First, Goldstein and Beasley et al states that because of the general human nature, public opinion is seldom unified on any policy issue. Individuals do not always agree on foreign policy issues that are raised in their societies. As such, making claims in wider public discussions about the status of public opinion would require selecting some data on some sentiments and ignoring the rest (Entman). This is as, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain the sentiment of each individual in order to determine the general public opinion. Entman states “individuals may have real preferences but obtaining truly comprehensive data on the preferences of a majority of individuals toward any specific government issue at any given moment in time, becomes in practice, very difficult” He maintains that framing, which involves selecting, highlighting, and associating elements of reality to tell a coherent story, would then occur. The outcome represents the view of a particular section of the society rather than the general public.

Even in the event that the public holds a strong and stable opinion about a foreign policy issue, indicated by polling for example, it does not necessarily have to translate into a foreign policy decision. Shiraev (Nacos et al 2000) states that polling may definitely affect the issues that policy makers put at the top of their political agenda, but “actual policy making is played out from a different script”.

The second argument reports that it is hard to ascertain a link between public opinion and foreign policy because the average person tends to know little or care little about his or her country’s foreign policies (Goldstein). The

truth is that foreign policy issues are difficult to understand, even by persons trained in the field. Only a select few, “the attentive public” claims Goldstein, stays informed about the international system. The most active members of this “attentive public” are referred to as foreign policy elites and include those people in the government, as well as business people, journalists, lobbyist, and other influential members of the particular society. In the end, most researchers accept that there is no formal link between public opinion and foreign policy; however, there are a few who maintain that semi- formal links can be identified. Spiegel holds that perhaps the most obvious way in which the public affects a democratic state’s foreign policy is through the election of policy makers, including the chief executive, for example the President or Prime Minister. However, Mingst (1998) opines that elections are an imperfect measure of public opinion since they merely select individuals for office- individuals who share voters’ attitudes on some issues but not on others. For example, political scientists speculate that the recent election of the Democratic Party in the United States was on the general public opinion to end the war against Iraq. Also it is difficult to completely understand what people actually vote for. For instance, perhaps the Republicans did not lose the election because of the war but rather because of its failure to make good on promises. In saying all this, it becomes clear that the link, formal or semi, between public opinion and foreign policy is theoretically weak.

Mingst maintain that occasionally and quite extraordinarily, the masses may vote directly on issues of foreign policy. In this case, some European states ratified the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, through the use of referendums. Notwithstanding, in some cases people may be voting for an issue they really do not have much knowledge about. As such, giving them this power through referendums can be dangerous

to a country’s foreign policy. Finally, maintains Mingst, in most democratic societies public-opinion polling provides information on public attitudes. However, with the exception of war periods, these polls rarely ask question of international significance rather they tend to focus on domestic affairs. In the event that it is of international significance, polling may just help to direct where on the politicians list (1st, 2nd or 3rd etc.) the issue goes.

RELIGION: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND FOREIGN POLICY

“I base a lot of my foreign policy discussions on some things that I think are true. One, I believe there is an almighty God and secondly, I believe that one of the greatest gifts of the almighty is the desire in everybody’s soul, regardless of what you like and what you think- to be free”

George W. Bush (April 24, 2006)

This statement by the American President, George W. Bush along with a host of others of similar nature has led to the argument that there is an increase in the role of religion in international relations and foreign policy. Appleby (2000) argues that “we in an age in which millions of people are on a march, in a rather militant fashion, in the name of religion” Against all expectations, maintains Appleby, the mixture of religion and politics is presently making a powerful comeback in international relations. To some this is frightening, however to others, for example Fox (2001) and Spiegel (1982) this is only natural first, because there exist a number of individual leaders who still associate themselves with particular religions and second there still exist theocratic states like Iran and Afghanistan. Clearly, Fox maintains, the foreign policies of these nations will be influenced by the religious views of the country and by a larger extent the leader. As an example, Spiegel asserts that religious motivations and philosophies have always been

essential to explaining Middle East/ US relations. This is essentially because of the 'religious nature' of a number of states in the Middle East.

To further the proof that the role of religion is increasing in the international arena, Goldstein maintains that there is an increase in the size, number and influence of fundamentalist movements and international organizations of Christian, Islamic, or Judaic (to name a few) origin. Such movements challenge the values and practices of secular organizations, created to set religion and states establishments apart. These fundamentalist movements include the Islamic movement in Turkey and the Christian evangelic movements in the United States. Both seek to challenge the longstanding secular traditions by incorporating religious values into the government. Goldstein maintains that the activities of these religious groups such as the Jews occupying settlements in Israel and the Christians in the US convincing their governments to withdraw from the UN population fund, in one way or another runs counter to the argument of a secular international system.

The article, "The World Shifting Sands; And Now, Islamism triumphs Arabism" by Slackman (2006, August 20) is, for the purposes of this paper, *the* testimony that there is an increase in the role of religion in foreign policy and international relations. Slackman's article points to the renewed relevance of religion in the state of Egypt in the aftermath of the conflict between Hezbollah and Lebanon. According to many political scientists and intellectuals, the influence of pan- Arabism began to weaken in Egypt after their defeat in the Arab-Israel war of 1967, a decline that seemed to hasten in the 1970's into the 1980's. Since then, there has been a steady increase in many Egyptians relationship to political Islam. Slackman articulates that the increase unification under the name of Islamism in Egypt

has occurred for a number of reasons. Hezbollah's perceived triumph in the war against Lebanon is one of them and has served to heighten political Islam as the antidote to the failures of Arab nationalism, communism, socialism, and especially contemporary American liberal democracy. Fox (2001) holds that there are three main ways in which religion serves to influence international relations and foreign policy today. First, foreign policies are influenced by the religious views and beliefs of policy makers and their constituents. He maintains that while it is clear that some or even many individuals do not give much weight to religion, it is undisputable that there are those who do and at least some policy makers fall into this category. A good example of a policy maker influenced by a religious belief system is the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Notably, this is a good example because of the theological nature of Iran. In another article (2006, May 10), Slackman speaks to a letter written by the Iranian condemning the actions of the US (invasion of Iraq) on religious grounds. Slackman maintains that the entire letter was framed in religious terms and seemed to be an attempt by Ahmadinejad to shame President Bush by constantly asking him to examine his actions in the light of his so called Christian values. Another example of the influence of religion on a foreign policy maker can be taken from an article by LaFranchi (2006, March 02). LaFranchi maintains that President Bush's focus on one of the world's most high profile humanitarian crisis in Dafur, Sudan suggests a deeper shift in the forces influencing US foreign policy today. Not surprising, Bush was cheered by the coterie of evangelical advisors and also the sizeable Christian right constituency.

The second way in which religion influences international relations today, maintains Fox, is through its use as a source of legitimacy for both supporting and criticizing government

behaviour locally and internationally. Slackman, while citing the work of experts like Rashwan, asserts "people have come together to identify themselves more as Muslims in the last five years in response to the US led war on terrorism". Essentially, this is because these people see the American government as an aggressor and the war as a discriminatory campaign targeting Muslims and Islam worldwide. However, maintains Slackman, it is not outside pressures alone that have pressed so many people of this nation, and this region, toward that view. Citizens in Egypt criticize their own local government on its policies towards the general population. This is the reason, maintains Slackman, why a number of Egyptians are of the view that: "Islam is the only solution". Slackman quotes an ordinary Egyptian citizen, Jihan Mahmoud stating "I have more faith in Islam than in my state; I have more faith in Allah than in Hosni Mubarak (Egyptian President)"

Goldstein (2004) maintains that religious institutions provide an avenue for political opposition. For example, where Saudi Arabian and Egyptian governments wanted to side with US in its military opposition to Iraq, but they were met by opposing populations who rejected this on the fundamental basis that they share a similar religion with the Iraqi's.

Fox maintains that the phenomenon of persons associating themselves with a particular religion or ideology is not anything new. In periods where there are crises people tend to gravitate to religious beliefs. To support this point, Slackman's quotes a Mona Mahmoud "we need an umbrella.....in the 60's Arabism was our umbrella. We had a cause. Now we lack an umbrella. We feel lost in space" The idea is that people always seek some ideology (Communism) or religion (Islamism) to identify with when they feel hopeless. As such, with the rise in unexplainable and in some instances unwelcomed phenomena today (globalization,

free trade markets and others), scholars have posited an increase in the number of people with traditional religious views than ever before. The third way in which the presence of religion is seen as increasing and influencing international relations and foreign policy is through the increase in the number of internal religious conflicts especially in the Middle East. When other states get involved, it seems to become an even greater war of religions. This is essentially the case when the US interferes in the disputes on the behalf of one group (Israelites) over another. A specific example that Fox highlights is the rebellion of the Albanians in Kosovo against the Serbia government. The violence in Kosovo recently spread to the Albanians in bordering Macedonia inciting support from Albanians in native Albania and also of numerous Islamic states and organization. The fourth way in which religion gains attention today is its ties with human rights issues. Documents such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of 1966 prohibit religious discrimination and inciting religious violence. Also increased attentions are now being paid to states that dictate a woman's role by way or religion.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, it is necessary to reiterate the premise of this paper that maintains that there is no direct linkage between public opinion and foreign policy formation. There is really no way of being unequivocally certain that public opinion plays a deciding role in foreign policy. Although the public may express their views in a number of ways, it is largely base on the perception of the policy makers, who may choose to follow or disregard public opinions as they see fit. Holsti supports this view by stating, that the only thing that is known is that "policymaker's perceptions of public opinion in the immediate and future sense can set

parameters for foreign policy behaviour” (Nacos et al). Slackman’s article as well as number of other writings supports the assertion that there is an increasing role of religion in international relations and foreign policy. Drake (Beasley et al 2001) states that the most important and constant elements of Israeli foreign policy for example are those that are derived from Israel’s self-concept of being the “biblically chosen people”. As such, Jews in America seek the support of politicians on religious grounds “to restore the Holy Land to its people” (Spiegel). However, it seems that religion is becoming more important in one part of the world (Middle East) rather than the whole. This is primarily because a large number of the examples, given by most scholars, originate in that part of the world. Also states especially westerners like the US still attempt to conduct international business in the absence of religious beliefs. American leaders for example, George Bush and Jimmy Carter, identify themselves with the religion of Christianity. However, maintains Spiegel they avoid policies in the name of Christianity so as to avoid discriminating against or marginalizing groups of people.

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