New Wars, Old Religions, Soft States: the macro environment of security and citizenship

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Social science explanations of religious militancy have been primarily psychology (or social psychological). The demographic growth of the late twentieth century produced a large gap between expectations and social reality, as highly educated young men found their social and economic aspirations thwarted by the absence of jobs. It is estimated for example that China needs to create twenty million new jobs per annum. In North Africa and the Middle East, the failures of nationalism produced extremist religious movements as a result of relative deprivation and frustration. My contention is that the Huntington thesis has become the dominant paradigm, and his thesis is psychological – the demographic bulge plus economic failure equals religious militancy. In short more explanations of terrorism and religious fanaticism are neo-Malthuasian arguments. In this paper, I want to explore alternative approaches to examine state failures and to adequate cognisance of the social impact of religious beliefs, namely beliefs.

In the recent sociology of the military, there has been an important debate about the distinction between old and new wars, providing a valuable insight into micro religious conflicts, ethnic-cleansing and genocide. In particular, the concept of new wars is helpful in thinking about the increased vulnerability of women and children in civil conflicts. Old wars are said to be characteristic of the international system that was created by the Treaty of Westphalia, involving military conflict between armies that were recruited and trained by nation states. In the conventional inter-states wars of the past that involved large set battles and military manoeuvres, sexual violence against women on enemy territory was dysfunctional in terms of strategic, rational, military objectives, because it interfered with the primary objective of war, which was the decisive defeat of an opposing army by direct military engagement. Harassing civilian populations constrained military mobility on the battle field and delayed engagement with an opposing army. With these conventional inter-state wars, the development of international law to protect civilians was perfectly compatible with these military objectives.

In new wars, this military logic evaporates, and systematic rape of women (so-called 'camp rape'), and violence towards civilians generally, become functional activities in undermining civil authorities and destroying civil society. In wars between states, the majority of casualties are military personnel; in new wars, the casualties are almost entirely civilian. New wars involve the sexualization of violence and through Hollywood the eroticisation of war. The other characteristic of such wars is the growing use of children as cheap combat troops. These wars are in part the product of failed states and the reduced cost of military equipment, such as the widespread use of mines and the Kalashnikov rifle. New wars have occurred in Afghanistan, Bosni, Darfur, Rwanda, Burma, East Timor and the Sudan. Bangladesh may soon be added to the list.

These new wars have the following characteristics occur therefore in post-colonial territories and they are expressed in terms of ethnic differentiation. Conflicting groups deploy or invent traditions to explain and justify current conflicts, and the belligerents

need ideological simplification of the conflict to justify violence. And hence violence plays a large part in community formation. Religious conflicts are often seen to be exacerbated by the negative social impact of civil wars and ethnic violence that are in turn the products of new wars. The essence of modern conflict is the disjunction between the identities created by states and the identities created by transnational religions. In Asia, the legacy of soft states provides a fertile context for Taliban-type social movements.

Recent sociological and political approaches to religious conflict have neglected cultural aspects of social violence. What these explanations often have in common is some attention to the failure of the state to deliver adequate forms of security through the development of secular citizenship that can embrace cultural or ethnic diversity. With weak or failing states, the public sphere is no longer a neutral ground for the expression of peaceful competition between social groups. Drug cartels and the funding of the state through illegal activities has become a common feature of political activity in the third world, where the state is directly involved in trafficking, drug dealing, and sexual slavery. The rule of law is corrupted by the direct involvement of the state in ethnic conflict (for example by supporting Hindus against Muslims in Gujarat, or Christian settlers against Muslims in south Philippines, or majority Buddhist communities against minority Muslim communities in south Thialand).

Empirical case studies of religious conflict such as Hindu-Muslim riots, Sunni and Shi'ite conflicts in Pakistan and Iraq, or Christian-Muslim conflict in Mindanao support the view that ethnic conflict is a function of state intervention in support of majorities against minorities. This suggests that the principal cause of social conflict and civil rights abuses is the crisis of failed states, but the response of western governments to these problems has so far been defensive and unhelpful, and thus the historical record suggests that democratic majorities care less about the erosion of liberties that harm minorities than they do about their own security.

Failed states create an environment for new wars, in which it may be in the interests of elites to use ethnic and religious conflict for political objectives, but we cannot ignore the cultural dimension. Are monotheistic religions (primarily the Abrahamic religions) less able to adjust to the hybridity and complexity of globalisation? David Hume once argued to the effect that polytheism is more tolerant of difference and complexity than monotheism. We need a better understanding therefore of how multicultural societies that are the products of global migrations and the rise of transnational communities can better manage cultural diversity and foster communal tolerance. We need to better understand the new challenges to political sovereignty that are consequences of globalisation without descending into fascism as the only radical response.