

Religion vs. Secularism in Contemporary World Politics

by Cesare Merlini

As mail-in voting begins for the US November elections, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has announced plans to visit Pope Francis in Rome. The intent was anticipated in a critical article penned by Pompeo himself in *First Things*, the authoritative US journal of conservative Catholics.¹

In it, Pompeo explained his visit as aimed at pressing the Vatican to halt its entente with China about the naming of bishops in that country, leading to angry rebukes and a warning that the Pope may in fact refuse to meet the incoming Secretary of State.²

¹ Michael R. Pompeo, "China's Catholics and the Church's Moral Witness", in *First Things-Web Exclusives*, 18 September 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/09/chinas-catholics-and-the-churchs-moral-witness>.

² Claudio Tito, "Cina, gelo Vaticano-Usa. Francesco dice no all'incontro con Pompeo", in *Repubblica*, 26 September 2020, https://rep.repubblica.it/pwa/generale/2020/09/26/news/cina_gelo_vaticano-usa_francesco_dice_no_all_incontro_con_pompeo-268627410.

A couple of weeks earlier, two normalisation agreements involving Israel and the Middle Eastern states of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates were signed with much pomp and fanfare at the White House. The name given to the agreements: The Abraham Accords. This follows Trump's transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem in 2018.

Donald Trump's efforts to consolidate electoral support from religious groups is not surprising or new. This tactic was instrumental in his previous election in 2016. More recently, one can recall the photo-op at Christ Church, near the White House, with the Holy Bible in his right hand after having ordered the police to dispel Black-Lives-Matter protesters from the area. Or Trump's decision to be the first sitting president to address the annual anti-abortion March for Life rally earlier this year.³

³ White House, *Remarks by President Trump at the 47th Annual March for Life*, Washington, 24 January 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president->

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It goes without saying that evangelical Christians are the main religious group in question. Mike Pompeo is an avid evangelical, as is Vice President Mike Pence. Around a quarter of the US population consider themselves evangelical.⁴ Eight out of ten white evangelicals supported Trump over Hillary Clinton in 2016.⁵ A recent Pew poll shows that a similar share would still vote for him come November.⁶

"The Donald" has been happy to rally this solid base during the campaign. As he himself said regarding the decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, this was "done for the evangelicals".⁷ Then, during a recent trip to Ohio, he attacked his Democratic contender: "He is following the radical left agenda, take away your guns, destroy your second amendment, no religion, no anything, hurt the Bible, hurt God. [...] He's against God".⁸

trump-47th-annual-march-life; David Smith, "Trump Tells Anti-Abortion Activists at March for Life: 'I Am Fighting for You'", in *The Guardian*, 24 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/d6d4a>.

⁴ Ryan P. Burge, "Evangelicals Show No Decline, Despite Trump and Nones", in *Christianity Today*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/march/evangelical-nones-mainline-us-general-social-survey-gss.html>.

⁵ Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis", in *Fact Tank*, 9 November 2016, <http://pewrsr.ch/2fSNWBY>.

⁶ Michael Lipka and Gregory A. Smith, "White Evangelical Approval of Trump Slips, But Eight-in-Ten Say They Would Vote for Him", in *Fact Tank*, 1 July 2020, <https://pewrsr.ch/3g7TClQ>.

⁷ "Trump Says He Moved US Embassy to Jerusalem 'for the Evangelicals'", in *The Times of Israel*, 18 August 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-says-he-moved-us-embassy-to-jerusalem-for-the-evangelicals>.

⁸ Ashley Parker, "A 'Radical' Leftist Who Is 'Against God'? Trump Paints Biden in a Picture

Joe Biden is catholic and should enjoy countervailing support from US Catholics, as happened during the times of Jack Kennedy. Yet, white and conservative Catholics, those who read *First Things*, have long been at loggerheads with Pope Francis and his social and economic message, drawing closer to the evangelicals in the US.

They will likely prevail over the progressive minority during the elections, supporting Trump even more so than they did four years ago. As for the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, it did not come out with a political endorsement – possibly an implicit suggestion of where their sympathies lie.

Looking at the US Jewish vote, a sizable majority – around two thirds – are said to be on the side of former Vice President Biden, though to a slightly smaller extent than they were for Hillary Clinton. The above developments related to Israel may reinforce the pro-Trumpian minority, but again, it is the evangelical community in the US rather the Jewish-American minority that is of most interest to Trump.

What is the significance of these trends? Are they limited to the United States or can they be interpreted as a sign of a broader and growing importance of religion in public affairs today?

Between the 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, religion seemed to be on the rise worldwide. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism in the

Many Don't Recognize", in *The Washington Post*, 10 August 2020, <https://wapo.st/3kthGmb>.

Soviet Union, with the related decline of “scientific atheism” to the benefit of Orthodox Christianity, had contributed to such readings. China was also affected, allowing Confucianism back among the élites and folk cults to recover among ordinary people.

Add to this the growing fanaticism of the Hindu population in India, at the expense of the Muslim minority, or the rise of political Islam in search of an identity alternative to the ones of the Christian West. Christian organisations were slowly becoming politically relevant in Europe too, particularly in those eastern countries joining the EU at the time.

The US, however, remained the most important case. To an extent, the election of President George W. Bush, an evangelical who made no secret of his piety, indicated the increasing relevance of this denomination as a political force in the country. Possibly elsewhere too, as shown by its growing influence in Brazil for instance.

Hence the flourishing of an academic school under the label of “the return of religion”. Not everyone was convinced by this argument, however. During a conference at the University of Sussex with the word “post-secular” in its title, I presented my points that there was consistency between secularisation and the transformations underway in most societies.⁹ Two trends supported

⁹ Cesare Merlini, *Religious Revival and Megatrends in Global Security, Economy and Governance*, paper submitted to the conference “The Postsecular in International Politics”, University of Sussex, 27-28 October 2011, <http://brook.gs/2bABsrb>.

such a view: religiosity tended to decline worldwide with the growth of per-capita income; and younger generations tended to be less religious.

Subsequent data provided further confirmation. Ronald Inglehart’s excellent article in *Foreign Affairs*, for instance, points to the late 2000s as the turning point and contends that from then to 2019 the overwhelming majority of the considered 49 countries have become less religious.¹⁰

The United States, according to Inglehart, has experienced the largest decline of religiosity. Over the time span of one generation, people in the US who gave high ratings to the importance of God in their lives have nearly halved, a significant decline indeed.

These trends are not limited to high-income countries, however. They are also spreading to the rest of the world, with the important exception of 18 Muslim-majority countries which, while not contradicting the above economic and age correlations, have tended to defy global trends, remaining “somewhat more religious and culturally conservative than average”.¹¹

Inglehart explains such developments by noting that “Modern societies have become less religious in part because they no longer need to uphold the kinds of gender and sexual norms that the major world religions have instilled

¹⁰ Ronald F. Inglehart, “Giving Up on God. The Global Decline of Religion”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 99, No. 5 (September-October 2020), p. 110-118, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1126301>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

for centuries."¹²

The rise of science and technology can also be highlighted as contributing variables for the dwindling appeal of religion, albeit the meaning and fear of death likely remain among the most effective springs towards faith among various communities. Looking at the current COVID-19 pandemic, the general absence of voices attributing the virus to God's retribution or turning to faith and rites to free us from the pandemic may be indicative of this declining religiosity worldwide.

How then can we reconcile the apparent return of religion with an acceleration of secularisation? The answer lies with a decoupling of, even a possible polarisation within, the religious phenomenon to a higher degree than ever before in history.

On the one side, stands a religious banner that is ideological, identitarian and xenophobic – and possibly also instrumental – a means to compensate for inadequate response by leaders to current adversities such as the economic downturn, ethnic conflicts or global warming.

The almost simultaneous abandonment of secular and tolerant roots in so many distant and different places around the world is striking. It includes Modi's India, that turns its back on Nehru's and Gandhi's heritage; Erdoğan's (second) Turkey that restores the museum of Hagia Sophia into a Grand Mosque, thereby reversing the legacy of Atatürk; the characterisation of Israel

as a Jewish state moving away from the lay Zionism of its founding fathers; and the new proximity between former soviet agent Putin and the Orthodox Church. Looking closer to home in Europe, Kaczyński's catholic Poland and Orbán's Christian Hungary, both of which are dismissing those who fought the Soviet Union, are further examples of these trends.

Under the label of patriotism, practically all the leaders mentioned above (and more) have resurrected nationalism. This nationalism is perhaps less aggressive and obsessed by conquest than it was a century ago – although Russian interference in Crimea and Ukraine or China's activism on its south-eastern borders do appear somewhat antique.

Instead, this is a nationalism that is more inward looking, hostile to immigrants, oppressive to dissent and internal minorities and opposed to independent justice and information. When it comes to foreign policy, it is a nationalism that privileges zero-sum dealings with counterparts, selective cooperation with partners, disdain for multilateralism and hostility towards different cultures.

The other reading of religion is a spiritual, theological and value (or solidarity) based belief system among ordinary people. In its various related forms and denominations, this understanding of religion is confronted with the challenge of being, or soon becoming, a minority in their respective secularising societies.

¹² Ibid., p. 111.

Hence, this religion faces a challenge of resilience, adapting and contributing to the demographic, ethnic, sexual and hence civic and cultural transformations underway in society.

Whether or when more secularised nations, including those faithful minorities within their populations, will reverse the current trend towards nationalism in the international scene may be speculative at the moment.

Yet, as far as domestic affairs are concerned, Inglehart contends that, contrary to the religious conservative warning “that the retreat from faith will lead to a collapse of social cohesion and public morality, [...] countries that are less religious actually tend to be less corrupt and have lower murder rates”.¹³

Thus, world politics are today experiencing a paradox in which the growing secularisation of societies is contrasted with the efforts of certain political leaders and figures who use religion as a rallying ideology; a means to attract political support at home and financial or ideological backing abroad, exploiting religious beliefs and symbolisms while not hiding their personal disdain for or infringements of the more spiritual and social characteristics of religious beliefs and practices.

Seen in this light, the real threat to global stability may not lay with the increased trends of secularisation, but rather with the efforts of political leaders intent on exploiting religion for their own purposes, deploying this a

rallying call to engage in different kinds of identity politics and divisive rhetoric both at home and abroad.

In a way, and using an image from the Italian microcosm as an example, the leader of the right-wing and anti-migrant League party (Lega) waving a rosary during a political rally while the Community of Sant’Egidio, a lay Catholic association dedicated to social service, was supplying hot meals to immigrants and the homeless in a nearby centre, can symbolise this decoupling of faith in contemporary world politics and society.

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¹³ Ibid., p. 111.

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