

Eric O. Hanson:
Religion and Politics in the International System Today

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Throughout much of the second half of the 2nd millennium, people of the Western world were convinced that with more and more technological advances, the importance of religion would decrease and perhaps ultimately cease to exist. The 20th century – although technological progress didn't stop – has shown a much different picture. Clearly, religiously inspired events, like the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s, made people aware of the importance of religion in most national political systems, although many remained unconvinced of its importance in international affairs. It was only after September 11th that people began to take notice of the interrelation between religion and the international political system. If 9/11 proved anything, it was the enormously influential role that religion plays in contemporary affairs.

With his book *Religion and Politics in the International System Today* Eric O. Hanson follows a recent trend in scholarly discussion on this new role of religion that followed the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon in 2001. The author is a professor of Political Science at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit university situated in Silicon Valley, where he has been teaching Chinese political culture and religion in politics for twenty years. His book is divided into two major parts, which are further subdivided into four and six chapters, respectively. In the first part, "Religion and politics in the new global paradigm", Hanson presents the paradigm that the book proposes and takes a look at religion and politics from a religious as well as a political viewpoint. In the second part, „Religion in contemporary world politics“, the author focuses on actual case studies, from „the globe's most secular society“ (p. 177) Japan to "Islamist Iran" (p. 7). In the end, he presents his outlook to the future in the chapter "Religion and politics for the new millennium".

Hanson "proposes a post-Cold War paradigm based on the interaction between the contemporary globalisation of the political, economic, military, and communication (political plus EMC) systems" (p. 1) and the growing influence of religion in those systems. He agrees with Samuel P. Huntington's theory that religion is the main factor in holding together civilizations¹ and defines it as a "pattern of beliefs and activities that express ultimate meaning in a person's life" (p. 70). In contrast, politics is defined by Hanson as a "pattern of beliefs and activities that determine who gets what, when, how" (p. 76). However, Huntington, according to Hanson, falls short of providing the concrete influence that religion and politics have on each other in these cultures; Huntington's *Clash* remained a theory that was at least challenged by empirical data. In this book, Hanson draws back on Huntington's analysis of cultural identity but hopes to match it with *Realpolitik*. His aim is to provide "the generally educated population" (p.

12), such as his students, academic scholars and practitioners, with a new model for understanding post-Cold War politics.

The first part of the book focuses more on a theoretical approach to religion. Others, such as Joseph Nye², have made an approach to analysing national power sources like Hanson's EMC systems but have failed to include religion as a factor. However, Hanson does not include religion as a system like the other four because religious systems of nations are not necessarily as linked as, for example, their economic systems.

At the national level, Hanson sees four possible relationships between religion and politics: "dominant religions" such as the US's civil religion that serve to legitimise state power, religious and political organisations competing for "institutional and expressive power", various religions competing for influence within one nation and religious groups fighting for control of the national culture. Each of the three EMC systems works in a way that tries to reduce the weight of the other two EMC systems and the political system. "Religion and politics thus constitute a 'united front against the EMC systems'" (p. 45). Religious and political leaders should thus work together to defend the society from such "monopolistic" practices of the EMC.

Hanson subsequently discusses the seven main religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and also Maoist Marxism, which he counts as a "religion [...] of public life,, (p. 70), and takes a closer look at those spiritual practices that are most likely to influence politics. This serves as the basis for the second and much longer part of the book, where Hanson applies the theoretical analyses from the first part to global *Realpolitik*. His categorisation of regions doesn't follow Huntington's earlier mentioned approach but distinguishes it from a geographical point of view, placing Israel within the chapter on the Middle East and Russia in the West.

Since it is the author's academic specialty, we will take a closer look at the section on China.

Judging from the media presence, the first thought likely to come up in the minds of many people is the image of the ever-present Dalai Lama and his fight against the repression of Tibetan Buddhism. But there is very little on that matter in Hanson's book. Hanson instead opts for devoting a major part of this chapter to the persecution of members of Falun Gong.

The economic reforms of the 1980s created new hardships for many Chinese, especially among the country's middle-aged population. Subsequently, traditional Chinese social networks gained more and more influence, including religious ones. „This religious resurgence included, first of all, the spectacular growth of Chinese folk religion,“ (p. 167) which led to the rise of Falun Gong and other *qigong* sects. *Qigong* as practices, according to Hanson, are viewed by most Chinese as a medical practice rather than religiously motivated. As medical care costs became unbearable for many Chinese families, they turned to their *qigong* masters for medical relief. For some time, the Chinese government not only accepted but also supported these *qigong* movements as valuable „indigenous medicine“ (p. 174). But Falun Gong also attracted many members of the Chinese administration and has proven to be very hard to destroy, despite severe

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persecution by the Chinese government. The persistence of the sect and its continued public appearances and demonstrations has directly challenged the Chinese Communist Party's grip on the Chinese people. If Maoist Marxism can be considered a „religion [...] of public life“ (p. 70), as Hanson considers it, it obviously cannot accept any other movement to challenge its position.

At various times, Hanson emphasizes the „global“ claim of his book (not just in the chapter on China). Hanson has possibly managed to show the interrelation of global actions by pointing out certain connections. For example, he shows how 9/11, an event not closely related to Chinese national politics in most peoples minds, has affected the Communist party's fight against religious groups by loosely labelling them as „terrorists“ (p. 168). It is those details that set the book apart from merely descriptive histories and make it especially interesting and valuable.

Since religion is an emotional topic, even more so today, it is not easy to write a scientific study about it. As Hanson himself admits himself in his introduction, his background as a Silicon Valley Lutheran certainly influences his views on these topics; yet he has actually managed to maintain a neutral position in regard to the different religions. Still, his religious upbringing can be noted from time to time. An example of this can be seen when he talks about the religious background of many Nobel-Peace-Prize winners, whereas there are probably just as many who did not have a religious background. This book is certainly not a critical look at the role religion has played and plays in the world. It does, however, offer a critique of current foreign politics of the US, which „focus [es] more on [its] own national good rather than on the health of the international systems“ (p. 59). Hanson's point of view becomes even more obvious when he writes that the U.S.'s neglect of the important role of religious leadership in Iraq and its reliance on the secular Ahmed Chalabi „was a U.S. defense department fantasy“ (p. 296).

With more than 300 pages, the book comprises a huge amount of facts without being unreadable. It is well structured, and the reader can follow Hanson's arguments without being overloaded with theoretical approaches. The result is a book that brings out the importance of religion and carries the potential to make a significant contribution to our understanding of post-Cold War international relations.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Huntington, Samuel P. (1996), *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 20.
- ² Nye, Joseph F. (2002), *The Paradox of American Power: Why the world's only superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.