

The Global Rise of Anti-Authoritarian Religion

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Why has religion become so political in the global era? One answer is globalisation itself. The globalisation of knowledge and the weakening of old authoritative institutions provide a space for new voices and movements to emerge. Some of these are buttressed with the traditional authority of religion, but in forms that are distinctively contemporary and anti-authoritarian. This is a striking and disturbing feature of religion in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

The shape of organised religion around the world is shifting. Islam is statistically on the rise. Pew research reports indicate that by 2035 the numbers of children born to Muslims will outnumber those born to Christians, and Islam is by far the fastest growing religious community in the world.¹ At the same time, Christianity is decreasing in numbers. The erosion of Christian affiliation continues at what the Pew Research Center describes as “a rapid pace”.²

But those statistics do not tell the whole story, since Islam is on the rise especially in some parts of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa. And Christianity is mostly in decline in Europe and the United States while its numbers proportionately increase in Africa, Asia, and South America.

Moreover, the kind of religiosity is changing as well. Increasingly the popularity of old traditional institutions is making way for new movements and denominations

¹ Pew Research Center. 2017. “The Changing Global Religious Landscape.” (<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/>), accessed 27 July 2020.

² Pew Research Center. 2019. “In U.S., the Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace.” (<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>), accessed 27 July 2020.

that tend to be stridently anti-authoritarian, since they reject the mainstream institutional forms of Protestantism. At one time in the United States the mainstream Protestant denominations (such as Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregational, and the like) rivalled the Roman Catholic church in numbers. But from 1972 to 2017, the numbers of mainstream Protestants in the US dropped precipitously from 28% to almost 10 percent.³ The average age of the surviving mainstream Protestant members is 52, indicating that the denominations are quite literally dying out. The decline of mainstream Protestants has been in part due to the strength of Evangelical Protestantism, some 26% of the population, a number that has held fairly solidly even though the total number of Christian adherents have declined.

Huge megachurches that are independent and not affiliated with any traditional denomination have sprung up, not only in the United States, but among Christian communities around the world. They are often centred around charismatic preachers like Joel Osteen in America or David Yonggi Cho in South Korea. Osteen's Lakewood Church in Texas is the largest congregation in the U.S., boasting a regular attendance of nearly 50,000 believers; that impressive number is dwarfed by Cho's Yoido Full Gospel Church, which vaunts a staggering membership of over a million Christians in Seoul. (Cho was forced to preach to a smaller crowd for a while, however, as he was convicted of embezzling \$12 million from his parishioners in 2014 and sentenced to three years in prison.) At a time when many religious communities around the world are diminishing, the global rise of these enormous megachurches and megacongregations are a testament to the continuing vitality of religion. But it is not traditional religion but new anti-authoritarian ones that are on the rise.

In a five-year Luce Foundation-supported study on religion in global civil society, my co-authors and I found that much the same is true in other religious traditions around the world.⁴

³ Stetzer, Ed. 2017. "If It Doesn't Stem Its Decline, Mainline Protestantism Has Just 23 Easters Left. *Washington Post*, April 28, 2017. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/04/28/if-it-doesnt-stem-its-decline-mainline-protestantism-has-just-23-easters-left/>), accessed 27 July 2020.

⁴ Juergensmeyer, Mark, Dinah Griego and John Soboslai. 2015. *God in the Tumult of the Global Square: Religion in Global Civil Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

INDIA

In India, a glut of new religious movements have emerged, mostly based loosely on Hindu ideas and concepts, but eschewing its traditional leadership. What these movements have in common is their creation of different centres of authority, new avenues for identity, and new modes of belonging – all outside the control of the established religious authorities.

The Sathya Sai Baba movement, a spiritual organisation based around the teachings of an eponymous Indian guru who stresses the one-ness of all beings, devotes itself to humanitarian projects. Education, medical care, efforts toward clean drinking water, and aid to victims of natural disasters are its stated focus. It is true that there are tax incentives from the Indian government to provide social services, but it also is true that the philosophy of many of these movements include a devotion to *seva*, the term for “service” that is applied both to serving the needs of the spiritual masters of the movements as well as serving the population as a whole. Many of the new religious movements surging throughout the world have widened their focus from solely spiritual aims to projects done in the service of a community that goes beyond the religious group.

JAPAN – AUM SHINRIKYO

This is the case in Japan, which has witnessed a remarkable eruption of new religious movements in the country for several decades. Some of those movements have been bizarre – members of the PanaWave movement, for example, wear white gear to protect them from hidden electromagnetic rays that they imagine are harming people and bringing about the end of the world. But none have seemed especially dangerous until the advent of the Aum Shinrikyo movement in 1984. The movement developed out of a blend of Japanese and Indian forms of Buddhism, and took on an extreme eschatological character under the guidance of Shoko Asahara, the leader of the movement. In March of 1995, members of the group released deadly sarin gas into the Tokyo subway during rush hour, killing 12 and injuring thousands. This attack was inspired by Asahara’s belief that a cataclysmic event he called Armageddon would destroy the unworthy and leave only the righteous members of Aum Shinrikyo.⁵

⁵ Juergensmeyer, Mark. 2008. *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

The terrorist group did not start out advocating terrorism, of course. It was a religious movement fully engaged with the modern world. But the confrontation turned deadly in a distinctly contemporary way. Not only did it make use of a vicious gas invented through advanced chemical processes, but also it propagated the prophecies of Asahara that were related to recent history. He envisioned a third World War at the beginning of the third millennium, one that would dwarf World War II in its destruction (a fearful claim in a country that suffered the world's only atomic attack). Moreover, he prophesied that the government of Japan would both perpetrate the attacks that would initiate the end times, and ultimately fail to protect the Japanese population from the disasters that would occur. Asahara challenged the authority of the secular Japanese government by incorporating the fears of the late 20th century and its technologies into prophecies that the nerve gas attacks were meant to confirm.

The tragic loss of life when sarin gas was released in the Tokyo subways in March of 1995 by disciples of Shoko Asahara was a calculated event. Asahara had conjured up an apocalyptic fantasy of the future and the attack in the subways gave his prophecies credibility – to his followers it seemed that the apocalyptic war had begun and his prophecies were becoming real. After the attack, Japan went through a public process of collective soul-searching, trying to understand how such a thing could happen. Many of the accusations pointed to the social crises that lay behind the creation of many of the Japanese new religions. People in Japan, like those in many industrialised nations, were experiencing an increased feeling of alienation and loss of dignity in the fast pace of urban life. Breaking from traditional cultures made this new life possible, but it also unanchored people from the structures of meaning that made sense of the world around them. New religious movements such as Aum Shinrikyo blended a prophetic vision and a charismatic leader with the promise of inner peace and personal transformation. It was a heady combination. While the Aum Shinrikyo vision of the world was a violent one, many other new religious movements and many traditional religions blended the idea of a knowable future (often a dangerous one) with the individual's ability to become something more than merely ordinary. The differences among the new movements lay in the shape of that future, the practices required to achieve personal enlightenment, and the perception of what the world needed in order to be transformed.

CHINA – FALUN GONG

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), religious movements have long been seen as posing a threat to the atheist state. At least since the Communist Revolution under

Chairman Mao Zedong, religion has been charged with stunting progress and stealing loyalty away from its proper place: Chinese nationalism and the Communist Party. A fear of religion has occurred in other cultures, of course – during the campaign of John F. Kennedy for the Presidency of the United States, for example, fears were rife that being a Catholic meant Kennedy's loyalty was ultimately to the Pope, who would therefore be able to dictate U.S. policy. In China, however, any kind of religion was regarded as potentially dangerous to public life. For that reason it has been carefully controlled. Article 36 of China's constitution expressly defends freedom of religion, but only those religions sanctioned by the government and controlled by it. In China there are only five official religions – Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism – and their actions are carefully monitored by government watchdogs. Any religious group unaffiliated with the approved versions of these does not enjoy legal protection.

Such is the case with the new religious movement known as Falun Gong (or Falun Dafa), which has been under government scrutiny at least since their large-scale protest on 25 April 1999. On that day more than ten thousand adherents gathered to seek governmental recognition for their movement. Their demands were ignored, and the group was banned only a few months later. Since then the persecution of the movement has persisted. Though Chinese state officials are rumoured to have been part of the group in the early 1990s, thousands of people associated with Falun Gong have been detained since the protest.

Falun Gong is a syncretic spiritual system that blends aspects of Buddhism, forms of mysticism and the popular form of exercise known as Qigong (a kind of martial arts training similar to Tai Chi and sometimes called shadow-boxing). The movement has repeatedly stressed that it seeks only legal recognition for its practices, not political power. Still, the PRC has condemned the group as an enemy of the state. What frightened the Chinese officials were two things: the fact that it is not controlled by the government, and its effortless ability to mobilise mass numbers of members in protest rallies. If it can gather such impressive crowds so quickly, the officials reasoned, it could threaten government itself if it chose to do so. Their sheer potential political power, therefore, made them scary.

In Hong Kong, which allows freedom of speech even though it is controlled by the government of China, adherents of Falun Gong have been able to voice their anger against what they regard as a Chinese government pogrom against their movement. At the entrance to the Star Ferry that plies between Hong Kong Island and the peninsula of Kowloon, posters have been mounted that vividly portray what the Falun Gong supporters state are savage attacks on their members by the Chinese police. Clearly, the urban, educated, and middle class supporters of the

Falun Gong movement have not been afraid to speak out against its opponents when they have the chance. They have publicised the Chinese government's discrimination of their movement around the world. Needless to say, this has not helped the politics-free image of an organisation sometimes described as an 'exercise group'. But the worldwide support has shed light on the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners, further calling into question the Chinese government's already spotty record on human rights.

Criticisms of China's human rights record have regularly appeared in global media, but perhaps ironically China has based their charges against the group on the same ground. Chinese officials contend Falun Gong's beliefs cause its practitioners to rely too much on meditation and paranormal methods of healing in opposition to modern medicine. It has also claimed that the group has hijacked state run satellite signals, and even murdered vagrants in order to achieve some sort of ideal spiritual state.⁶ The result of the state's programme has been the removal of many of the movement's spiritual leaders, and the forcing of adherents to move their practices underground. Its charismatic leader in exile Li Hongzhi, often referred to as simply 'Him', continues to attract devotees to his particular brand of spirituality blended with exercise, and the groups numbers have swollen in spite of the PRC's ban. The ban itself has been interpreted by Hongzhi as a test from heaven to be endured, and the actions of China have been read as acts in a kind of apocalyptic scenario.⁷ Tensions continue between the movement and the Chinese government, and vividly portray how a new religious movement with global connections can become politically potent and challenge the authority of nation-states.

MIDDLE EAST – ISLAMIC MOVEMENTS

The rise of new Islamic religious movements and figures has also presented a global political challenge. The political challenges of movements such as Hamas, al Qaeda, and the Islamic State are well known. But even when the movements are not violent in character they can challenge the old religious regimes.

⁶ These accusations came from the Embassy of the People's Republic of China to the United States, "Falun Gong Followers Cruel in Killing the Innocent, July 14, 2003, (<http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/ppflg/t36618.htm>), accessed 27 July 2020.

⁷ For his poetry where he references "The day of reckoning draws near," see "The Red Tide's Wane" at the Falun Dafa's official website: (<http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2005/10/19/66050.html>), accessed 27 July 2020.

The use of television and the internet to convey religious thoughts and practices has proven very effective in the Middle East, where charismatic personalities challenge traditional religious authorities by directly addressing large numbers of people not only in mosques and in the streets but also in the living rooms of private homes. A model well-known in Western nations, especially in the United States where demagogues such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell are household names, televangelists can spread their message beyond the walls of both church and mosque. The voices of Muslim televangelism in the Middle East speak to all sides of the spectrum – conservative, liberal and moderate – and their popularity has the potential to change the religious discussion without recourse to conventional religious officials. No longer do spiritual teachers require a brick and mortar building; their temples are satellites, beaming their broadcasts on satellite television or YouTube, and the new breed of preachers have harnessed this democratic medium to great effect.

Perhaps no televangelist in the Middle East has proven more effective than 'Amr Khaled, an Egyptian who was ranked by Time Magazine in 2007 as the thirteenth most influential person in the world. A former accountant, Khaled's particular brand of tele-preaching stresses an understanding of Islam that is tolerant and open, and promotes cross-cultural understanding as well as harmony with the West. He has explicitly attacked the mindsets of ultra-conservatives and Salafi Islamic extremism, emphasizing instead the ability for Muslims to be modern, successful and religious with no contradiction. This approach has won him an enormous audience across the Middle East and North Africa, especially in urban areas. His television shows are especially popular in places that have experienced a loss of local traditions and customs, and where individuals are searching for a new way to be Muslim outside the religious rituals and doctrines of their parents. Khaled's preaching has filled that vacuum, and his message has likely spread farther than previously would have been possible.

Khaled himself is both an agent and product of global processes. Fluent in English, he uses an Egyptian vernacular in his programmes as opposed to the formal, classical Arabic favoured by the more traditional Islamic leaders. This choice decreases the distance between him and his viewers, and merges with the general populist trend across the world. His shows are produced by multinational companies, which provided the funds to continue his preaching even after being banned from television in his home country of Egypt. The increased connectivity of the global world made possible by satellite and internet technologies has thwarted any possibility for traditional religious and political leaders to control Khaled's message.

Those technologies have also allowed Khaled to reach and influence huge numbers of people across national boundaries.

The central message of Khaled's preaching is a focus on piety over politics, making him theoretically as apolitical as any other strictly religious organisation, but of course the same can be said of Falun Gong. Moreover, Khaled emphasises the need to demonstrate one's piety in action, rather than in mere words. This emphasis led to the development in 2010 of a television show that put a religious twist on the popular U.S. show *The Apprentice*, brainchild of Donald Trump. The shows are as different as their creators, and Khaled's programme *Mujaddidun* centred on using religious principles to inspire projects aimed at poor and troubled communities. Teams that did the least good in an episode were confronted with 'Amr Khaled himself telling them "you're fired."

Khaled's use of the boardroom format and catch phrase of Donald Trump's show is the only relationship between the two programmes. *Mujaddidun* challenged young Muslims to create effective and sustainable programmes to help those in need across the Arabic world.⁸ The title of the show comes from an Arabic word meaning 'reviver' or 'renewer', and carries the sense of an agent who appears at the end of an era to revitalise Islam itself. This seems to be precisely what Khaled is aiming at: a vision of Islam that highlights care for community and activism rather than obeying strict Islamic rules for behaviour – following what is approved (halal) or avoiding what is forbidden (haram).

Khaled's show has wide influence across national borders. It can focus on humanitarian aid for the poor in Amman, Jordan and be watched by viewers in Sanaa, Yemen and impact viewers' understanding of Islam in both locations. The emphasis on what is possible through faith has shown to be extremely popular with many young Muslims dissatisfied with traditional interpretations of religious doctrine. Khaled's ability to mobilise young believers, however, carries the potential of political power. Like the Falun Gong in China, Khaled's public influence is a concern by governments that are primarily concerned about their own self-preservation. This fear caused Hosni Mubarak's Egyptian government to terminate all of Khaled's projects in his native country after the start of the Arab Spring uprisings. But Khaled is not easily muzzled, and his iconic status has also spawned a wave of other new televangelists, such as Mostafa Hosni whose show *Love Story* discusses issues of faith in the setting of a pop music show.

⁸ Clip of *Mujaddidun* from CNN available at: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7XWkGqm034>), accessed 27 July 2020.

Khaled's brand of religious television is not the only form of televangelism growing in popularity in the Middle East. The waves of information that allow for voices like Khaled's also carry more conservative voices. One of the more well-known and vociferous Egyptian tele-preachers is Ahmed Abdallah, also known as Abu Islam. Abdallah made international headlines in 2012 when he tore a Christian Bible to shreds before the U.S. Embassy in protest over the inflammatory film *Innocence of Muslims*. Produced by an Egyptian-American in California, *Innocence of Muslims* was considered a vicious attack on the Prophet Muhammad and his followers, which sparked outrage when it was translated into Arabic and linked to the blog of the National American Coptic Assembly. Abdallah's protest was one of many that took place around the Middle East, and the film was initially thought to be the catalyst of the deadly attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi, Libya.

Like the Christian extremist, Florida Pastor Terry Jones, whose public burning of the Qur'an was met with global fury, Abdallah's burning of the Bible brought him a great deal of attention. Previously well-known for his hateful speeches about the Coptic Christian community, his actions in front of the American Embassy in Egypt were part of a demonstration driven mainly by the Muslim extremists, the Salafis, who are the main audience for Abu Islam's sermons. Those sermons found a new home when Abdallah founded the Islamic satellite television channel Al-Omma in 2012. In 2013, however, Abdallah was convicted on charges stemming from Egypt's anti-blasphemy laws, which declare it a crime to show contempt toward any of the 'heavenly religions' of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.⁹ This was one of the few examples of the law's application to the contempt of a religion other than Islam.

Abdallah's conservative style of preaching has a complement in Khaled Abdullah (no relation to Abdallah, nor to the moderate Muslim televangelist, Amr Khaled). Abdullah claims to be a Sheik and his Salafist message closely resembles that of his contemporary, Abdallah. On his talk show, set in Egypt and broadcast on satellite television channel Al-Nas, Abdullah also railed against the film perceived as blasphemous and blamed Coptic Christians for its creation and production. He spread that message at least as far as the estimated 300,000 viewers who visited his YouTube channel.

Abdullah's rants do not only fall upon the Copts, as much of the world finds its way into his tele-preaching. He has accused secularists of being homosexuals, Shi'ites of planning the downfall of Islam, and has spit hatred against the West, the

⁹ Al Youm, Al Masry. 2013. "Abu Islam to Serve Five Years in Prison for Defaming Christianity." *Egypt Independent*. Online, posted December 18, 2013.

Jewish people and the nations of Israel and Iran. On his programme he blamed the uprising in Egypt on foolish children who were being controlled by Western interests, and spoke for the need of a return of traditional moral values that are contained, he claims, only in the Salafi ideology.

These examples highlight the conflicting narratives playing out on satellite and internet television channels. On the one hand are those television celebrities who might be said to be of the Facebook generation: liberal, secular, university educated and led by the popular televangelist 'Amr Khaled. Traditional government and religious leaders find them threatening. On the other hand are the televised conservative, anti-Western Islamist voices. They have likewise been suppressed but still find internet and television outlets that allow them to reach a large transnational audience. And in the middle are the traditional religious institutions that for centuries have had a virtual monopoly on the religious communications that are conveyed to the masses. Their place as guardians of the faith have been bypassed by a genre of popular religious figures that have broken all the old institutional boundaries and no longer have any need for their custody or support.

CONCLUSION

In the multicultural era of globalisation, religion has often been used as a badge of identity politics. It has been used by extremist Muslims to demarcate what they regard as the true definition of the faith, and with it a clear distinction between those who are legitimately Muslim and those who are not. It creates a religious in-group. Exactly the same phenomenon is at work among right-wing Evangelical Christians who want to assert the social and political primacy for their kind of people – an identity that is partly defined by race and ethnicity, and partly by religious affiliation.

The explosion of membership in these new religious groups appears to be symptomatic of the challenges posed by the new shape of the global world. With the unstable boundaries of identity and increased interconnection between people, religion is often seen to offer stability amidst the shifting sands. Even religious movements that are considered 'new' locate themselves in relation to ancient traditions based in the cultural makeup of the populace. People taking part in these new movements can find a sense of community, a *trusted* authority that is an alternative to the establishment's authority, and meaning for their lives within the bounds of religion, all of which link back to traditions anchored in the past.

Dramatic social changes in the global era have upset the old national centres of power. The weakening of the nation-state, the emergence of transnational

communities of identity and interaction, and the ability of modern technology to give voice to individuals and once-marginal elements of society have all challenged the national status quo. A new global anti-authoritarianism is in the works that in its best moments looks like democratic populism and in its worse moments looks like anarchy. These changes are shaking the foundations of the old religious establishments. Sometimes this anti-authoritarian religiosity has resulted in an explosion of violence, self-harm and hatred. Other times it has forged new concepts of communal support and administration. In yet other instances it has joined forces with political leadership to attempt new forms of religious nationalism. It is not clear which, if any, of these alternatives to the traditional status quo religious institutions will dominate, or indeed if the expressions and organisation of religion in the 21st century will ever look the same as they have in the past.

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