

## **SPLIT BETWEEN THE WORLD OF BELIEVERS AND THE WORLD OF DISBELIEVERS: A GLOBAL MEGATREND?**

A while ago, some analysts have come up with a thesis that the international community may in fact split into the World of believers and the World of disbelievers in the nearest future. Taken as a forecast, this binary separation of the global community is extremely provisional, as it doesn't take into account the inevitable existence of various transitional and undecided countries. Nevertheless, potentially, the core of the World of believers are Islamic countries, while the World of disbelievers is centered in the secular Europe where religion has been squeezed out to the roadside of social life, let alone completely detached from the politics.

Prior to further discussion of this topic, there is a question that needs to be mentioned in direct relation to it: that of the current status of the globalization process. Without globalization there would be no megatrends common for the majority of the states. (In scope of a conference report we can, of course, only skim the themes raised herein).

### **Globalization crisis**

Only a few years ago globalization seemed to be an overwhelming megatrend, its vortex very nearly consuming most of the differences and borders between countries and civilizations. "Hyper globalization" was the phase which the world community of states entered, first of all, owing to the stunningly rapid advance of technological revolution in communications. However, the outcome isn't as conclusive as it seems. Let us have a quick look at the three main globalization flows – capital, people and information.

Over the last years, the flow of capital has encountered powerful barriers, mostly due to the protectionist politics of the country which always claimed to be a leader of the "free world" – the US. Politics of President Trump was a severe shock to the international trade system. Analysis of the decisions to sanction

governments “at fault” in America’s eyes, allegedly as a political leverage, shows that their purpose was to banish competitors of American companies from the market and ensure preferential conditions for the American business. EU countries played along with these decisions and fell second victim to the sanctioning policy. An increasing number of governments is unhappy with WTO activities; in fact, some of the experts believe that the organization has become irrelevant in view of the present conditions. Trade disputes between the US and the People’s Republic of China became at times rather heated; still, in the interests of national manufacturers of goods the two countries had come to the compromise. Fulfilment of integration agreements in the Eurasian Economic Union has also become problematic. In the recent EAEU summit of 14 May 2018, President of Belarus Aleksandr Lukashenko spoke critically of the Union as follows: “Global economical growth today largely depends on regional integrational associations. Unfortunately, instead of free trade, we close ourselves to one another. Moreover, we exchange mutual complaints, even in mass media, jeopardizing the international reputation of the Union. We neglect civilized methods of resolving trade disputes through Eurasian Economic Commission.”

Even more barriers now impede the free flow of people. Some of the European states regard migration as just about the gravest problem of all, and one of the key challenges to their national security. This attitude greatly influences national politics in EU countries, stirring xenophobia, populism, and emerging prevalence of nationalistic parties and movements. The problem is becoming even more acute with continuing migration to these countries, which will only increase in the foreseeable future, and with continent penetration by former insurgents - members of radical Islamic organizations disguised as refugees. At the same time, aging of population, a steady trend in Europe and some other regions of the world, will most probably only aggravate in the future and increase the need of European states for influx of workforce from abroad, which may result in growing anti-migrant sentiment among the citizens and further inflation of contradictions between the EU member states. To overcome the cultural dissonance resulting

from massive relocation of the Middle-Eastern and African population to Europe, time and well-considered politics are in demand, and both are often lacking.

Information flows are difficult to cut off in the era of technological revolution. Still, they are also impacted by emerging limitations. Certain restrictions are necessary as they help control propagation of extremist ideas, calls for terrorism, violence, incitement of national and religious hatred, while other measures are not so well-founded. Some states limit access of their citizens to Internet and strongly filter content due to ideological reasons.

Nevertheless, globalization still continues. All societies increasingly avail themselves of its opportunities and counter the problems that it has caused. Despite the seemingly convincing victory of secularism and even a certain expansion of the zone of atheism, overall, in many parts of the world and not only in its Islamic segment, some sort of a religious renaissance is ongoing, spurred by high-tech era induced pursuit of spirituality. Many people are looking for a spiritual alternative to the pervasive but unsatisfying cultural routines and behavioral stereotypes, especially in the deeply secularized societies. The Islamic world is partially dominated by the most radical, extremist understanding of its religion which gave birth to such organizations as DAISH, ISIS and the like, forbidden in Russia.

All world religions feel the need to somehow adapt to the new reality. This need can manifest in denial of globalization influence, resistance to modernization (which I will come back to), and in a “global product” of their own design. This product is simultaneously a response to the challenge of globalization, a part of globalization, and a manifestation of globalizing influence of religion. What are the forms that this product may assume? For the Islamic world, specifically, it is the universal transnational ummah (community, “nation” of Muslims) termed “imaginary” by French analyst of Islam Olivier Roy. It is imaginary because Muslims are, firstly, citizens of their nation states (and not only Muslim states, but also those where they constitute a minority and which we are currently discussing), and only secondly - solidary members of the universal Ummah. Nevertheless, this growing confessional minority has established its solidarity ties across Europe

where some thirty million Muslims reside presently. Rapid growth of the minority is nourished by migration from Asian and African countries and higher birth rate, but also (less so) by some Europeans who adopt Islam.

### **Religion, politics and advance of secularism**

In many Muslim societies, mostly in the Middle East, globalization is only accepted as long as it does not contradict fortification of their civilizational identity, in which Islam is one of the signature features. It would be, however, only partially true to say that only Muslim (primarily the Middle East) societies get a chance to enter the World of believers, whereas the World of disbelievers is all the rest, primarily the Christians. Difference in relationship between religion and politics plays an important role here. Karen Armstrong, a well-known British author of popular books on religion, wrote about the early modern period when Protestant Christianity emerged: “At this time Europeans and Americans had begun to separate religion and politics, because they assumed, not altogether accurately, that the theological squabbles of the Reformation had been entirely responsible for the Thirty Years’ War. The conviction that religion must be rigorously excluded from political life has been called the charter myth of the sovereign nation-state. The philosophers and statesmen who pioneered this dogma believed that they were returning to a more satisfactory state of affairs that had existed before ambitious Catholic clerics had confused two utterly distinct realms.”

Armstrong is right when she says that “the habit of separating religion and politics is now so routine in the West that it is difficult for us to appreciate how thoroughly the two co-inherited in the past.” It is true that dissociating the inextricably connected religion and politics at that time “would have seemed like trying to extract the gin from a cocktail”. In premodern period many activities were experienced as deeply sacred (Armstrong names, e.g., “forest cleaning, hunting, football matches, dice games, astronomy, farming, state building, tugs-of-war, town planning, commerce, imbibing strong drink, and, most particularly, warfare”), which contemporary people would be probably unable to relate to faith.

Is it fair to assume, then, that the Muslims who closely associate religion and politics are just “stuck” in the early modern times? Or is it the Islamic inherent quality of its association with politics? It is probably impossible to provide a sound answer to this question in scope of this paper. However, it is common knowledge that Islam is historically more closely linked to the problem of power than any other religion: it was the dispute on this problem that provoked the initial split of the Muslims into Sunni and Shia.

Continuing secularization in societies which form the World of disbelievers is accompanied by erosion of religious values and general desacralization. This is a valid explanation of, for instance, use of abandoned churches as entertainment venues, e.g., in Germany. Crisis of religious institutes is ongoing. Traditional practices and rituals are becoming obsolete. Even in Russia, where religiousness is much higher than in most European states, and which cannot be considered a part of the World of disbelievers, all religious riots are only observed by maximum 3% of orthodox citizens of the country (whereas Russian Muslims score higher).

Political imperatives can erode the most deep-rooted religious and moral attitudes even in the self-proclaimed religion-based global actors. Yemeni rebels of Ansarullah group, referred to as Houthis due to the ancestry of most of its members, killed Yemen’s Ex-President Ali Abdullah Saleh who severed connections with them. The murder occurred on 4 December 2017, however the rebels have been keeping his body in the fridge for several months now (at least, as of the time this is being written), whereas according to Islamic canon, he had to be buried on the next day with proper rituals. The body has become some sort of a merchandize; in the throes of the long-lasting civil war, even those who fight for return to the original values of Islam overstep its moral principles and fail to observe the customs. Those who subject the country to ruthless bombing are none the better.

Everything that has been said about the desacralization process can be considered in the context of modernization of the religion, while one of the approaches describes this process as “simplification”. Such is the opinion of some

Buddhism researchers who mention relaxation of requirements to the believers and reduction of the role of doctrine in the lives of most of them. To some extent, this is true. Possibly, a simplified version of religion is emerging as faith is losing its reflective gravity yet becomes easier to adopt. In other words, religion is being stripped of its sublime sacredness, becoming more mundane and easier to comprehend. Numbers of religious people, subsequently, are not decreasing but growing, despite the fact that for most of the believers religion boils down to rituals and moral principles that are not strictly binding (in other words, “expansion-reduction” occurs). It is difficult to fathom, though, how regular Tibetan believers would have been able to fully study and integrate in their everyday lives such expansive religious texts as Kangyur (108 volumes of Buddha’s Word) and Tengyur (235 volumes of translated *shastras*). Indian authors A. Shukla and V. Dixit say that in the past, possession of these texts was regarded merely as a tool for maintenance of a certain social status. There is also little cause to believe that regular Muslims know all texts of the six “correct” volumes of Muhammad’s Hadiths (however, learning the entire Quran by heart is a widely adhered practice in many societies in the Islamic territory). The rule still stands, though, that in all religions the teaching of religious texts to regular believers and especially their interpretation is entrusted to priests, religious mentors, scholars and theologians. Their number is replenished by religious education which currently undergoes transformation both in Buddhism and in Islam.

Still, it would be a simplification in itself to interpret modernization as merely simplification. The ongoing transformation of religion can rather be described as “becoming more mundane” or “desacralization”. In Tibetan Buddhism the trend manifests in the fact that nuns who were previously forbidden to visit *monlam* (prayer festival for peace and prosperity in the first Tibetan month) were allowed to do it in 1994 by decision of Dalai Lama. To some extent, this phenomenon can be compared to the change of attitude to women in Muslim communities, where women are now allowed to perform activities which previously were considered men’s only. It is in the sphere of attitude to women that one of the key collisions

between Islamic archaic traditionalism and modernity (specifically, Western culture) lies. (Think of the still ongoing European disputes concerning wearing hijab and niqab/purdah). Mohammad Bin Salman Al Saud, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, is adopting a series of reforms for improvement of attitude to women and their rights in scope of liberalization, which is a notable step in our context.

As for lamas, their charisma is gradually waning now that they have moved to common villages, Shukla and Dixit say. In the past, when monasteries were located in hard-to-reach places, it was rare luck to get a blessing from a lama. “Lamas were forbidden to visit the market or go elsewhere, unless it was necessary for family business. Women were not allowed in the monasteries, and laymen were asked out after sunset. All these bans are now canceled.”

Elements of the old Tibetan *bon* religion (prevalent until 7th century) are conducive to ritualistic reduction of Tibetan Buddhism. These elements are known to be so thoroughly integrated in the local Buddhism that many scholars even consider *bon* to be one of the Buddhist schools. However, this religion, which can be described as animistic and shamanic, introduced decorative symbolism and material props to Buddhism, facilitating ritualization. According to A.V. Arakheri, “pre-Buddhist customs and related symbolism are still present in the Tibetan society... Walls of houses are decorated with intricate patterns and signs representing deities of the old religion. Symbols of the four elements - tiger, lion, eagle and dragon - are still being used in the Buddhist philosophy.”

It is notable that the Islamic tradition for incorporation of elements of previous beliefs from the people who adopted Islam is manifested in Sufism. Sufi practice of *Dhikr* - rhythmic movements with chanting of religious phrases, which is to some extent similar to meditation - in certain countries has been reduced to a plain ritual devoid of true spiritual meaning.

Influence of western secular culture is one of the many reasons underlying this process. Let's not forget, though, that the role of religion as the marker of identity in the contemporary highly globalized world does not abate; instead, it helps many societies withstand civilizational onslaught of the West.

## **Resacralization as a response**

This “enclosing” imperative partially explain the process which is opposite to desacralization and modernization, namely the process of resacralization and archaization. Its ground in the Islamic world produces such ugly saplings of phenomena as extremism and terrorism, which also emerge in response to intrusion of the West in internal affairs of Islamic states - the politics which primarily served the purpose of replacement of undesirable governments and forceful instilment of extraneous rules. (This paper does not aim to discuss Islamic extremism and terrorism in detail.)

Islam is often seen as the most warlike religion due to the role of jihad. But jihad in Islamic doctrine is an effort of a Muslim believer to instill in himself the piousness and Islamic moral. Only sometimes it is used for protection of faith, life or property of the Muslims and requires to take up arms (greater and lesser jihad). Absolutization of jihad is often a response to aggressive secularism seen as a threat to the Muslim identity. Contemporary radical jihad adepts who understand jihad doctrine in an extremist way provoke wrong conclusions which should not be generalized and extrapolated to the doctrine as a whole. Elements of such doctrines are present in all religions: Christianity and Buddhism are no exception. For instance, Kalachakra Tantra textual tradition permits transformation of internal, spiritual struggle into external action in response to aggression.

Buddhism attributes lesser role to violence; however, there is evidence of political murder by monks in Shri Lanka and countries of South East Asia. Actually, the question is related to politization of the clergy which fluctuates in intensity over time. Think of the demonstrative self-immolation of monk Thich Quang Duc in Saigon, Vietnam in 1963.

Aum Shinrikyo was an exceptional phenomena for the Buddhist environment (and ideology of this sect has an admix of other religions). It was a grotesque combination of anti-globalism and social protest with elements of “blind terrorism”

attacking innocent people similar to assaults of terrorists acting in the name of Islam in the Middle East and other regions.

Islam, Christianity and Buddhism treat secularism differently. In Islam, the anti-secular trend has been growing for several decades now. In the book of fatwas (rulings issued by Islamic scholars) distributed in Russia by Fatwa Council, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in Russian translation, secularism is even called “enemy of Islam”. Even in such a constitutionally secular country as Turkey (the only Middle East country where secularism is stipulated in the basic law), a slow process of re-islamization is ongoing under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party, while the social and political debates are increasingly pro-religious.

In Buddhism, anti-secular motifs are less pronounced than in the Abrahamic religions (in the opinion of Russian scholar Agadzhanyan, this is due to the less distinct boundary between the sacred and the secular in the Buddhist tradition).

There are also differences in terms of attitude to adherents of other faiths. Although initially the Islamic doctrine postulates positive attitude to representatives of other monotheist religions and tolerance towards followers of non-monotheistic religions, pagans and even atheists, in practice and in theological discourse of certain schools in later centuries the trend of exclusivism had emerged and developed. Buddhism in general is far from such attitudes, but sporadic manifestations of exclusivism and elements of intolerance have been noticed in certain groups and individuals in its territory of presence.

Under the effect of resacralization of certain concepts important for the doctrine, their initial meaning has been distorted. One of the instances is the concept of *Ummah* which is presently associated exclusively with Muslims in the Islamic world. But the concept of *Ummah* actually transcends people. The medieval dictionary by imam Ibn Manzur says: “*Ummah* – breed and type of all living things” [...]. In other words: “Every type of animal is *Ummah*”. Quran says: “All animals on Earth and all birds flying on their wings are *Ummah*, just like you...” (Quran, 6, 38). One of the correct Hadiths is even more straightforward

and descriptive: “If dogs (!) were not *Ummah*, like all the rest, I would command to kill them...”. Also: “Ants are *Ummah* of *Ummahs*” (we left *Ummah* untranslated as it is difficult to find an adequate equivalent – “communion of communions”, or perhaps “community of communities”?). Based on an array of studies of medieval Arabic lexicographers, author of the famous thesaurus English Arabic scholar Edward William Lane concludes that *Ummah* is “people to whom the prophet was sent down, both believers and disbelievers”. And disbelievers! Telling this to modern fundamentalists would be a dangerous idea.

In conclusion, I would like to add some thoughts about the phenomenon of Islamic extremism and terrorism. Consider one of the scenarios suggested in the open report of the American National Intelligence Council “Mapping the Global Future: 2020 Project” developed by an extensive group of recognized experts from many countries, published in Russian in 2005. Authors of the report predicted the events in the Middle East in the nearest future. They wrote: “Over the next 15 years, religious identity is likely to become an increasingly important factor in how people define themselves.” And further: “Radical Islam will have a significant global impact... rallying disparate ethnic and national groups and perhaps even creating an authority that transcends national boundaries.” Of course, al-Qaeda had been active in the world back then, and such forecasts seemed to be self-evident. However, it was followed by a thesis of a fictional scenario of a “new Caliphate” (!) capable to “advance a powerful counter ideology that has widespread appeal”. In a decade, some pro-conspiratorial Middle East analysts interpreted this prediction as a proof of participation of certain American circles in creation of ISIS (forbidden in Russia and far from defeated as of today).

Anyhow, in the book “The Wave: Man, God, and the Ballot Box in the Middle East” written in October 2010, i.e. before the Arab spring of 2011 (the book was published in early 2011) employee of the American Foundation for

Defense of Democracies Reuel Marc Gerecht<sup>1</sup> actually predicted the victory of Islamists in Egypt, adding that in this country the Islamists will “do well in any free vote”, and appointing a crucial date of 2011 for this event. At that time the majority of the Western expert community was overtly optimistic about the political program of the Muslim Brotherhood. Published in August 2007 by Egyptian newspaper Al-Masry Al-Youm, the program promised responsible leaders appointed by free will of people, reinforcement of democracy, and various independent civil society institutes. It said that the Brotherhood was certain that “democracy is the only legitimate political system for Egypt and the entire Islamic world”. Their victory would result, Gerecht speculated, for the first time since the times of “the rightly guided caliphs”, in a possibility of “organic, mutually trusting relationship” between the leaders and their societies in the Arab World.

Another prediction, or evidence of knowledge? Of course, the point is not that the Western states are directly involved in creation of terrorist networks in the Middle East which pose a threat to their own safety. Still, it is obvious that despite the depth of the above-mentioned civilizational split (into the World of believers and the World of disbelievers), some circles in the Western communities are still tempted to use radical Islamists as a means to their own geopolitical ends.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerecht was a student of Bernard Lewis, served as an executive officer in CIA, is known for his neoconservative and interventionist views. He was especially openly aggressive in his attitude to Iran (“The Iranians have terrorism in their DNA”).