

## The United Nations – what has religion got to do with it?

*In the last two decades there has been a pressing need to make sense of religion in international politics. Here **Anne Stensvold** finds that the struggle over values at the UN is not a fight over ultimate truth but about how to accommodate religion in a globalized world. Rather than focusing on 'good' or 'bad' religion we need to look at how people actually relate to religion in the public sphere.*



Pope Francis addresses the UN General Assembly. Image: Flickr, Zoe Paxton/DFID

Until the last couple of decades international politics was a religion-free zone. At least that's how it was supposed to be. In line with this ideal, the UN Charter of 1945 has no mention of religion. This understanding did not change even when Pakistan (1947) and Israel (1948) were declared independent states on ethno-religious grounds. Religion was somehow considered to be beyond political debate, and not a concern for the UN. But after the ethno-religious wars in ex-Yugoslavia (1991-95) and the rise of religious terrorism, there is a pressing need to explain religious violence and to make sense of religion in international politics.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks George W. Bush **declared** that the terrorists were not Muslims because Islam is a religion of peace. Other politicians have followed suit and distinguish between true and false religion. While scholars of religion tend to take self-claimed religious actors at face value and leave the value judgment to others, politicians seem to regard all use of violence as unreligious. The underlying assumption is of course that true religion is 'good'. But what is good? And what is religion?

In order to answer these questions we need to study religion in a peaceful political context, like the UN, where various religious actors take part in political debate. The contributors to a **book** I have edited this year does this by approaching religion as a given fact of world politics. The book does not limit itself to considering only self-described religious actors, but also looks at the actions of states, like **Russia's campaign for 'traditional values'** (2008-2011), which promoted a set of values that are legitimized and promoted by the Russian Orthodox church.



At the UN an overall positive attitude to religion is voiced on ceremonial occasions, e.g. when pope Francis visited the United Nations in New York in September 2015 General Secretary Ban Ki-Moon **greeted him as the moral leader of the world**. Since the General Secretary speaks on behalf of the UN, good moral leadership must be compatible with **human rights**. In my view, this is problematic, but the Catholic Church pope seems to agree, when they say that human rights stem from natural law – as defined by Catholic tradition. On the other hand there seems to be a problem with Islam, since conservative Muslim countries have formulated their own interpretation of **human rights in Islam**. On second glance, however, both religions openly defy equality between man and woman, a foundational aspect of human rights. For instance the Muslim position on family values is largely compatible with that of the Roman Catholic Church and Evangelicals alike when it comes to **family values**.

In the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (1948), religion is mentioned four times: states are not allowed to discriminate on religious grounds (art. 2); you have the right to marry who you want regardless of religious affiliation (art.16); the right to freedom of religion and belief, including the right to change one's belief, and the right *not* to believe (art.18). In each of these instances, the rights-holder is the individual. Needless to say, this does not tally well with organized religions, which seek to define religion more in terms of collective beliefs and group identity.

There is then a conflict here between religion as a personal faith, or as a collective identity as religious organizations see it; between individualism and collective concerns. A prominent example is the heated **UN discussions over 'defamation of religion'**, which lasted more than a decade (1999-2011). The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), an international organization of Muslim countries, was worried about growing Islamophobia in Western countries, as evidenced in the hijab controversy. But instead of framing the problem in terms of individual's right to express his or her religion in public, the OIC launched a campaign against 'defamation of religion'. Western countries saw this as an attempt to undermine human rights. After several years of discussions the **case came to a close** when the OIC conceded that freedom of religion is a right pertaining to individuals, not to religious groups, and agreed on a declaration to combat intolerance and negative stereotyping.

The fact that the main opponents of the OIC's 'defamation of religion' campaign were Western countries does not mean that there is a permanent divide between Islam and the West when it comes to value politics. In fact, the two religions often have more in common than secular actors have with the Christian heritage of the West.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that various versions of "good" religion inform – openly or implicitly – the member states' position on values. However, the most prominent conflict is between secular and feminist values on the one hand, and religious and traditional values on the other. At the UN this divide has been played out in innumerable discussions since the mid-1990s between member states fighting over women's rights, the definition of the family, and LGNT rights. In these matters liberal-democratic states like the EU and Canada argue for pragmatic solutions to what their traditionalist opponents (e.g. Russia or Iran and the majority of OIC countries) see as moral matters. Legalization of abortion is another problematic issue. After decades of resistance from conservative Latin American countries, spearheaded by the Catholic Church, abortion has effectively become a taboo. There are no discussions about legalization of abortion, instead it is treated as a health issue and framed as a procedure that concerns only those exceptional cases when the pregnant woman's life is in danger. The Catholic Church is a main player in this field, with unparalleled influence since it enjoys a status as an independent state (a non-member observer state, like the Palestinian state) unlike any other religious organization, and has full access to all UN fora.

The struggle over values at the UN is not a fight over ultimate truth, but an on-going discourse on how to accommodate religion in a globalized world. **Grace Davie's concepts** of 'believing' and 'belonging' are helpful here. They refer to two distinctly different modes of relating to religion and conveniently shift our attention from 'good' or 'bad' religion, to how people actually **relate** to religion in the public sphere.



Davie's concept of 'vicarious religion' designates a third mode, which I believe captures the prevailing attitude to religion in secular environments like the UN. In these environments religion is 'elsewhere'. As long as it stays 'out there', religious values can be discussed in open political fora. But when religion becomes 'belonging' it turns into identity politics with no room for negotiation.



**Anne Stensvold** is Professor of History of Religions at the University of Oslo, Norway where she leads the Value Politics research group. She is the editor of *Religion, State and the United Nations: Value Politics* (2016).

---

November 29th, 2016 | [Featured](#), [International](#), [Latest](#) | [1 Comment](#)

---

