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**FAITH, EQUITY, AND DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Introduction**

Religion, as Casanova observes, went public in the 1980s and it has exhibited a Janus face since – “as the carrier not only of exclusive, particularist, and primordial identities but also of inclusive, universalist, and transcending ones.”<sup>1</sup> It has worn this Janus face because, I argue, religion has for sometime been torn by the identity politics of our times, consisting of two conceptually distinguishable phenomena and processes: the politics of equal dignity, and the politics of difference. These two political dramas have used the discourse of religion and are leading to new and not surprisingly contradictory interpretive strands of modernity, development, and equity.

In order to understand how religious movements are influencing the development process and in particular what implications they have for equity and an anti-poverty agenda it is critical first to explicate how religious movements may be interpreted using the lens of identity politics. The inter-meshing of identity landscapes and religious landscapes is influenced by all manner of local, national, and international political and social influences. To construct a ‘model’ of this interaction as it were, it is essential to understand how it has been occurring in the case of specific religions and religious groups in specific countries. This will help us develop the broad markers of the interaction between identity politics and religion – markers that are critical for understanding the equity and developmental implications of religious movements.

At this point in our research, the relationship between faith, equity and development is poorly, or at best only vaguely, understood. In this report, I seek to bring some clarity to these linkages, though it would be far too bold to claim that the existing research makes the linkages transparently clear. Much more work will be needed before we get radical clarity. The formulations presented here should help the cumulative process of research along.

My report is presented in five parts. First, the report will discuss how the rise of identity politics and the resurgence of religious movements in recent years have weakened support for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Second, it will focus on the relationship between faith and equity and argue that the key to understanding this relationship lies in seeing religious resurgence as part of identity politics. Identity politics that has burst on the scene in many parts of the world is widely viewed as a search for recognition and equal dignity. Its ironic consequence, however, is that while religious movements seek to overcome perceived inequality and social injuries, they end up making some members of their own community (especially women) even more vulnerable. Moreover, when these religious movements represent majority communities in a country, they also end up making religious minorities weaker. Third, the report will deal conceptually with the relationship between faith, poverty and development, showing the tensions and synergies in the interactions. The fourth part in the final report will explore these conceptual arguments in the context of some specific faiths -- Islam, Hinduism and Christianity, with a focus on the rise of Islamism in Egypt, Nigeria and Indonesia; Hindu nationalism in India; and the role of Catholicism in Chile and Philippines and Liberation Theology and Protestantism in Latin America. The final section of the report will contain my conclusions.

## 1.

### **Signing The Declaration Of Human Rights**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was signed in 1948 with much fanfare and great optimism by 48 signatories.<sup>2</sup> The discussions leading up to it were elaborate, polite, and vigorous. They included conversations with theologians, religious leaders and scholars of religion

and philosophy. The conversations were guided by the principle that while different philosophies and traditions might not agree on why they support some rights over others, it should nevertheless be possible for all parties to agree on a minimal set of human rights.<sup>3</sup> It was hoped, in other words, that in the absence of agreement over why certain rights were regarded as human rights, the framers could nevertheless arrive at a point of convergence about the idea of human rights and some of its critical dimensions. Jacques Maritain, the head of the French delegation, argued at the Second General Conference of UNESCO, that "... agreement on a joint declaration is possible, given an approach pragmatic rather than theoretical."<sup>4</sup>

Four issues about this approach appear to be critical, given our concern with faith, equity, and development. First, a focus on *convergence without agreement* on the rationale underlying the choice of human rights, as proposed by Maritain, meant that cultural disagreements over rights were not resolved. This left the door open for subsequent cultural challenges to both the letter and spirit of the Declaration of Human Rights.

Second, such an approach did little to respond to the argument that the premise of human rights is a Western one. UNESCO's 'Human Rights Teaching' biannual bulletin noted that though the 'principles set out in the Declaration were called universal ... it should not be forgotten that the Declaration was proclaimed by an organization from which many Asian and African countries were excluded ... [and that] the general concept of the Declaration bore the stamp of predominantly Western influences.'<sup>5</sup> The Declaration has, moreover, been criticized "for putting forward a view of human rights too strongly influenced by liberal philosophy of an individualistic type."<sup>6</sup> An approach that dealt with both the idea of human rights *and its underlying rationale* might well have been able to respond to this charge more effectively.

Third, the religious scholars who supported the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were largely the more liberal/progressive interpreters of religion. The more conservative interpreters of religion have played this up in their subsequent political battles. The former interpreters had presented many arguments and offered considerable evidence to suggest that the idea of human rights was present in these various religions, arguing that it was not alien to Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism for instance, but was constitutive of these faiths. However, there appears to have been little attempt

to persuade the more conservative interpreters of religion to engage in a conversation with the framers of the Declaration with the view to resolving differences of opinion. This has made the Declaration less persuasive to more conservative interpreters of religion.

Fourth, the framers seem to have implicitly hoped that with socio-economic development the differences in perception of human rights would diminish if not entirely evaporate. They arguably also anticipated that the liberal/progressive interpreters of the world's religions would come to dominate the discourse. This hope was supported by mainstream social and political theories of the day. Modernization theory, for instance, held that traditional values and life-styles would be replaced by modern universal values as a result of development. The idea that there would be a resurgence of religious movements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, or that conservative religious interpreters would come to dominate them, was never anticipated. The prevailing ideological divide of the time made such ideas at best idle speculation.

## 2.

### **Modernity And Its Aftermath – Dignity and Recognition**

Things, however, did not occur as anticipated. Modernity did not fully replace tradition, at least not everywhere. Modernity, meanwhile, came to be replaced by a condition that combined the traditional and the modern, that broke down prevailing ideological barriers and crisscrossed conventional borders, as it reinterpreted and critiqued both the modern *and* the traditional. In other words, these reinterpretations were neither purely modern, nor purely traditional, though they have been claimed to be both by their interpreters and supporters at one time or another, in some context or the other. These reinterpretations have an inherently contradictory character.

The passage to modernity and to its aftermath has, and continues to have, some features important for the discussion at hand. Two are critical for us – dignity and recognition. First, modernity has replaced the traditional discourse of honor with a conversation about dignity. As philosophers argue, honor is reserved only for some and was characteristic of pre-modern hierarchical

social systems. Dignity, on the other hand, is intrinsic to all human beings, and with modernity, more and more previously dominated groups and individuals have come to believe in their equal dignity.

Second, modernity has reinterpreted micro-politics and group politics through claims about recognition. Political strategizing by religious groups and parties began to incorporate demands for recognition by others *in addition to* claims for religious authenticity and validity that they historically possessed. Religion was always about authenticity; in modern times it has also come to be about equal dignity and recognition by other religious groups.

Demands for recognition and dignity also meant that religious interpretations that challenged the Declaration of Human Rights could now make claims that were difficult to contest. A discourse of equality and rights (promoted by the Declaration of Human Rights around the world) has ‘democratized’ the space available for such claims and legitimized them. If everyone could claim equality, it also followed that religious interpreters could mount fresh challenges to the Declaration of Human Rights, challenges that claimed to be culturally and historically grounded articulating the sentiments of specific locations and particular peoples, and challenges that also claimed to speak on behalf of larger swathes of population.

Identity politics or the politics of recognition, as this trend came to be known, occurred both in the developing and developed world. It drew support from the middle classes and to a non-insignificant extent from the working classes and oppressed communities. Identity movements had roots in gender politics, sexual politics, ethnic politics, and of course religious interpretations, or some combination thereof. The founding arguments of many, if not all, of these movements combine tradition and modernity in unusual ways.<sup>7</sup> This synthesis was not aimed at strengthening the modern and secular worldviews, nor for that matter did it seek to bolster the pre-modern perspectives. It was a synthesis basically aimed at pursuing dignity and achieving recognition – that is all.

Instead of a decline in support for traditional values and the rise of secular universal sentiments, there has thus been a significant resurgence of religious movements. This resurgence has two related yet distinct implications for concerns about equity and development. First, religious movements have in various parts of the world been accompanied by religious nationalism, and the rise of majoritarian religious political parties or groups. This has had unequal, even threatening,

implications for religious minorities. Second, whether or not religious movements have threatened the equity concerns of religious minorities, they have tended to undermine the rights of vulnerable members of their own religious community. Nearly every religious movement has, for instance, redefined the role and rights of women. Many have also undermined the rights of other weaker members – for example, the Dalits (the ex-Untouchables) in Hindu society.

In short, the change from tradition to modernity and beyond has triggered the rise of religious movements in multiple ways. The replacement of honor systems with more egalitarian ideas of dignity has contributed to increasing demands from subaltern communities for equal rights and dignity.<sup>8</sup> In the place of the traditional notion of honor, which was intrinsically linked to inequality, we have the modern concept of dignity – the concept that all of us as citizens deserve, and have a right to, equal dignity. This spurs demands for equal rights on the part of individuals and communities, leading to what might also be termed the politics of equal dignity.

If modernity, as modernization theory anticipated, had contributed to strong individualism, then such demands for equal rights would have taken the form of a demand for equal individual rights only. However, modernity has left considerable disillusionment in its wake for many groups as a whole – disillusionment caused by inequities not addressed by modernity, and by the “multiple social, political, and economic upheavals that have occurred as the forces of modernization have swept so rapidly across the globe.”<sup>9</sup> This disillusionment has triggered a search for meaning and purpose. And this meaning has often, if not always, been found in established religions, not in the precepts of secularism and economic development.

By consequence, if not by intention, the functioning of modern bureaucratic institutions has also tended to promote equality. Modern state institutions, driven by their need for efficiency and systematization, have tended to homogenize the populations they cater to.<sup>10</sup> This homogenization gives further strength to demands for equal dignity and rights. Of course, this has been stronger in countries that have democratic political institutions, but even in non-democratic or relatively less democratic countries, the trend is present to some extent.

The tendency of modernity to homogenize populations, however, has also triggered a counter-response that might be, and has been, termed the politics of difference. The tendency to homogenize

populations runs counter to the other modern ideal – to develop one’s individual sense of identity, to develop one’s authentic self. Homogenization often means that minority religious groups have to accept the hegemony of the dominant religions. This tendency encourages the politics of difference.

In the religious sphere, the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference together end up fostering religious movements which demand equality vis-à-vis other religious communities, and also tend to encourage the movements to define themselves in unique and often unusual ways. In other words, religious movements might demand equal rights for their members and also demand that their unique group identity (which redefines the role of women or family lifestyles) be recognized and respected by the state and other citizens, but this may run counter to the letter and spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### 3.

#### **Faith, Poverty and Development**

Religious movements pose a unique and complicated challenge to the development agenda and to the achievement of the MDGs. They often confront the legitimacy of states, offer citizens an identity at variance with the national identity, challenge the state’s economic and social agenda, weaken the state’s status in the international arena, seek to undermine universal principles promoted by international organizations, and more generally offer believers an interpretation of their world at odds with the one advocated by international organizations. In sum, religious movements and identities can, and do appear to, make it difficult for states and the international community to pursue their developmental agenda especially with regard to gender equity, minority rights, rights of vulnerable groups, wealth redistribution, democracy, and participation. More importantly perhaps, they do so in ways that are seemingly different from those posed by other interest groups or institutional actors.

There is a significant body of work on the rise of religious movements and identities in developing countries – including Egypt, Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and India. However, while these works offer a careful analysis of the characteristics of religious movements, few discuss their negotiations and engagement with states and international organizations *with regard to*

*their developmental agenda*. Conversely, while the development community has explored the circumstances under which states and international organizations are able to pursue development, we know very little about how they do this when faced with powerful national and/or global religious movements. How do some states negotiate space with religious communities such that they are able to pursue a developmental agenda? This is one of the central development concerns of our time.

Consider for example how the Indian state under the BJP led government (1998-2004) pursued economic globalization despite demands on the part of Hindu faith-based organizations to pursue an economic framework grounded in *Swadeshi* (inward looking self reliance); or, how the Sri Lankan state redefined its policy agenda, especially on education and affirmative action, in response to demands from growing Buddhist movement; or the experience of the Malaysian state that made compromises with some faith-based communities on cultural and identity matters in effect in return for greater freedom on economic policy-making. These experiences of negotiation and engagement have been neither peaceful nor painless, yet they have led and in some cases, forced, states to redefine themselves and their relationship to their citizens in critical ways. More importantly, these experiences have influenced patterns of development (especially with regard to gender equity, minority and vulnerable groups) in significant respects.

Consider also variations among, and within, religious communities across countries in terms of their influence on development agendas. Why have the Islamist movements in northern Nigeria and Egypt been more effective at undermining the development agenda, than the Islamist movements in Indonesia or Malaysia? Why has the Catholic Church been more of a positive force with regard to the development agenda in some Latin American countries than in others? Why has Catholicism been more effective at undermining gender equity in some countries more than in others?

As many of the powerful religious communities have a global presence with support in both developing and developed countries, we need to also understand how faith-based movements in the developed world influence such movements in the developing countries, and what impact they have on development patterns.



These questions can at this point be raised more effectively than answered. Through an exploration of examples from Islam in Indonesia, Nigeria, and Egypt, and Catholicism and Liberation Theology in Latin America and Protestantism, some answers are provided in this report.

#### 4.

### **Islam, Christianity, and Hinduism on – Poverty and Equity**

#### **Islam**

Discussions of Islam's perspective on human rights have tended to grapple with three articles of the UDHR, articles that have implications for our concern with equity and development. These are: Article 2, on equal rights and freedom; Article 5 on torture and cruel punishment; and Article 18 on freedom of religion. In other words, at the core of these analyses are the question of equal rights for men and women, interpretations of cruel punishment and torture, and the space for women and men to 'opt' out of the religious obligations and strictures placed on them. Disagreement about how different religions ought to interpret these freedoms/rights and what are the acceptable definitions and boundaries of these concerns have riven the analyses.

The discussions tend to adopt one of two positions. There are those who argue that Islam offers as liberal a foundation as any other religion or ideology; others are critical of Islam's capacity and willingness to be this liberal. Some argue that the liberalism of Islam ought to be accepted as a valid religious/cultural position to the same extent as for other religious positions, especially the Judeo-Christian ones, on human rights. Others argue that a lack of 'fit' between Islam and universal ideas of human rights ought to be rectified to some extent.

Which of these interpretations of Islam gain popularity and legitimacy in any country or even community is a function not -- unsurprisingly -- of the theological accuracy or insight of the interpretation, but of the political landscape of the time and place that propels or enables certain interpretations to gain legitimacy and popularity. The popularity of one or other interpretation depends on the identity politics in any particular country or even community. How the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference plays itself out in various institutional, historical, and

socio-economic contexts has helped specify which religious interpretations come to hold sway over the popular imagination. They thus act as palimpsests of the Koran.

At the time of formulating and signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, both interpretations of Islam were presented, one by the Saudi Arabian delegate and the other by the Pakistani delegate. The Saudi Arabian delegate said that he could not accept that men and women should have equal rights in marriage, or that all human beings had equal dignity and rights, or that all were free to change their religion.

The Pakistani delegate offered views that opposed many of these positions. He argued, for instance, that Islam is liberal, and at its core a religion tolerant of other religions. This interpretive position has been supported by the arguments of some Islamic scholars who have observed that equality is a cornerstone of Islam and that Islam contains nothing contrary to a liberal worldview in its understanding of human rights, and equity. Ameer Ali Syed, for instance, observes in his book, *Spirit of Islam*, that genuine Islam is the most appropriate foundation for a liberal society.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, adherents of this perspective argue that the Koran actively endorses freedom of religion and condemns the lack of religious tolerance and that neither faith nor conscience should have an obligatory character.

In contrast to this interpretation of the Koran, and in line with the position adopted by the Saudi Arabian delegate, other scholars of Islam “have argued that international human rights standards are to a large extent incompatible with the tenets of Islam.”<sup>12</sup> Their position is usually based on two related arguments. One, universal human rights are a product of Western cultural ideas, ideas that are Judeo-Christian in origin. Second, these ideas are not compatible with ideas at the core of Islam – ideas about gender equality, torture, freedom of expression, and religious freedom among others.

Bozeman, for instance, has observed that “Islamic culture is not guided by notions of right or principle (the way) the West understand them. Instead, Islamic culture is characterized by the governance of personalism and pragmatism, where ruling authority is illegitimate and coercive almost by definition.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Stackhouse has argued “that Islam is a religious tradition ill suited to

democratic conceptions of society. It simply does not present the individual with those opportunities for freedom of action and association that are characteristic of Western Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

However, as the discussion below suggests, it is impossible to say definitely whether or not Islam is a liberal religion based on theological or legal analyses. Which interpretation of Islam is regarded as authentic and gains popularity is determined by the specificities of the identity politics in a particular country or region. In the discussion that follows I draw on the recent experience of Islamic movements in northern Nigeria, Egypt and Indonesia to argue that the nature of Islamic identity politics -- understood in terms of its relation to the state, the form of intra-Islamic group competition, and the definition of the 'other,' i.e. how they define their adversaries opposing identity - - in these three countries influences how equity, especially gender equity, and poverty are understood. All three sections draw on primary materials I gathered during fieldwork.

### **Nigeria**<sup>15</sup>

In northern Nigeria a number of states have adopted the *Sharia* not just with regard to civil law but also with regard to criminal law. The official line in these states is that to be a good Muslim and to live the life of the good Muslim is to live in a community, the rules of which are those defined by the Koran. It is believed that living in such a community allows Muslims to follow the other rules prescribed by the Koran. These rules are: performing *salat* (five prayers a day), *saum* (fasting during Ramadan), *zakkat* (charity contributions), going on a *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina), and *jihad* (striving to follow the path specified by the Koran). Performance of these activities is made possible when the community in which one lives has adopted the *Sharia*, rather than any other civil and criminal code.

How does the adoption of the *Sharia*, and the identity politics underlying it influence the interpretation of poverty and equity in the region? And how does this interpretation relate to the idea of universal human rights?

Scholars have long debated the factors that have led to the rise of Islamism in Nigeria.<sup>16</sup> Political corruption, weak state institutions and poor governance have, the popular argument goes, compelled the masses to seek solace among religious leaders and organizations (both Muslim and

Christian). Those flocking to religious leaders are seeking alternative ways to hold community leaders, and (at least local) politicians, accountable.

Moreover, the political corruption and inept state institutions have meant that everyday life is surreal and chaotic. Few institutional rules are obeyed or even recognized. The stability and order of Emirate rule has been replaced by institutional breakdown and corruption. And in Northern Nigeria people have tended to believe that the *Sharia* is the most effective way to turn this disorderly state of affairs around. Strict adherence to Islamic precepts is viewed as the only way of regulating a society corrupted by modern politicians and institutions gone amok.

In this landscape of state ineptitude and corruption, religious leaders and organizations have found a comfortable resting place. And a number of Islamic organizations and leaders have emerged, vying for popular support and recognition of their claim to be the true interpreters of Islam. In the process of distinguishing themselves from other Islamic organizations and of demanding that their interpretation of Islam is the authentic one, they have ended up radicalizing Islamic identity politics in the region.

The main Islamic groups in Northern Nigeria maybe divided into five: two traditional Sufi sects the *Qadiriyya* and the *Tijaniyya* -- who follow a traditional version of Islam seeped in local culture and practices; a loose network of *Yan Izala* followers adhering closely to the Saudi Arabian version of Islam repudiating traditionalism and seeking to purify the practice of Islam by advocating the *Sharia*; fiery radicals seeking to challenge the popularity of the *Izala* and Sufi ideologies; and Muslim women's organizations seeking to empower women by reinforcing their Islamic identity and using it to challenge religious leaders to grant women Islamic rights.

While discussing how poverty might be tackled, interviewees belonging to *Izala* and Sufi Islamic organizations argued that poverty is a problem that can be tackled by giving jobs to the male heads of households. Their argument is that since in Islam, men in their role as husbands and fathers are responsible for the welfare of women (wives and daughters) poverty can best be reduced by ensuring that men have the necessary skills and education to get gainful employment.

When asked what role Islamic organizations had in the process of poverty reduction, members of all types of organizations (Sufi, *Izala*, radical Islamic, and women's) almost unanimously

responded that their role is limited to two activities – first, to providing Islamic education so that employable men realize that their duty under Islam is to find gainful employment and thus be responsible for the welfare of the women in their family; and second, to also providing Islamic education that would impart to men a clear sense of their responsibility with regard to the practice of *Zakkat*. Islamic clerics and sheikhs (Sufi, *Izala*, and radical) who were involved in *Zakkat* committees in these regions argued that *Zakkat* is indeed an effective way of re-distributing resources in a manner that promotes financial responsibility among the poor. It is a sacred duty of rich Muslims to pay a portion of their wealth to take care of the poor. It is a form of welfare system that helps to redistribute wealth and alleviate poverty in the society.<sup>17</sup>

With the resurgence of Islamic consciousness and the expansion of the *Sharia* law in Northern Nigeria, many of the *Sharia* compliant states started adopting the *Zakkat* system as part of the welfare scheme for the poor in their states. They set up *Zakkat* committees and co-opted the traditional Emirs into these committees to help in the collection and distribution of the *Zakkat*. However, the *Zakkat* system is far from efficient. A few of the Islamic clerics and sheikhs, but *all* of the women's organizations we interviewed observed that *Zakkat* funds are not quite as effective in reducing poverty as the Koran suggests it would. This, they argued, was because middle class and upper class men were ignorant of the *Zakkat* obligations and were consequently not complying with them, as they should. They pointed to a common practice among wealthy men to give their *Zakkat* contributions to extended or even close family members rather than to the *Zakkat* committees.

Some more specific reasons emerged for the ineffectiveness of *Zakkat* during interviews, especially with women's organizations. First, the *Zakkat* committees are (mostly) corrupt and they invariably distribute the *Zakkat* pot among favored members of the community. Second, the *Zakkat* committees tend to distribute the available funds among a vast number of men, with the consequence that none of the recipients got funds substantial enough to establish oneself financially. They attributed this to a recent development among *Zakkat* committees to name the donors/contributors. Donors/contributors, the women argued, were more interested in the publicity that they had helped vast numbers of poor men, less in enabling a few poor men to establish themselves financially. This, the women suggested, led the *Zakkat* contributors/donors to put pressure on the *Zakkat* committees to

subvert the *Zakkat* process. Third, the women argued that the *Zakkat* committees give money only to men (given their role as husbands and fathers). Women are allowed to receive funds only if they are divorced or widowed. Unfortunately as a large percentage of poor married men spend their *Zakkat* payment on alcohol, mistresses, or gambling and such, [and –cut] their wives and children never learn about the payment, let alone benefit from it.

In other words, Islamic leaders and organizations in northern Nigeria almost unanimously argue that poverty is a problem because the community lacks enough good Muslims. Their ways of addressing poverty are rooted in Islamic theology. Further, their increasing radicalism has meant that they are hostile to what they perceive as ‘Western’ development. And this does appear to be getting stronger.

In 2003 these leaders and organization came together to denounce the government’s immunization program. They argued that Islamic scientists had ‘proved’ that the polio vaccine given to infants contains ingredients that cause sterilization once they are adults. They asserted that the polio vaccine is yet another ploy by international development agencies, America and the West in general to make Muslims sterile. Their protests led the government to suspend its vaccination program. The government decision later to import the vaccines from Indonesia rather the West led to the Islamic clerics agreeing to support the vaccination program. Polio vaccinations have now resumed in northern Nigeria.

In short, in the absence of effective governance, identity politics is causing Islamic groups in the region to compete with each other for popular support and legitimacy. In order to win the competition they all strive to present themselves as the purest and most authentic Islamic group. The Sufi sects and the Wahhabi group, *Izala*, despite their ideological differences and their different historical experiences, are all concerned with countering the pressures of modernity and the influences of the West. Given this similarity in mission, as it were, the politics of difference leads them towards radicalizing Islamic discourse and identities in the region. Radicalization leads the groups to compete with each other with regard to: limiting women’s rights and restricting their personal freedom; literally interpreting the *Sharia* and challenging universal definitions of torture and cruel punishment;

and restricting men and women's freedom of faith and conscience. All of this has serious implications for equity, especially gender equity, and for women living in poverty.

## **Egypt**

Islamism began its ascendancy in Egypt in 1881 with the promulgation of a religious reform decree that sought to remove rituals and mysticism from popular culture. Though the decree was unsuccessful in its attempts in the 1880s, the economic crisis of the 1930s helped the rise of Islamism as an alternative to secularism and economic inequality. Despite this tension, Nasser received support from the Muslim Brotherhood, the most prominent of Egypt's Islamic organizations, for overthrowing the Egyptian monarchy in 1952. Nasser's nationalist-socialist government effectively countered this Islamism by co-opting religious symbols, language, and leaders. The regime wanted to wrap itself in an authentic Islamic garb. The leading Islamic university, Al-Azhar University, was nationalized, and the state periodically obtained *fatwas* (decrees) from its scholars to buttress its Islamic credentials.

The Muslim Brotherhood stepped up its protest of this misappropriation of Islamic symbols and institutions without the establishment of what it considered a legitimate Islamic state. Following an alleged attempt to assassinate Nasser in 1965, the Brotherhood was brutally crushed. It reappeared in the 1970s during Sadat's regime. Sadat granted legal status to the Brotherhood and the organization flourished, but it also began to challenge the state. The Brotherhood and other more radical Islamic groups were yet again crushed.

Sadat's successor, Mubarak, has adopted a somewhat more nuanced approach to the Brotherhood and other Islamic organizations, repressing violent and political Islamists while giving the other Islamists public space and some freedom of expression. Under his regime Islamic organizations such as the Brotherhood have been allowed to run hospitals and schools in middle class and poor neighborhoods and even field candidates during the parliamentary elections.

While political Islam seems to be transforming itself, cultural conservatives until recently commanded considerable strength in the religious establishment, and creatively used the courts to promote their agenda thanks to the insertion of the *Sharia* in the constitution. As a result, the state ironically enforced a version of orthodox Islamic law that is much stricter than that which many of the

political Islamists themselves would apply. Further, cultural conservatives appeared to have won one significant battle: that of reinforcing Islamist ideas and interpretations in popular culture, of reducing the space for and legitimacy of other interpretations of Islam (such as Sufism) and Egyptian culture.

However, this complicated dance between the state and Islamic organizations appears to be undergoing a transformation. A new trend of moderation appears to be setting in, inviting speculations about why that might have happened. The Muslim Brotherhood has, for instance, entered into alliances with the left-wing political party. Even more surprising, the Brotherhood held a joint rally with the ruling political party to protest the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, while Al-Azhar, the home of official Islam is being challenged by Islamists and the public alike. More shocking yet, the Brotherhood has been engaged in talks with the American government, though it has denied this in public.

Meanwhile, moderate charismatic preachers have begun appearing on television in Egypt. Amr Khaled, dressed in a suit preaches to middle class Egyptians American evangelical style. Even some middle class women have taken to preaching. And popular musicians have begun to Islamize themselves. The *hijab* (headscarf), which was regarded as a critical symbol of Islamic resurgence by Islamists, and seen as the beginning of the curtailment of women's rights by Egyptian feminists, has gradually become a fashion accessory. All of which suggests that cultural conservatives who, until recently had appeared to have successfully created a civil society to their liking, are now faced with a very different cultural/religious landscape. It is a landscape where radical Islamic organizations are being marginalized, and previously radical organizations are reinventing themselves as moderates.

The Muslim Brotherhood has over the years used the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference to demand that the state negotiate with it over the correct interpretation of an Islamic identity, and sought to mobilize its support base to generate pressure. It challenged the discourse of Islam presented by the state and by traditional Islamic leaders and offered poor communities healthcare and educational services that the state was not providing effectively.

An extensive and long-lasting engagement with the society and politics appear to have encouraged the Muslim Brotherhood to moderate many of its positions. Indeed, the very success of



the Muslim Brotherhood appears to have contributed to its moderation. The widespread acceptance of head-scarves and veils has, for instance, meant that it is seen today, at least by some, as a fashion item and has spawned a growing market in designer veils and head-scarves. Widespread acceptance of Koranic schools and instruction classes has meant that moderate (and female) interpreters of Islam also offer Koranic schools and attendance at their speeches is rising.

With better state institutions and more effective governance than in northern Nigeria, Islamic groups in Egypt have not had the same opportunities to radicalize their politics. They instead have had to vie with the state in reaching out to poor Egyptians, thus developing an understanding of poverty that is concerned with equity. Their focus is different from that adopted by Islamic groups in northern Nigeria – less the West and more the state and local ‘liberal’ groups and movements. Interestingly, the tension between the state and the Muslim Brotherhood has also brought the Brotherhood closer to Coptic religious organizations leading to some cooperation between the two on developmental activities.

None of this is to say that Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood recognize the lack of gender equity in society in the same way as Egyptian feminists do. The former persist in arguing for a Koranic interpretation of women’s rights and duties. Female ‘circumcision’ continues to be supported and domestic violence is not always challenged. Social and familial processes that force women into poverty are rarely recognized and consequently never addressed in an effective manner. Egyptian feminists interpret the Koran from a liberal perspective and see a greater degree of compromise and dialogue possible between Islam on one hand and gender equity, women’s rights and development on the other.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the specific historical and political landscape has led Islamic groups to moderate themselves over time, to seek dialogue with the state, and even with other Egyptian religious organizations. And they have been very active in promoting development, if not gender equity. Their interpretation of poverty and strategies for reducing it are not entirely contrary to that preached by international donors and development organizations. In this, they are closer to Islamic groups in Indonesia than to those in Nigeria.

**Indonesia**

Since the 1970s Southeast Asia has experienced extraordinary levels of religious resurgence. As Hefner notes, “Mosques have proliferated in towns and village; religious schools and devotional programs have expanded; a vast market in Islamic books, magazines, and newspapers has developed; and, very important, a well-educated Muslim middle class has begun to raise questions about characteristically modern concerns, including the role and rights of women, the challenge of pluralism, the merits of market economies, and, most generally, the proper relationship of religion to [the] state.”<sup>18</sup>

This religious resurgence has led to an unprecedented contest for popularity and authenticity in Indonesia between the state and Islamic groups and to a lesser extent between the two largest Islamic groups in the country – the *Muhammadiyah* and the *Nahdltul Ulema* (NU). However, the nature of this contest, for reasons I discuss later in this section, is notably different from similar contests in northern Nigeria and Egypt, both in terms of how they are played out and their consequences.

The *Muhammadiyah* has around 20-25 million members and the NU is somewhat larger with 25-30 members. Both these organizations run schools, universities, hospitals, libraries and hostels throughout the country. A vast number of Indonesians pass through these institutions and regard themselves as members of these organizations. Membership defines people as specific kinds of Indonesian Muslims.

Set up in 1957, the *Muhammadiyah* organization is seen as the more ‘modern’ of the two – modern in terms of membership profile. Its members tend to come from Indonesia’s modern sector – the urban middle classes. The organization’s members meld their Indonesian urban middle class identity with their Islamic identity while negating their traditional religious identity with its animist and Hindu-Buddhist influences. They do this in a manner that allows them to profess their support of Islamic piety and purity. The organization’s membership has grown with the development of the Indonesian economy during the 1980 and 1990s.

NU, by contrast, has historically been regarded as the organization of the traditionalist Muslims. NU members are more inclined to mix their Islamic lifestyle with indigenous Javanese

customs and practices. This is not to suggest that NU as an organization looks favorably upon these customs and practices; but that its members are less likely than *Muhammadiyah* members to have given up these ways of living. NU membership is more rural than the *Muhammadiyah* membership. And it is their rural lifestyles, arguably more than any philosophic positions that facilitate their ability to meld together indigenous cultural/religious practices and Islamic ideas of piety and purity in their identities.

The NU was created in 1926 in response to Islamic reformers who sought to ‘modernize’ Indonesian civil society by restricting the role of the *Ulemas* in the interpretation of religious texts and law. It gradually came to be supported by peasants, petty bourgeoisie, religious professional officials and a range of politicians from most parts of Indonesia. As its support grew it came to play a central role in Indonesian politics.

The question in Indonesia is no longer whether Islamic leaders (from either NU or the *Muhammadiyah*) will be accorded an increasing influence in the public sphere, but as Hefner puts it, it is “how those leaders once accorded influence, will interpret their responsibility to Islam and nation.”<sup>19</sup> How they interpret this responsibility, and mobilize their members, is likely to influence their support for specific kinds of development and their understanding of poverty.

Based on how the contest or interaction between these two organizations, and between them and the state, has evolved, it is unlikely that these organizations will define their Islamic identity in a non-moderate way. Both oppose the imposition of the *Sharia* in Indonesia for instance. There are arguably three reasons for this opposition. First, even though both organizations compete with each other for legitimacy, popularity, and authenticity, each organization has a core base of supporters (rural for NU and urban for *Muhammadiyah*). They feel secure about the support they have. Second, with the exception of the parts of the 1950s and the 1980s, both organizations have more or less enjoyed collaborative relations with the state and regard that space as more or less safe and guaranteed. Third, each of the two organizations is concerned with defining itself and Islam vis-à-vis a different set of identity claims -- traditional culture/religion for NU and modern urban lifestyles for the *Muhammadiyah*.

This pattern of contestation or interaction between the two organizations tends to ensure that neither is compelled to radicalize itself in search of support, or to oppose an adversary. For the *Muhammadiyahs* the ‘other’ is defined by modernity, not the West per se or the federal state, as in Nigeria or Egypt. They are concerned with countering what they regard as the negative externalities of modernity such as materialism, lack of faith, alcohol consumption, and sexual indiscipline. For NU, the ‘other’ is cultural and religious traditionalism. They are concerned with Indonesian Islam’s excessive engagement with animist and Hindu/Buddhist practices and belief. This difference in focus, along with the guaranteed place in the public sphere and a secure but not overlapping support base has led them to not compete with each other and outdo the other in terms of who is a more authentic and pure Muslim, as Islamic groups in northern Nigeria tend to do.

Thus, as Hefner observes, in Indonesia “the dominant discourse to emerge from [the contest between religious interpreters] has been marked not by theological totalism or strident authoritarianism, but by a remarkable combination of pluralism, intellectual dynamism, and openness to dialogue with non-Muslim actors and institutions.”<sup>20</sup> Consequently, both NU and *Muhammadiyah* organizations have been willing collaborators of the state with regard to development concerns. They do not, for instance, regard *Zakat* as the sole or even the primary strategy for reducing poverty. As with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, they are actively engaged in developmental schemes and projects in order to reach the poorest of the poor. Second, because they are not playing one-upmanship with each other through radical politics, they are less interested in limiting women’s rights (by imposing the *Sharia* for instance) in order to claim Islamic authenticity as Islamic groups in northern Nigeria do. Third, unlike their counterparts in Nigeria they are relatively unconcerned with restricting freedom of faith and conscience whether of Indonesian Muslims, or of the country’s religious minorities.

In his recent book, Olivier Roy argues that political Islam and calls to establish an Islamic state have been replaced by a concern with establishing an Islamic identity that transcends cultural boundaries while engaging with modernity and globalization.<sup>21</sup> While I would agree with his point about the decline of interest in establishing an Islamic state, based on research in Indonesia, Egypt and northern Nigeria I would suggest that Muslim organizations are actively engaged (without quite

admitting to it always) with local culture and tradition. Where the political and social landscape allows them to be open about this negotiation (as in Indonesia and to only a very limited extent in Egypt) they appear to take on more moderate and flexible positions on development, poverty and equity. Where they are forced to define their agenda in terms of hostility towards the West (as in northern Nigeria), they adopt more radical and extreme positions on development, poverty, and equity.

### **Christianity (Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism)**

Let us now turn to those Christian groups (Catholic Church, Evangelical conservative Protestant) that have had, or are believed to have, a troubled relationship to the secular human rights agenda. Christian movements, like Islamic movements, have been on the rise. The Catholic Church and Evangelical Protestant churches have all gained in popularity on the coat tails of identity politics. The politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference have nurtured Christian (Catholic and Protestant) movements in Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Membership in churches, especially evangelical churches is growing in all regions except Western Europe, and the competition between churches is triggering all manner of religious extremism and fundamentalism. Concern over maintaining the 'flock' and guarding the boundaries of the faith community have meant that churches are pushed into defining their identity by reinterpreting the Bible and recasting contemporary politics with the help of theological arguments.

If most Islamic movements consider themselves as opposing the human rights agenda, Christian movements, and especially the Catholic approach, have consciously attempted to reinterpret their theological positions so as to provide the foundations for the human rights approach. The Christian approach to concerns about equity, development and human rights has been to facilitate Christians to "promote and appropriate the values of a human rights culture."<sup>22</sup> The Catholic Church and Protestant Churches have been concerned with appropriating and incorporating the discourse of human rights and grounding them within a specific theological understanding. As Villa-Vincencio

notes, “the primary aim of the various ecclesial studies ... has been the articulation of a political ethic grounded in a theological understanding of what it means to be human. ... [and] ... the task of theology has been to “help locate the human rights struggle at the centre of the debate on what it means to be human and therefore also at the centre of social and political pursuit.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the expressed concern with the intrusion of secularism and secular lifestyles, both Protestant and Catholic churches are concerned with maintaining the boundaries of their faith community, fending off competition from other churches and retaining their grip on their flock. In this respect, the manner in which Christian leaders and churches respond to identity politics is not dissimilar from the way Imams and Islamic leaders in northern Nigeria respond. However, the difference between the positions adopted by the Imams of northern Nigeria and the political and religious trajectories they choose to follow, and those (that-cut) adopted by Catholic priests (especially those of the liberation theology persuasion) and Evangelical Protestant leaders is that the latter also see the Bible and Christian theology as offering legitimacy and justification for the human rights agenda; the former do not. The latter are merely concerned with using the Bible to reinterpret the human rights agenda not opposing it (as do the Imams and Muslim leaders of northern Nigeria for example).

Consider the relationship between the Catholic Church and the human rights agenda: Since the encyclical of 19XX, *Pacem in Terris*, human rights have been at the heart of the social teaching of the Catholic Church. In the words of John XXIII, the entire Catholic tradition “is always dominated by one basic theme – an unshakable affirmation and vigorous defense of the dignity and rights of the human person.”<sup>24</sup> The encyclical has shaped the Catholic interpretation of UDHR, equity, and development since that time.

Three themes of this interpretation in particular may be regarded as critical. First, that every individual is at his/her core a member of a community and the individual cannot attain well-being in isolation from or at the expense of the community. As the Catholic Bishops’ Conference noted in 1998, neither “an individualism that denies the claims of community, nor a corporate prosperity that excludes the well-being or dignity of individual persons, is ultimately tolerable.”<sup>25</sup> Second, that life itself is not only a human right, but is first a divine gift. Third, that the divine word of God is the

philosophical foundation of our concern with human rights. The human rights agenda and “the use of Scripture do not contradict, but reinforce, each other in the weight to be given to human dignity, and hence to rights.”<sup>26</sup>

The position of the Catholic Church on human rights has been critiqued for not adequately addressing possibilities and legitimate sources of conflict that arise within the human rights agenda – a good example being the tension between individual rights and group rights. Hollenbach thus asks whether the theoretical inclusiveness of the Catholic approach to human rights has been bought at the expense of “abstract generality? [Whether] ... the emphasis on the interconnection between all human life made it impossible to establish priorities in a world where not all desirable goods are immediately and simultaneously realizable? ... [And whether] the desire to reconcile and harmonize all the various human rights really betray an inability to admit the reality of social conflict and the need for making hard choices?”<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the Catholic Church has not been good at responding to the politics of difference under certain circumstances. Where Catholics are in a majority and their primary challenger is the state, the Catholic Church has responded to the politics of difference by reinterpreting society and politics in light of their theological position – frequently engaging in extreme rhetoric and political positions. This is, for instance, their response in Chile and the Philippines.<sup>28</sup> In Chile and the Philippines, the Catholic Church has not only promoted the hard-line position on birth control that has been adopted by the Vatican, but it has also engaged in *real* politics seeking to better control the political and social agenda.

Positions on birth control have serious implications for equal rights for women. In the Catholic Church the modern origins of the Church’s position on birth control can be traced to Pope Paul VI. He argued that the transmission of life should never be obstructed. He deemed ‘natural’ methods of contraception to be the only ones acceptable. This had implications not only for women’s rights, but also for concerns about population policy, poverty and more recently, AIDS.

As the *Economist* noted in an article in 2001, “[in] the sphere of international policy, the birth-control ruling still marks out the church as an irresponsible and obstructionist voice in any debate on over-population, poverty or, especially, the containment of AIDS.” The impact of not

accepting sex education and contraception (condom use) is of course even more catastrophic in regions of Africa ravaged by HIV/AIDS. This is a serious loss, as the church is often the prime provider of health, education and social services in poor communities in Asia and Africa. The essential work of Catholic doctors and teachers is now undermined by the perception that they will put ideology first. “As a result, the church is often not taken seriously on other issues, such as embryo research, where health and ethics collide.”<sup>29</sup>

Despite its serious engagement with the problem of poverty, the Catholic Church’s position on birth control has undermined many of its efforts. In the Philippines, for example, the insistence of the Church on abstinence has the sanctioned contraception as meant that countless poor women are forced into deeper poverty because of their childcare responsibilities. Dr Melgar of the *Likhaan Women’s Group* in Manila observes that because “sexuality education is prohibited and even efforts to institutionalize sex education and contraceptive care is being opposed very strongly by the Catholic Church” women’s health is at risk.<sup>30</sup> This opposition is not merely expressed via popular social pressure, but is backed by threats from the Catholic Church in the Philippines to unseat politicians who support women’s reproductive rights. The politicians give in to the popular and institutional pressure put upon them. The Mayor of Manila has, for instance, declared the city “the world’s first ‘pro life’ city, and banned all contraceptive services from city-run clinics.”<sup>31</sup>

In countries where Catholics are in a minority, and where support for them is not increasing by leaps and bounds, the Church’s primary goal appears to be to specify their position vis-à-vis other religions and especially Christian denominations, but not necessarily adopt extreme positions on social and political events and issues. This is clearly the case in India where the Catholic Church stays under the radar to the extent possible, which is very different from the Church’s approach to its role in Chile or the Philippines. It is more vocal and visible in the United States, for instance, though it refrains from engaging in the competitive radicalizing politics that appear to egg evangelical Protestant groups on.

The liberation theology movement in Latin America was built on the Catholic Church’s interpretation of the Bible and the human rights discourse. As Roelofs notes, “Liberation theology and its attendant Christian base community movement” occupy “the left wing” of the Catholic Church



in Latin America and “have recovered for their own time and place a biblically derived political radicalism.”<sup>32</sup> This radicalism is a consequence of their position that “the poor in their base communities are well positioned to read and interpret Scripture without instruction. This assertion is essential to the whole grand theme of liberation of the poor and specifically to the function of the base communities as arenas for the recovery of self-respect and human dignity by the poor.” And as Roelofs concludes, the “unmistakable implication of this assertion is a radical egalitarianism, first existentially, then specifically in roles having to do with interpretation of faith and morals.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, “this equality is seen [as] bestowing among members something absolute and unqualified. Anything short of this would demean self-worth, denied to the poor by society at large but affirmed by the poverty-stricken person’s newfound neighbors in the based communities. It is this sense of self-worth that enables the poor person – male or female; black, white, or Indian; old or young; ill or well; skilled or wholly ignorant – to escape societal feelings of oppression and marginalization and assert within the base community as new self” both receiving dignity from, and giving dignity to, others in one’s community.<sup>34</sup>

Protestant churches have engaged with the issue of human rights from a somewhat different perspective Protestant churches have argued that the “struggle for liberation is not only inherent to what it is to be human, but the call to liberation is the call of God.”<sup>35</sup> Further, the study by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) observed in 1970 that the search for human rights is directly related to an obligation to live a life that is “befitting of one bearing the image of God.” Villa-Vincencio observes that this “*means that the pursuit of human rights comes to be seen as an inherent part of what it means to be human.*”<sup>36</sup> If human rights are regarded as the “gift and demand of God,”<sup>37</sup> then this theological position has profound implications for societies and political systems where women, minorities, homosexuals, and other marginalized populations are not granted these rights.

The Lutheran World Federation identifies freedom, equality, and participation as “the three inviolable basic elements of worldly rights.”<sup>38</sup> In the study published in 1977, the Federation notes that while there is no simple link between UDHR and rights defined in the Bible, all Christians should

“engage in the struggle for human rights with a level of hope and courage that surpasses what the law alone can generate within us.”<sup>39</sup>

The two positions above define the two ends of the Protestant approach to human rights. Other positions such as those adopted by the Anglicans, Methodists, Quakers fall somewhere in the middle. The World Council of Churches, which represents both Protestant and Orthodox Christian churches has long adopted a relatively liberal perspective and associated itself with the human rights agenda. The council has increasingly been seriously internally divided on a number of issues such as eligibility of women for ordination, acceptance of gays and lesbians for ordination, and acceptance of committed homosexual relationships as equivalent to heterosexual.

Orthodox and Evangelical Protestant groups (Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, Charismatics, and neo-evangelicals) have been loud and strong in their protests of these positions, which they argue are too liberal. Of the various Protestant groups, evangelical Protestants have had a more complicated relationship to the human rights agenda. As Traer notes, “support for human rights among evangelical Protestants is not unanimous” and that the “deist roots of the human rights tradition are worrisome to many.”<sup>40</sup> To these groups, Traer argues, the human rights agenda is too close to a secular worldview for comfort.

However, as Shibley suggests, many evangelical Protestant groups, even the seemingly conservative ones in the West, are more ‘world-affirming’ than usually recognized. Thus, he argues that there “is a sense in which contemporary evangelicals are more modern and more liberal than other Protestants [such as the Pentecostals and Fundamentalists], if by ‘modern’ and ‘liberal’ we mean simply that they have a higher level of comfort with cultural pluralism and a willingness to concede the authority of a secular state.”<sup>41</sup> This, of course, is partly a consequence of their increasing interest in gaining members and asserting themselves in the political arena.

This world-affirming tendency of evangelical Protestants notwithstanding, pressure from competing churches means that while believers may be relatively liberal, their leaders are not. The competitive pressure compels them to use an increasingly conservative or extreme rhetoric in the public space.<sup>42</sup> Intra-evangelical competition thus contributes towards radicalizing the rhetoric and activities of evangelical Protestant groups. It might also, at the same time, contribute to internal

spaces where somewhat more liberal worldviews and interpretations take root and even flourish. The extent of this countervailing tendency is still to be analyzed in depth. Thus, while the radical rhetoric and activities of evangelical groups undermines women's rights, gay rights and has implications for birth control policies and HIV/AIDS prevention policies adopted by the United States.

With no Christian group is the tension between a religiously rooted human rights perspective and one rooted in secular ideals more clearly seen than among Catholics and some evangelical Protestant groups. And this tension is particularly visible in issues concerning women's rights and gay rights. This tension, emerging from the rhetoric and activities adopted by the Catholic Church and groups and evangelical Protestant churches and groups have profound implications for poverty, equity and development. Lobbying by these groups in the United States has significantly cut support and funding for birth control and HIV/AIDS prevention programs undertaken both by USAID and multilateral development organizations. This has strengthened the hand of conservative organizations (religious and other) in developing countries and thus put increasing pressure on developmental programs adopted by already fragile state institutions. Whether in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, this has seriously undermined anti-poverty initiatives and promoted inequity.

### **Hinduism and Hindu Nationalism**

Exploring the relationship between Hindu and Hindu nationalist movements on the one hand, and equity and poverty on the other offer the clearest evidence for the argument that identity politics has altered and complicated the face of the relationship between religion and human rights. Whether one considers religious movements as riding on the coattails of identity movements, or as masquerading as identity movements, it can be argued that recent challenges to ideas of universal human rights and to the UDHR are not mere religious challenges, but they are challenges made by interpreters of religious texts. These challenges, consequently, are easily entangled in identity politics

and under specific circumstances get caught up in competitive radicalizing rhetoric and activities. In the case of Hindu reform and Hindu nationalist movements, the challenges to universal ideas of human rights are not made by interpreters of religion, but by 'interlocutors' of Hinduism, who seek to represent the Hindus in politics and whose religious authority is not clearly evident. Consequently, Hindu nationalist movements appear more clearly to be response to contemporary identity politics.

The difference between Hindu religious reform movement and Hindu nationalist movement is critical to my argument in this section. Rooted in diverse interpretations of the religion, Hinduism has over the centuries spurred religious reform movements and, in modern times, also religious *nationalistic* movements. Hindu religious movements -- from ancient times (Jainism and Buddhism) through to the 19<sup>th</sup> century (*Arya Samaj*, *Brahmo Samaj*) -- have been social reform movements. These reform movements have sought to enhance the status of women in society (giving them more rights), improve the status of subordinate groups in Hindu society, and more generally create a more equal and just society. These movements have tended to argue that Hindu philosophy at its core allows for, and is rooted in, concerns about equity and equality, and that this concern has been undermined by social factors.<sup>43</sup> Hindu reform movements have further argued that if the veil of the caste system were to be lifted, Hinduism would be able to offer believers a just society. Moreover, their leaders have come to be regarded as legitimate *interpreters* of Hinduism, not just as interlocutors and *representatives* of Hinduism.

The recent rise of the Hindu nationalist movement in India came as somewhat of a surprise to many students of Indian politics and development.<sup>44</sup> They had begun to assume that secularism would remain unchallenged in post-independent India. As Jafferlot observes, "the essential characteristics of Hinduism scarcely lend themselves to a closed and monolithic radicalism of the type associated with Muslim, Jewish, and Christian 'fundamentalisms'. In fact, Hinduism is distinguished by a social-cultural differentiation and a capacity for integration which hardly seem compatible with the expression of militant collective consciousness."<sup>45</sup>

Jafferlot further notes that, the "development of a collective Hindu consciousness was inhibited not only by the extreme social and religious differentiation within Hinduism, but also by a

tendency to discount the importance of the Other and therefore to ignore the need for solidarity in the face of the Other.”<sup>46</sup> Given the social differentiation and the tendency to minimize the distinctiveness of the Other, incorporating the Other into Hindu society has always appeared to be relatively straightforward. Straightforward, that is, until Islam encountered Hinduism. Islam was the first “Other” to resist on a sustained basis incorporation into Hinduism’s social folds. This resistance has over the past eight centuries led to the rise of a Hindu identity and during conducive political climates, has also fed Hindu nationalist movements.

Despite the core characteristics of Hinduism (i.e. the extreme differentiation of its socio-cultural foundations) and its inclusive character, the Hindu identity has today seemingly developed into a frequently virulent form of nationalism.<sup>47</sup> The current incarnation of the Hindu nationalist movement – the remarkable rise of the BJP-RSS-VHP trio since the 1980s – has been less concerned with issues of justice, equality, and fairness and the inequities sustained by the caste system, more with political mobilization. Of the three organizations above, the BJP, RSS and VHP, the first one is viewed as political, the second as cultural, and the third as religious, consisting of priests as advisors as well as office holders. Despite the VHP, and unlike Hindu religious movements, Hindu nationalism has been less of a social movement than a political and nationalist movement. This is not to say that it does not have leaders (*Shiv Sena* leaders protesting Valentine’s Day in Mumbai, for example) who have sought to introduce social changes. A few others have been concerned with “sankritizing” lower castes and thus giving them a status closer to the upper castes.<sup>48</sup> But Hindu nationalist leaders who have pushed for these changes have ended up playing a relatively secondary role in the movement, and in fact the occasions on which they occupied a prominent position appear to have been a source of some concern for the movement leadership as a whole. All social reform ideas have been sacrificed at the altar of an anti-Muslim, anti-Christian political program.

Moreover, despite the fact that many leaders of the VHP are priests, they are not regarded as interpreters of Hindu texts, merely as interlocutors between the Hindu religious world and *real* politics. Buddha and Mahavira in ancient times, and to a lesser extent the leaders of Brahma Samaj (Rajmohan Roy) and Arya Samaj (Dayanand Saraswati) in modern times both headed religious movements and attained the status of interpreters of Hinduism. The multiplicity of Hindu texts

means that priests who are politically powerful or prominent do not necessarily take on, or are bestowed with, the mantle of ‘interpreters’. In other words, the route for becoming a ‘legitimate’ ‘interpreter’ of Hinduism who not only is a ‘representative’ of Hindu society but who also refashions the core elements of Hinduism is not as clear as it is with Catholicism, Ismaili Shi’ism, or even Sunni Islam. This comparison would suggest that having a single text (which Catholicism, Ismaili Shi’ism, and Sunni Islam have in common) rather than having a singular institutional hierarchy in place (as Catholicism or the Ismaili group have) may well be a critical pre-condition for the emergence of religious leaders who are also regarded as legitimate ‘interpreters’.

The conceptual distinction between a Hindu religious movement and a Hindu nationalist movement helps us draw clearer comparisons between (a) Islamic politico-religious movements (in Egypt, Nigeria, and Indonesia for example) and (b) the Hindu nationalist movement in India. The former are identity movements, political movements *and* religious movements; the latter is an identity movement and a political movement, and its leaders (despite the fact that many of the leaders of the VHP are priests) are ‘mere’ interlocutors between the religious Hindu world and *real* politics. Leaders of Islamic politico-religious movements position themselves also as serious interpreters of Islam, not simply as interlocutors between the religious Islamic world and *real* politics. The absence of a core Hindu text, the multiplicity of acceptable religious interpretations, and the high level of social differentiation of ‘Hindu society’ have meant that leaders of Hindu nationalist movements are rarely regarded as serious interpreters of Hinduism. This in turn has meant that *identity politics – the politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference – despite the best efforts of Hindu nationalists are somewhat independent of religious politics.*

The politics of equal dignity and the politics of difference have traversed a complicated path in India. The politics of equal dignity of course runs counter to long-held beliefs about the legitimacy of the caste system, in which some castes were socially superior, others inferior, and some even untouchable. However, the core of these long-held hierarchical beliefs have been challenged in the years since independence by affirmative action laws that have offered members of the lower castes (*Dalits* and ‘other backward castes’) opportunities for social mobility and dignity. Affirmative action laws, together with urbanization, have weakened the extent of social differentiation in Hindu society

and modified India's caste narratives.<sup>49</sup> Democracy has further strengthened the politics of equal dignity and has also altered (if not undermined) broad caste narratives.<sup>50</sup> It has encouraged individuals to interpret the politics of equal dignity via the lens of their specific local community and family traditions. In other words, the politics of equal dignity is today, to a large extent, a matter of local politics and local narratives. Consequently, the rhetoric of Hindu nationalist leaders has only limited sway over it and their attempt to construct a nation-wide (or even global) Hindu narrative is only partly successful.

The politics of difference is of course significantly reinforced in India by the extreme differentiation of its social-cultural foundations and presence of 'micro-ethnicities'. Democracy, urbanization and affirmative action have weakened the boundaries of traditional identity groups and have contributed to the creation of new social-political identities, groupings and alliances.<sup>51</sup> In this landscape the BJP-RSS-VHP's attempts at creating a single Hindu identity have not been entirely successful. To the extent that declining social differentiation has triggered a concern among upper caste Hindus about the need to redefine Hinduism in light of these social changes, it has helped the Hindu nationalists. A frayed caste fabric has provoked a concern about the boundaries of a Hindu community and definitions. However, to the degree that the decreasing levels of relatively rigid patterns of social differentiation have allowed individuals greater freedom to redefine their own personal identities somewhat independent of extant group identities, it has hurt the Hindu nationalists. Identity politics in Hindu society is, in other words, relatively independent of Hindu nationalist politics, somewhat elusive, and never quite under their grip.

The BJP-VHP-RSS's influence over developmental issues is thus limited by first, the presence of democratic institutions in India, as has been widely argued, and second, by their inability to don the mantle of legitimate and significant 'interpreters of Hinduism', which is not normally pointed out. The resultant relative independence of identity politics in 'Hindu' society has undermined the ability of Hindu nationalist leaders to significantly influence the interpretation of developmental concerns such as poverty and equity. It is also unclear that they had any distinctive things to say on such matters. The identification of Hindu nationalists with domestic economic liberalization and greater de-regulation (reducing bureaucratic interference in business matters, but

only for domestic groups, not for foreign businesses) is well known, but they are not known for any clear positions on poverty and equity.

The relative inability of BJP-VHP-RSS leaders to influence developmental concerns notwithstanding, there are two issues of interest to us on which the Hindu nationalist movement has had some influence – religious conversion and minority rights. On these issues they have raised very serious concerns about equity and challenged the universal ideas of human rights.

Concerned that Christian missionaries and Muslim organizations were converting members of subordinate Hindu castes using ‘unfair’ practices, Hindu nationalist leaders have long called for a ‘ban’ on ‘forced’ conversion in India. While the defeat of the Hindu nationalist party in the May 2004 elections has pre-empted any such national ban, five Indian states had already passed such a ban. The ban in one state (Tamil Nadu) has been overturned, but it continues to be in effect in the other four (Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, and Arunachal Pradesh).

The ability of the Hindu nationalists to successfully introduce anti-conversion policies even on a limited scale is paradoxically a function of the decreasing levels of social differentiation within Hindu society as a result of the serious assault on the caste system since Indian independence. With lesser social differentiation, a concern about the boundaries of Hindu society is likely to increase as social differentiation has itself come to be seen as integral to the definition of a Hindu society.

Minority rights have been undermined in states where the Hindu nationalist party has been strong both politically and also organizationally. In Gujarat, for instance, the BJP has been very effective not only at winning control of the state legislature, but also as establishing a network of organizations that support its political and social agenda. This network of organizations has worked assiduously to undermine minority rights in the state. While seeking to assert their right to be recognized, the supporters of the BJP have sought to erode the rights of others to be so recognized and to expect equal dignity. The BJP-VHP-RSS family has successfully transformed public discourse to the extent that it has left members of minority communities feeling unsafe and unsure of their position within the Gujarati society.

One might argue that the BJP-VHP-RSS was successful in transforming this discourse in Gujarat and not nationally because in Gujarat the BJP-VHP-RSS was focused on demanding



recognition of its distinctive politics (i.e. it focused on the politics of difference), thus undermining secularism to a greater extent than it was at the national level, where it was more concerned with demanding what it regarded as 'equal dignity'. At the national level, political alliances and partnerships, and requirements of grass-roots political dramas across the country, compelled it to focus on its demand that 'Hindu dignity be restored' rather than its distinctive brand of politics and its definition of secularism be recognized. As the party in charge of the national government caught in the middle of coalition politics and given the extreme social differentiation of Indian society, the BJP-VHP-RSS's ability to redefine secularism was somewhat limited.

Second, the dominance of the BJP-VHP-RSS in Gujarat politics and society has meant that Gujarat has, as it were, a glut of Hindu nationalist leaders. Competition among these leaders or aspiring leaders has only further radicalized the discourse and the activities of the BJP-VHP-RSS in the state. Upping the ante in attacking minority rights thus becomes the logical consequence. This is not to suggest that Gujarat politics is likely to follow this trend unchallenged for the near future. As the discussion of the emergence internal liberal spaces within evangelical Protestantism in the United States suggested, the greater dominance of Hindu nationalists and their greater engagement with organizational issues and strengthening their large base in Gujarat might well lead to challenges and moderating influences from within with regard to minority rights.

In short, in the case of the Hindu nationalist movement, the extreme social differentiation of Hindu (and Indian) society, reinforced by the logic of local politics, have worked against any possible attempts by the BJP-VHP-RSS to undermine equity concerns at a national level. This, however, was not the case in Gujarat where local politics helped the BJP-VHP-RSS to maneuver identity politics successfully so as to seriously undermine minority rights.

## 5.

### Conclusion

Let me, in the end, summarize the conclusions of this report and also re-state that due to the state of existing research, these conclusions must be approached with necessary caution. Only more research will bring greater clarity on the complicated linkages between faith, equity and development. Humility as well as realism require that scholars at this stage of research not claim more than their materials allow them to. We simply need to learn more.

The drama of identity politics has given rise to a variety of religious movements in the last few decades that have seriously challenged the ideas enshrined in the UDHR. At least three factors appear to have influenced the extent to which, and the manner in which, these movements have negotiated identity politics and challenged the UDHR. These are: (a) the extent of intra-religious competition in the country; (b) the effectiveness of governance in the country; (c) the focus of the religious movement – whether it is on the West and its notion of development, or it is on traditionalism.

Intra-religious competition among evangelical Protestant Christian preachers and churches in the United States, and among Islamic clerics and mosques in northern Nigeria, has contributed to radicalizing their rhetoric and activities. While these preachers/clerics and churches/mosques insist that their primary ‘opponent’ is the secular/liberal worldview, it is other evangelical groups and Muslim clerics they are really opposed to, groups that threaten their interpretation of the Bible or the Koran and consequently the size of their following. In India, this has not occurred at a national level, though the dominance of the BJP-VHP-RSS in Gujarat has meant that several Hindu nationalist leaders and interlocutors (from within the Hindu nationalist fold) compete with each other to capture the imagination and support of the Hindu majority in the state, thus contributing to the increasing radicalization of Hindu nationalist rhetoric and activities.

The absence of effective governance institutions tends to allow this radicalization to proceed unhindered, as is the case in northern Nigeria. The federal state appears to have, in effect, only a minimal presence in *Sharia* states of northern Nigeria such as Kano, Zamfara, Jigawa and Katsina. In

any event, the politics of negotiating its space and authority in the Nigerian federal political landscape with its ethnic/religious/regional divides has meant that the federal government appears to not withstand the pressures put on it by Islamic leaders/groups.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, the government in Egypt, though non-democratic, has been effective at restricting the space available to radical Islamic groups and leaders.

Religious movements that have argued that the West and the goal of development promoted by it is their primary opponent also appear to be more involved in radicalized competitive intra-religious politics. Focusing on a different opponent (such as traditionalism in the Indonesian context) seems to have a moderating influence on religious groups and movements, thus dampening the emergence of such intra-religious competition. In addition, the relationship between the religious movement (its leaders and groups) and the state appears to make a difference. The Indonesian state has been relatively successful in negotiating with and drawing religious movements into its fold. This seems to have reduced the space for anti-Western rhetoric and activities. The contentious relationship between the federal state and Islamic groups/cleric in northern Nigeria has arguably been a factor in encouraging the latter towards the path of radicalism.

Viewed via the lens of identity politics, it is clear that religious movements redraw the contours of the relationship between theology and universal ideas about equity, rights, and development. To strengthen the support for these universal ideas negotiating with religious interpretations of identity politics is critical. This is a complicated process with few guaranteed avenues for success. On the positive side, factors such as effective governance and/or relative democracy do play a role in tipping the balance.

### Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup>. J. Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.3.
  - <sup>2</sup>. There were eight abstentions.
  - <sup>3</sup>. UNESCO (ed.), Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations, London: Allan Wingate, 1949.
  - <sup>4</sup>. Ibid, p.11
  - <sup>5</sup>. UNESCO Biannual Bulletin, Human Rights Teaching, Volume II, No.1, 1981, p.4.
  - <sup>6</sup>. Ibid.
  - <sup>7</sup>. For example, gay rights movements demand the right to marry; women's rights groups in Egypt and Nigeria demand that the *Sharia* be imposed.
  - <sup>8</sup>. The most significant, and widely read, statement on this has been made by Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995.
  - <sup>9</sup>. Jeff Haynes, "Religion" in Liam Gearon, ed, Human Rights and Religion, Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002, p.22.
  - <sup>10</sup>. James Scott, Seeing Like a State, New Haven: Yale, 1999.
  - <sup>11</sup>. Ameer Ali Syed, The Spirit of Islam, Kessinger Publishing, 2003.
  - <sup>12</sup>. Ebrahim Afsah, "Islamic Exceptionalism: How valid is the concept of 'Islamic human rights.'" KSG, Harvard University website.
  - <sup>13</sup>. Adda B. Bozeman, The Future of Law in a Multicultural World, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971, p.76.
  - <sup>14</sup>. Max Stackhouse, Creeds, Society, and Human Rights, Grand Rapids: Eermans, 1984.
  - <sup>15</sup>. The data presented were gathered between November 16 and November 28 in three Northern Nigerian states: Kano, Katsina, and Jigawa. Both urban and rural locales were studied. In all over 60 leaders/members of Islamic organizations and poor women from these regions were interviewed. The interviews were conducted with the help of two research assistants from Northern Nigeria (one man and one woman). The interviews were semi-structured and most interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour and the responses were translated and recorded. The interviewees were identified in two ways – (a) from a list of Islamic leaders/organizations; (b) from snowballing with the help of key interviewees we identified during the course of fieldwork. The first set of questions we posed to the members/leaders of Islamic organizations, women's organizations, and poor men and women in the three states under study were aimed at identifying the cultural and political presuppositions of the interviewees. We asked how they defined poverty reduction. We inquired how they viewed the key dimensions of poverty in the region, what they regarded the causes to be, and what they believe the appropriate response (from civil society organizations (or NGOs), the government, and international aid organizations) should be.
  - <sup>16</sup>. Toyin Falola, Violence in Nigeria: the crisis of religious politics and secular ideologies, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1998.
  - <sup>17</sup>. The giver of *Zakkat* must be a Muslim; must be free and not a slave; must possess what is required to pay the *Zakkat*; and that amount must be in his possession for one year in the case of money/wealth or during the harvest period in case of crops.
  - <sup>18</sup>. Robert W. Hefner, 'Islam in a Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Revival in Muslim Southeast Asia', in Robert W. Hefner, and Patricia Horvatich (eds.) Islam in a Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Revival in Muslim Southeast Asia, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997, p.5.
  - <sup>19</sup>. Hefner, 'Islamization and Democratization in Indonesia', in Islam in a Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Revival in Muslim Southeast Asia, p.114.
  - <sup>20</sup>. Hefner, 'Islam in a Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Revival in Muslim Southeast Asia', in Islam in a Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Revival in Muslim Southeast Asia, p.7.
  - <sup>21</sup> Olivier Roy, Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah, London: Hurst and Company, 2004.

- <sup>22</sup>. Charles Villa-Vincencio, "Theology and Human Rights" in Liam Gearon (ed.) Human Rights and Religion, p. 103.
- <sup>23</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup>. Robert Traer, "Catholics and Human Rights", Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991, p.1.
- <sup>25</sup>. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Human Rights and the Catholic Church: reflections on the jubilee of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1998, p. 3.
- <sup>26</sup>. Ibid.
- <sup>27</sup>. David Hollenbach, Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition, New York: Paulist Press, p. 141.
- <sup>28</sup>. In the United States for instance, the Catholic Church has offered the Vatican's theological view of rights and development, but has not engaged in the kind of competitive games that lead to radicalizing religious positions engaged in by evangelical Protestant Churches.
- <sup>29</sup>. The Economist, January 25, 2001.
- <sup>30</sup>. Dr J. Melgar, interviewed on the BBC program 'Sex and the Holy City.'
- <sup>31</sup>. BBC program 'Sex and the Holy City.'
- <sup>32</sup>. H. Mark Roelofs, 'Liberation Theology: the Recovery of Biblical Radicalism' American Political Science Review, Vol.82, No.2 (June 1988), p.551.
- <sup>33</sup>. Roelofs, p. 561.
- <sup>34</sup>. Roelofs, p. 562.
- <sup>35</sup>. Villa-Vincencio, p. 114.
- <sup>36</sup>. Villa-Vincencio, p. 114
- <sup>37</sup>. "Resolution on Human Rights" Adopted by the General Synod of the United Church of Christ, published in S. J. Alfred Hennessey and John Langan, Human Rights in the Americas: The Struggle for Consensus, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, p. 150.
- <sup>38</sup>. Lutheran World Federation, Theological Perspectives on Human Rights, Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1977, p. 15.
- <sup>39</sup>. Villa-Vincencio, pp. 110-111.
- <sup>40</sup>. Robert Traer, Faith in Human Rights: religious support for a global struggle, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001, Chapter 3, p. 11.
- <sup>41</sup>. Mark A. Shibley, "Contemporary Evangelicals: Born-Again and World-Affirming" Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. 558, American and Religions in the Twenty-First Century (July 1998), p. 85.
- <sup>42</sup>. It would be very interesting to explore whether there is a high turnover of members/believers/followers. Unfortunately, reliable membership data are hard to come by.
- <sup>43</sup>. Caste system has its origins in the *Rig Veda*.
- <sup>44</sup>. See Daniel Gold, "Organized Hinduisms: From Vedic Truth to Hindu Nation", in Fundamentalisms Observed, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- <sup>45</sup>. C. Jafferlot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement in India, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p.1.
- <sup>46</sup>. Ibid, p.2
- <sup>47</sup>. P.5
- <sup>48</sup> A leading RSS leader, Govindacharya, sought to take Hindu nationalism in this direction)
- <sup>49</sup>. Vibha Pingle "Caste: Continuity and Change", in Sumit Ganguly and Neil deVota, (eds.), Understanding Contemporary India, Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner. 2003.
- <sup>50</sup> Myron Weiner, "The Struggle for Equality: Caste in Indian Politics", in Atul Kohli, ed, The Success of Indian Democracy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001; Ashutosh Varshney, "Has Indian Become More Democratic?" Journal of Asian Studies, February 2000.
- <sup>51</sup> Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph, The Modernity of Tradition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968.
- <sup>52</sup>. This was clearly visible in the polio vaccination imbroglio.