

COMMENTARY

Religion as a Category of Diplomatic Analysis

As a committed “culturalist” and “gender head” trained in women’s history and the history of religion in the United States, I can only applaud Andrew Rotter’s decision to attend to the role of religion in his effort to construct a culturalist diplomatic history. I puzzled, therefore, over the question of why I find his discussion of religion as a factor in U.S.–South Asian relations from 1947 to 1954 so much less satisfying than his brilliant article on “Gender Relations, Foreign Relations” in the same period.¹ His earlier foray into the gendering of diplomatic history considered Western stereotypes of religion as they intersected with gendered constructions of India and Pakistan, but did not make the explicit claim that “religious thinking infuses states” and that “religious thinking in all three nations had influence on the policies each formulated toward the others.” In part, what the consideration of religion as an independent variable does, at least in this example, is to eliminate gender as a category of analysis. The admirable complexity of an argument that understood perceptions of others’ religion as inflected by gender is missing here. But it is primarily in its effort to move beyond a consideration of the impact of religion and religious stereotyping on U.S. policy alone that the essay falters.

Another fundamental difficulty lies in the proposition that religion can function, like gender, as a category of historical analysis. Religion certainly constitutes a category that ought to be considered in the writing of diplomatic history. It is not, as Susanne Hoeber Rudolph has pointed out, a “master variable” in international relations, but one that acquires (or loses) salience in particular historical moments.² Religion cannot easily be abstracted as a structural component of social order. It cannot therefore be deployed as a category of analysis in the same ways that scholars have wielded gender, class, and race. (A comprehensive explanation of just why this is so would require extensive discussion and, quite probably, the specialized skills of a philosopher or cultural

1. Andrew J. Rotter, “Gender Relations, Foreign Relations: The United States and South Asia, 1947–1964,” *Journal of American History* 81 (September 1994): 518–42.

2. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, “Dehomogenizing Religious Formations,” in *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, ed. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph and James Piscatori (Boulder, 1997), 243.

theorist; my comments condense what seem to me on initial reflection significant differences.) Discourse analysis and social science have illuminated the dynamics of gender, class, and racial systems. The implications of the rhetorical gendering of nongendered entities – including states and religions – can be fruitfully explored, as Professor Rotter's article on "Gender Relations" demonstrates. In the academy we have come to speak of things and people being "raced" and "classed" as well as gendered. But can we imagine the locution "religioned"? Our inability to do so reflects an intuitive, linguistic awareness of the distinction between religion and these other structural categories. Religion differs from the other "filaments" in Rotter's metaphorical webs of significance in part because it has formal, institutional manifestations and authoritative, sacred revelations as well as informal, popular beliefs and practices. Most important, if Rudolph is correct, religion may not always be a variable that matters as we now assume race, class, and gender must always be understood as constituents of any society or state.

Rotter's contention, then, that religious thinking infuses states needs to be limited and qualified. What we need to ask is whether a particular state, at a particular historical moment, is infused by religious thinking in ways that influence policy. Rotter's claims may apply principally to what Rudolph has termed "homogenized states," those nations characterized by ethnic and religious homogeneity, and to states where a single religion enjoys dominant or privileged status. And as Rudolph suggests, it may be, even for those states, more salient at some moments and in some relationships than in others. A dehomogenized or multicultural state, such as the United States became in the twentieth century, has a vested interest in separating religion from the state and relegating religion to the private sphere. What makes Rotter's analysis of U.S.-South Asian relations in the middle years of the century so fascinating is the evidence he marshals to indicate that even in an ostensibly secular state the private religious commitments and concerns of foreign policymakers can be crucial, even decisive factors in shaping international relations. This effect is enhanced when policy leadership is dominated by individuals who share a common religious culture. In the United States, for the better part of the twentieth century, the foreign affairs establishment, both at the State Department and in the academy, was populated to a surprising degree by "missionary kids" who had grown up in the matrix of a vibrant Protestant missionary subculture. Their impact on U.S. foreign relations is an important story, one that deserves closer scrutiny in the writing of American diplomatic history. As Rotter clearly demonstrates, the lingering assumption that the United States was in some essential way a Protestant or at least a Christian nation perpetuated a missionary mentality in the era of the Cold War.

Religious conviction (and prejudice), in Rotter's telling, seems paradoxically a much less significant factor for both Indian and Pakistani leaders, despite the fact that partition had been designed to create homogeneous states. Ghandi, we are reminded, appealed to universal values; Nehru explicitly distanced

himself from Hinduism. India emerges in this account as a nation suffused by Hindu spirituality, but its impact on Indian foreign policy formation appears indirect and diffuse, nebulously linked to neutrality. Similarly, Pakistani political leaders are presented as nominal Muslims, who used religion instrumentally, first to argue for a separate state and then to cement an advantageous alliance with the West that only incidentally opposed godless communism. Both Indian and Pakistani leaders are presented as needing, in their respective domestic arenas, to accommodate more religious compatriots whose agendas rarely had an explicit foreign policy component. In contrast, U.S. leaders found their religiously based Cold War reflexes reinforced by popular preachers who articulated a shared sense of global mission. But I have drawn this contrast on the basis of relatively sparse evidence offered about the religious commitments of Indian and Pakistani foreign policy elites and of popular religiosity in each nation. Would a more detailed analysis, one that matched the treatment of U.S. policymaking in this article, support my tentative conclusion about the lesser salience of religion from the South Asian side of U.S.-South Asian relations during the Cold War?

The evidentiary imbalance in the U.S.-South Asian equation is even more pronounced on the crucial issue of religious stereotyping. In this piece, and even more effectively in "Gender Relations," Rotter shows how pervasive and influential such stereotyping was as the filter through which U.S. policymakers and public commentators saw South Asia. But was religion a primary filter for South Asians as they interpreted the United States? What, if any, religious stereotyping of the United States influenced South Asian policy? Similarly, we need to know the extent to which popular religious leaders and/or attitudes had an impact on international relations during the Cold War. On these questions, we are offered only fragmentary hints.

These questions suggest the thorniest issue that Rotter's article raises for a culturalist approach to diplomatic history: How can an individual scholar actually produce a persuasive study that addresses religious thinking and its policy impact on the relations among multiple states? The task is daunting, much more demanding than the earlier call to move beyond a national focus in writing diplomatic history. Examining the official archives and public policy pronouncements of the "other" state(s) requires a redoubling of research effort on the part of the diplomatic historian, but it does not require mastering new discourses and new fields of cultural study. To do so may require more than can be expected of the lone scholar.

Professor Rotter has met the challenge of extending analysis to incorporate gender discourse and the field of religion in writing American diplomatic history. His application of gender analysis has broad explanatory power for comprehending relations between the United States and South Asia. In the current article, he has produced a path breaking account of the impact that religion had on U.S. attitudes and policies in South Asia during the Cold War and convincingly sketched out a larger history of the connections between

religion in the United States and foreign policy that sets a challenging agenda for research in U.S. diplomatic history. His is a most valuable and substantial contribution to our understanding of twentieth-century American diplomatic history, but he has promised more than an argument about the United States. Here, as my questions indicate, his article fails to satisfy. Here, it seems to me, culturalist diplomatic history faces a problem that can be solved only by developing more collaborative models of scholarship.

Let me take a concrete example to illustrate the need for collaboration. Rotter's discussion of *darsan* as a political as well as a religious practice in India, and of the transformation, sometimes unwilling, of a political leader into a *sanyasin* is a wonderfully illuminating moment. But the extrapolation of this to explain U.S.-Indian tensions over protocol is not convincing. Rotter draws on the work of one of the world's leading scholars of Hinduism in explaining *darsan*; a consultation with Diana Eck about his application of the concept in the context of diplomatic *politesse* would have been, I suspect, mutually beneficial. The evidence he has for a political practice of *darsan* in India could inform her understanding; she might have refined his argument in productive ways. In short, the messy particularity and complexity of religion makes it a category of diplomatic analysis that requires collaboration. We need to imagine creative ways to stimulate and foster such collaboration.

One example of how we might proceed is provided by the efforts of the Committee on International Peace and Security of the Social Sciences Research Council to examine the meanings of security after the Cold War. The committee, with foundation support, sponsored meetings where scholars considered "the implications of transnational religions for conflict and cooperation, for security, for the future of the nation-state, and for the emergence of transnational civil society."³ Those meetings led to the publication of a volume of essays on *Transnational Religion and Fading States* that, as I fortuitously read it in juxtaposition to Rotter's article, seemed to me to offer conceptually and theoretically significant insights for the writing of culturalist diplomatic history. In addition, the process through which this volume was produced offers a model of collaborative intellectual work.

While *Transnational Religion and Fading States* responds specifically to the surprising explosion of religious formations since the Cold War, its concerns have implications for our understanding of the past as well as the present. In the wake of the Cold War, coeditor Susanne Hoeber Rudolph argues in her introduction, religion and ethnicity seem to have replaced ideology as major sources of both intra- and international conflict. Neither religion nor the state has withered away, as Enlightenment rationalism and Marxist teleology predicted. Yet our cherished notions of the state are being challenged by a rhetoric – and increasingly we suspect a reality – of globalization and transnationalism that

3. Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, "Introduction: Religion, States, and Transnational Civil Society," in Rudolph and Piscatori, eds., *Transnational Religion and Fading States*, 3.

argues that nation-states are rapidly becoming irrelevant, or at least less relevant, formations. And the secular academy is ill-prepared for the paradox that post-modern transnationalism has produced a global religious explosion. *Transnational Religion and Fading States* offers a promising beginning for theorizing world political and cultural developments anew.⁴

Rudolph proposes that transnational religious formations be understood as significant players in shaping an emergent transnational civil society. Conceptualizing a transnational civil society constituted by nongovernmental organizations and communities of activists working on a variety of global issues as well as religious communities and movements represents an important theoretical advance over current paradigms of sovereign states acting in anarchic space or in the context of an international society constituted through the cooperative actions of states. A model of world politics that situates international relations in a context of transnational civil society and sovereign states will, Rudolph predicts, help us comprehend “thinning out monopoly sovereignty” as transnational civil society increasingly intervenes to limit and provide alternatives to state activities. Interestingly, Rudolph points out that the first efforts to challenge the monopoly of state actors in international relations theory emerged in discussions of neomedievalism; the allusion to the medieval functioned to remind scholars that the modern state is a relatively recent invention and that religion, in the form of the medieval Church, operated to constrain state sovereignty.⁵

What are the implications of this theorizing of contemporary global politics for the writing of a culturalist diplomatic history? First, it confirms Professor Rotter’s contention that religion must be taken seriously. The unpredicted resurgence of religion in global society has heightened awareness of its potency as a political force and relegitimized it as an object of study in the secular academy. But precisely what advantage does locating religious movements in transnational civil society offer the historian? Is the concept of transnational religion relevant to Rotter’s specific story? In Rotter’s account, states remain the primary actors. But are state actions influenced by transnational religions in the Cold War era? I think so, in some ways that are implicit in Rotter’s work, but that could be profitably highlighted by directing specific attention to transnational aspects of the religious thinking that infused states in the era. The connection of so many foreign policy experts to the missionary subculture suggests a link to transnational Protestantism. Certainly such linkages were significant in the nineteenth century, perhaps especially in Anglo-American affairs. Rotter’s article on “Gender Relations” supplies evidence that British attitudes toward Hinduism and Islam strongly influenced U.S. assumptions

4. *Ibid.*, 1–24. I have summarized key points from Rudolph’s introduction. She expands upon her theoretical reflections in a final chapter titled “Dehomogenizing Religious Formations” that deserves fuller consideration than I can offer here.

5. *Ibid.*

about India and about the respective character of Hindu and Muslim societies; in "Christians, Muslims, and Hindus" he cites Cold War British records for evidence of shared British and American concerns about Hindu society. The extent to which transnational religion impacted South Asian states is beyond the scope of my expertise, but the issue raises questions that I would like to pose. Is the tendency, noted by Rotter as lamented by columnists in the *Times of India*, for U.S. policymakers to judge state actions in binary moral categories an Indian perspective on a specifically Western transnational religious tradition? What insight might we gain from knowing that Hindus viewed the West in this way? Was Indian nonalignment causally linked to Hindu rather than specifically Indian attitudes? Once we begin to imagine a world politics where transnational religion exercises important explanatory, even causal power, the questions multiply fruitfully. The avenues of research they suggest will, however, require cooperation across both disciplinary and geographic boundaries. Indeed, Rudolph argues explicitly that transnational civil society should be imagined as "transparent plastic overlays . . . superimposed upon the meaning systems of political maps."⁶ As we look at our old maps through such overlays, we may learn much about the past that our old maps could not convey effectively.

Transnational civil society, Rudolph points out, is populated by groups, sometimes called epistemic communities, whose commonalities do not depend on residence in common geographic space. The increasing ease of global migration as well as the new communications technologies that obliterate spatial limitations have facilitated the explosion of religious formations that are not linked to the territorial space of a nation-state. The attempt to create religiously and ethnically homogeneous states is increasingly viewed as atavistic, but dehomogenized states are notoriously volatile, subject to (un)civil wars where ethnic and religious cleansing require international intervention. Dehomogenized states also contain populations that may identify more strongly with transnational communities than with the nation. Rudolph suggests that, having abandoned the nineteenth-century mode of achieving state stability through assimilation to a homogeneous ideal, the problem facing the world today is the need for alternative modes of cultural constitution that can resolve rather than excite conflict. Historical examples of heterogeneous societies, she believes, may supply such alternative models.⁷ Here, I think, a cultural approach to the history of international relations has much to offer.

If, for example, we begin to think about the United States as a nation forced, under the impact of successive waves of immigration, to ultimately abandon homogeneity as a cultural ideal and become a dehomogenized, multicultural state, the history of immigration is transformed into an aspect of international relations. And international relations can be refigured as a force in shaping the

6. *Ibid.*, 12.

7. *Ibid.*, 8.

United States as a modern state, rather than as an arena for state action. (In this context, Rotter's account of the continuing construction of the nation as a homogeneous, Christian state during the Cold War can be re-read as evidence that the United States had not yet abandoned the Romantic, European-style ideal of nationhood, that modernity had imperfectly and unevenly reshaped the culture.) Religious identity is, of course, one of the identities that migrants notably carried with them. Historians of immigration and of international relations alike need to be attentive to the ways in which religious identity can cross national boundaries and undermine or subvert nationality.

Matthew Jacobson's *Special Sorrows* (1995) is a splendid model of a cultural approach to immigration history that is also a contribution to constructing a cultural history of international relations that takes religion seriously; Jacobson offers concrete evidence that immigrant religion forged or reinforced links for particular immigrant groups to nationalist struggles in their European homelands. His complex consideration of diasporic nationalism posits the possibility of dual national commitments; religion combines, in his account, with ethnic popular culture to sustain a dual identity that frequently produced a quite particularized perspective on U.S. foreign policy. The ethnic and religious communities he examines have, through immigration, become transnational communities. As foreign policy publics with special interests they function as actors in the transnational civil society that Rudolph theorizes.⁸ The specific histories of other immigrant communities deserve similar scrutiny.

I am firmly convinced that a collaborative, culturalist approach to diplomatic history must be attentive to religion so that it does not miss those moments when religion acquires historical salience in international affairs. Andrew Rotter's work shows us that religion(s) may have surprising salience in contexts that we had construed differently under the controlling ideological paradigms of the Cold War. As a gender head, however, I would regret to see religion substituted for gender as a category of analysis. I wonder whether the negativity toward Hinduism that characterized the attitude of the foreign policy elite in the United States and Britain during the Cold War was a gendered response. Rotter's article on "Gender Relations" notes in passing that many of Ghandi's Western admirers were women. It would be interesting to consider whether women were more positively disposed toward Hinduism. In this context one might note that it was a woman, Madame Blavatsky, whose Theosophical Society is credited by Catherine Albanese with providing "the first organized conduit for the introduction of Eastern religious thought into the United States."⁹ If I may be permitted a personal note, my recollections of reading, as an adolescent, Allen Drury's Cold War political fictions included a somewhat nebulous, but positive memory of his Indian ambassador, Krishna Khaleel, who

8. Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge, MA, 1995). See especially chaps. 2, 4-6, and the conclusion.

9. Catherine L. Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA, 1992), 268.

occupied the position – as spokesperson for the nonaligned nations – of worried peacemaker. Looking back over Drury's novels, which incidentally I would recommend to the cultural historian of Cold War diplomacy, I find that his portrayal of Khaleel supports Rotter's arguments about the feminization of Indians and their philosophical/moral ambivalence. Yet the response of this reader remains sympathetic; Drury's characterization contains enough positive material to render such a reading possible. What then should the cultural historian make of the ninety-three weeks that *Advise and Consent* (1959) spent on the *New York Times* bestseller list, if one accepts the assumption that women constituted a large majority of the novel-reading public? Or of the fact that Khaleel is made an increasingly sympathetic figure in the sequel with its focus on the interplay between international racial tensions and U.S. domestic racial policy? In that novel he remains complicit with Communist-inspired "mischief," but he is given virtually the last word in the final pages, and it is his phrase "a shade of difference" that serves as its title.¹⁰ Is Drury, a committed Cold Warrior, articulating a view of world politics less insistently masculinist than the official version? Does his need as a novelist both to create female characters and to appeal to a female public result in a more complex documentation of Cold War politics in their cultural context than conventional sources utilized by historians of diplomacy? The religious note in Drury's novel is muted, but there, too, it confirms Rotter's analysis in that U.S. leaders are presented as understanding themselves as divinely led and supported in moments of crisis. And does the sense of crisis and imminent danger that pervades these novels signal yet another context for interpreting the discourses of religion and gender that intersect in foreign policy formulations? Drury's are fictions of beset manhood, threatened with physical and cultural extinction; a rhetoric of toughness and crusade may be simultaneously gendered and religious responses to the threat of annihilation.

In short, a culturalist approach to diplomatic history opens up a host of previously unasked questions. Answering them will transform the field. As Emily Rosenberg has cogently argued, gendered analysis can produce exciting new perspectives on the history of international relations.¹¹ Now the impetus from the current explosion of transnational religious formations to use religion as a category of diplomatic analysis promises, as the foray made by Andrew Rotter reveals, to reconfigure our understanding of international relations. Yet, because religion constitutes a very complex category for analysis, to construct a history that includes multiple national sites and takes seriously the transnational character of some religious movements, will require creative, collaborative efforts. We need both a culturalist approach and an innovative process for implementing that approach.

10. Allen Drury, *A Shade of Difference* (Garden City, NY, 1962).

11. Emily S. Rosenberg, "Gender," *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 116–24.