

**„RELIGIOUS NGOs IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS.  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF ‘THE RELIGIOUS’ AND ‘THE SECULAR’“**

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The creation and evolution of the United Nations (UN) as a political body since the 1940s has had a mobilizing impact on the political and civic structures of all countries around the globe. National governments and their diplomatic structures have created new professional figures and institutions in order to integrate with the UN, civil society actors and organizations have adapted and professionalized in order to access this new field of action, and also religious actors and organizations have moved into the orbit of transnational political and legal debates. Karsten Lehmann's book tells the story of this last group – the religious actors – on their way into the UN's institutional and ideational universe. The heart piece of the book is a historical case study of two religious nongovernmental organizations (RNGOs), the Catholic lay organization Pax Romana and the World Council of Churches' Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, and their development as UN accredited NGOs from the mid-1940s until the present. Around these two case studies, the author constructs a dense theoretical debate on two levels, first on the role of religion in international relations, second on religion, secularization and politics.

The two-levelled theoretical approach makes this book of interest for two sets of readers: first, the academic community of IR scholars interested in religion; and second sociologists of religion. The first will benefit from what the author calls "opening the black box of religion", the second from the debate on political and elite activism inside religions.

The book presents itself as a treatise in good academic tradition: eight chapters, two of which theoretical and methodological, chapter 4 gives an overview over the empirical field, chapters 5 and 6 comprise the case studies, chapter 7 is a comparison of the cases and outlook, and chapter 8 ties the material back to the theoretical questions. More narrative and a little less meta-discursive directions by the author to the reader would have made the book a more fluid and certainly no less relevant, engaging and insightful read. At the same time, the book has the great merit of setting the terminology straight and offering theoretically motivated, workable definitions of key-terminology ("religious actors", "religious affiliation", "activism", "church diplomacy"), which recommends the book for future reference.

The first theoretical framework in which the author places his debate on RINGO activism inside the UN is that of the “resurgence of religions debate”. With this term, the author bundles together the analyses by scholars working in different disciplines, who all reach the conclusion that “we are presently witnessing a strengthening of religions in public space and an increasing worldwide significance – or at least visibility – of ‘religious actors’” (p. 1). The author counts Mark Juergensmeyer, Samuel Huntington, Juergen Habermas, Bassam Tibi, and Martin Riesebrodt among the protagonists of such “resurgence debates”. According to the author, resurgence debates present a threefold agenda: (1) “they ask for a renewed academic interest in religions [...] as a significant aspect of present-day politics”; (2) “they question [...] the so-called ‘secularization paradigm’”, and (3) “they underline the social significance of phenomena that are explicitly labelled as religious while at the same time being positioned outside [...] ‘the religious mainstream’” (p. 1). Lehmann correctly identifies a bias in all of these “resurgence debates”, namely the scarce interest in religions themselves. Religions figure in these debates as “black boxes” to which various attributes are ascribed. Paradoxically, the author writes, “the debates on the resurgence of religions seem to take place without religions” (p. 2). The author identifies this lacuna prevalently (but not exclusively, as the inclusion of Habermas and Tibi into the criticism demonstrates) in international relations theory. In response to this gap in the literature, the author promises an in-depth study of religious actors in order to make more tangible how religions enter into the public sphere. In particular, he wants to answer the question whether the “resurgence of religions” happens only in the secular scholarly debate or whether it actually has a basis in changes inside the religious sphere itself. He asks “how far is the so-called resurgence of religions based upon changes inside a specific group of religiously affiliated organizations that describe themselves as religious NGOs?” (p. 2)

The second theoretical debate to which this book contributes is the age-old sociological debate on modernization and secularization. Drawing on Linda Woodhead, the authors speaks of “sedimentation of ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’” and argues that “the concept of sedimentation proposes an analytical perspective that analyses the process of secularization as the social construction of different layers of what is described as ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’” (p. 32). The chronological approach of the case studies enhances the analytical value of this theoretical line, because the author can demonstrate systematically how the negotiation of the “religious” and the “secular” changes over time. The very concept of human rights has experienced, from the perspective of religious actors, a re-definition, “a shift from a purely secular external construction of human rights towards integration of human rights into the central system of religious symbols” (p. 13). Against this background, the author argues that the resurgence of religions debates stand for a new sediment in the construction of the religious and the secular, rather than a reversal of the secularization thesis.

Lehmann has selected two organizations for analysis: Pax Romana and the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs. The latter was founded in 1946 as a formal commission to represent the World Council of Churches before the UN, and the former was founded in 1921 as an international lay movement of Catholic students and later developed into one of the first Roman Catholic organizations that obtained NGO status with the UN. The author has done an impressive amount of archival research in order to tell the story of these two RNGOs and the leading individuals inside these institutions over more than 50 years of their existence. Firsthand quotes from the archives enrich the overall argument and create a true bridge between the present day conceptual debates and past contexts.

The main change which took place inside the religious organizations over this period and which the two case studies make tangible, was the shift from seeing the human rights discourse, for which the UN was representative, as external to the religious universe to understanding human rights as an integral part of the self-description of the religious organizations and, indeed, of their religious tradition. Lehmann shows that it was the work of few dedicated individuals that made Christian NGOs discover the UN as a field of action, but he also demonstrates that their endorsement of human rights did not remain without internal opposition and criticism.

The main argument derived from the case studies is that over the decades, religiously affiliated organizations at the UN have undergone a shift from a “church diplomacy” mode of engagement to “civil society activism”. This shift had to do with their access to politics: “While the RNGO representative of the 1940s and 1950s had direct access to central political decision makers, this was no longer (or at least to a much lesser degree) the case during the 1960s and 1970s” (p. 13). In the 1940s and 50s, Lehman writes, RNGO actors acted as church diplomats. They participated in UN meetings, cooperated primarily with members of the diplomatic corps, and tried to influence UN policies ‘behind the scenes’ (p. 169). From the 1960s onwards, this mode of working changed. With the establishment of the Holy See’s permanent observer to the UN, Christian NGOs were forced to change their role. Subsequently they moved further into the world of accredited NGOs, adapting their strategies and modalities of interaction (p. 170).

The author identifies the crucial moment for this shift from church diplomacy to civil society activism already in the 1960s, thus well before the resurgence debates. In the author’s final analysis, today’s resurgence debates are a reaction to the consequences of this change. The shift from church-diplomacy to civil society activism explains why today the religiously affiliated actors at the UN are ideologically much more diverse than they were in the past – they no longer reflect the consensual view of the religious mainstream, but pursue particular strategies. “In terms of the socio-political standpoint”, the author observes, “the majority of RNGOs so far had a more or less liberal outlook. From the

mid-2000s onwards, an increasing number of conservative RNGOs approached the UN" (p. 75). Lehman observes, "on a practical level ... these new RNGOs went through processes not too different from the processes that dominated the ... 1940s and 1950s. ... RNGO activities seem to be no longer limited to a particular liberal milieu. In this sense the basis of these activities is not only to cross the borders of religious traditions but also the border of social milieus within those traditions" (p. 173). Lehman's insight here is of great value for scholars working on religion and politics. It underscores that the multivocality of religious traditions effectively translates into a multiplicity of political agendas in the sphere of civil society. It also explains how, notwithstanding their ideological diversity, RNGOs have internalized the language of human rights. In order to be part of the UN field of action, even human-rights-critical RNGOs have to speak in a language of human rights.

In the final analysis, the civil society activism of religious actors is a form of secularization of religion, not least because it speaks of a decrease of direct access to political power. This conclusion is counterintuitive with respect to the resurgence of religion debates, which talk of a return of religion. Lehmann rightly concludes that Woodhead's concept of "sedimentation of the religious and the secular" offers a promising avenue ahead for research. This conclusion will not surprise sociologists of religion, but it is desirable that it scholars in the field of international relations theory will pick it up in order to overcome essentialisms that pose obstacles to the interdisciplinary study of religion.

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