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## Scott Appleby, the Pioneer of *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* and Religious Engagement

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The distinguish scholar we are honouring in this special section is, to my mind, a 'pioneer': rather literally, and apologies in advance to my post/de/anti-colonial colleagues for the image, our colleague Scott Appleby was among the first ones who entered new territory thus opening it for occupation and exploitation by others, second/third-comers, like myself, who have since then been contributing to the building and governance of the increasingly expanding academic *communitas* of the Religion and International Relations section of the International Studies Association with its own structure and gate keepers, knights and monks built on what was *terra nullius*, *tabula rasa*, uncharted field.

There is in fact, I want to argue, a significant link between the broader intellectual developments of this burgeoning field of study that has been institutionalised in the last five years in this young ISA section, and Scott Appleby's scholarly and policy contribution. It was in fact 20 years that with the publication of his important book, now a classic, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* that Scott Appleby was a trailblazer for a new more reflexive study of religion in international relations, the *conditio sine qua non* for a series of successive developments that have since impacted the academia and the policy world. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* was drawing on, refining and bringing to its theoretical conclusions the massive collaborative research project on Fundamentalism that Scott Appleby had co-directed with Marty and still represent today, more than three decades since its first publication of the 5 volumes, the unsurpassed empirical survey and analysis of the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism.

Rarely a book's title summarises so powerfully the core argument of the volume and the new research orientation and paradigm that it was opening: The political ambivalence of the sacred meant that religion, on the one hand, could promote political violence and conflict, but, on the other, also non-violent civic engagement,

conflict-resolution and even reconciliation. This argument sits, I want to argue, in a special place in the context of the research produced in the last thirty years to address the neglected role of religion in international affairs, and in particular, in the break through that has seen the emergence of the more recent policy discussions on 'religious engagement' in the global foreign policy-making community.

I have schematically identified three moments of the scholarly realisation that religion *does* matter in international relations (Petito & Ferrara, 2016). The first was a sort of shock awakening reaction: following the end of the Cold War, a predominant discourse emerged which saw the unexpected resurgence of religion primarily in the form of a violent-prone form of politics; the second moment was a more reflexive one as scholars, like Appleby *in primis*, started to recognise that the above-mentioned understanding of the global resurgence of religion was based on a problematic set of assumptions, it was an ideological understanding more than a social-scientifically based and historically/empirically grounded analysis; the third moment consisted in a policy-oriented discussion informed by the second multifaceted understanding of the role of religion in international relations. At the centre, right and left of this process, sits, in my own reading, Scott Appleby's unsurpassed contribution articulated first of all in *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*.

Contrary to the secularisation thesis, the first wave of analysis following the end of the Cold War, had de facto consolidated in the 1990s a predominant discourse which if, on the one hand, it did acknowledge the resurgence of religion, what Peter Berger called in his 1999 volume the desecularisation of world politics, on the other, it read it primarily in the form of an unexpected explosion of a violent-prone form of politics, almost like "the revenge of God" (Kepel, 1991) or as if there was only "terror in the mind of God" (Juergensmeyer, 2000), as some of the titles of this first wave suggested. For these scholars the manifestations of this violent-prone global resurgence of religion were many: from the politics of identity along religious-nationalist lines of the 'new wars' in the Balkans to the worldwide rise of radical Islamism and terrorism; and of course, on similar interpretative lines of this post-Cold War scholarly wave, featured the worrying macro scenario of a forthcoming "clash of civilizations" (Huntington, 1996). The attacks of 9/11 exemplified this worrying trend

of the new irrational-religious sources of world disorder and possibly of a forthcoming “clash of civilizations”.

These scholarly interventions were, of course, to some extent putting forward different arguments and approaches to make sense of what was perceived as a troubling violent-prone return of religion in international relations but, I would contend, the fundamental implicit core assumption was the same: if you combine politics with religion on the global scene, that is the politicisation of religion in international relations, then you necessarily end up with political instability, terrorism and a disordered state of affairs. Scott Thomas, who was influenced himself by the argument of *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* (see his essay in this section), aptly called this problematic assumption the “Westphalian presumption” (2000) when we started the discussion on what would become the first theoretical journal’s special issue on Religion and IR (*Millennium*, 2000).

With his pioneering book Scott Appleby was inviting to start from a different assumption: ‘religion is politically ambivalent’, that is, it is not by definition a threat to security, inimical to modernity and to the resolution of conflicts. He argued that ‘neither religion nor religious militancy is per se a source of deadly conflict’ (13). Religious militancy could be for peace and justice and that actually ‘the nonviolent “warrior for peace” could be more influential in the long run than the religious extremist’ (ibid.). This different fundamental assumption, which Scott Appleby captured in a simple and powerful way was a game changer. It was proving with a wealth of empirical examples and theoretical considerations that the idea of ‘religious violence’ as William Cavanaugh (2009) would argue in an important book a decade later was nothing but a myth.

It had a series of important theoretical implications. Firstly, politicised religion – even in their most extreme forms - were modern political ideologies, and the analysis of their impact in international affairs required a careful balance of social scientific as well as theological considerations. The key question is for Appleby under which socio-economic conditions and which type of religious identity explain the emergence of nonviolent religious militancy for peace rather than violent religious extremism? His carefully crafted answer to this question balancing social factors with

theological considerations remains, to my mind still the best available framework to make sense of this phenomenon, something that I was again reminded of when the rise of ISIS generated again the false and unproductive scholarly debate on whether it is a certain kind of religion or “political theology” that fosters violence rather than material factors (Wood, 2015).

Secondly, contrary to the almost given for granted secularist assumptions according to which, in a schematic manner, ‘stronger’ religious identities are more violent-prone, since Appleby’s book, we now know that religious-inspired political violence, what has also been described as *politically* ‘strong religion’, is often characterised by *doctrinally* ‘weak religions’ or as the French sociologist Olivier Roy has put it a form of ‘holy ignorance’ (2009). Superficial religious identities – if not religious ignorance and indifference – seems to be the most conducive substratum to violent politicisation by political entrepreneurs. The protestant theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croatian immigrant to the USA, who was personally confronted with this phenomenon first through the use of Christianity in the harrowing civil war in ex-Yugoslavia and then through the fundamentalist politics of his own American co-religionists, has effectively argued that the political violence legitimised by religion is normally the result of the politicisation of a ‘vague religiosity’ conceived of as exclusively a private affair of individuals or reduced to ‘cultural resources endowed with a diffuse aura of sacred’ (Volf, 2000, 866). In other words and contrary to the fashionable assumptions of the ‘strong religion *cum* violence’ thesis, religiously inspired political violence seems often to be characterised by religious identities that are uprooted and banalised and have often not been sustained by an inter-generational process of transmission of tradition. Conversely, doctrinally ‘strong’ religious identities – rooted in a culture and nurtured by an inter-generational process of transmission of tradition – as Appleby has well demonstrated, would seem to be more common in religious actors committed to processes of conflict-resolution and peace making.

Thirdly, Appleby’s book has provided the most convincing and empirically grounded argument for what Charles Taylor described in his famous essay on the politics of recognition as ‘a presumption of worth’ and more of an ‘act of faith’ than an hypothesis: I am talking about the idea that within *all* the great worldwide religious

traditions there is such an internal pluralism of political positions going from the violent religious extremist to the nonviolence religious peacebuilder. After reading Appleby's book, which doesn't overlook at all the differences in religious traditions and theologies, you can confidently argue that this act of faith looks now more as a reasonable hypothesis. This is an important point as still too often the scholarly and public debate present us with problematic association of one specific religion (let's say Islam) with violence and other (let's say Buddhism) with peace only.

In other words, this second more reflexive moment of study of religion in IR, exemplified and arguably inspired by *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, was about realising that analysts had been biased in making sense of the role of religion in international relations and has a result, had been overlooking the positive political role that religion could play in the modernisation, democratisation, development and even peace-building in many parts of the world. From a practical policy perspective, the message was that religion in international relations does not need to be seen only as a problem: It can also be part of the solution to some of the current problems!

This insight leads me to the third wave of work on the role of religion in international relations and to a more practical-oriented point that I want to make about how Scott Appleby and *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* continue to influence the current debate. The third moment, as I anticipated, consisted in a policy-oriented discussion informed by the second multifaceted understanding of the role of religion in international relations. As the readers of this journal know well, there is an emerging recognition that religion can be a strategic resource for diplomacy, peacebuilding, the strengthening of human rights, and the advancement of sustainable development. This new policy-oriented discussion, referred to in foreign policy as "religious engagement," is emerging as one of the most promising fields of strategic and creative thinking on which governments and international organizations increasingly are working collaboratively with a view to partner with religious organisation to achieve common goals.

An important stage in the emergence of this new policy-making discourse and practice was the publication of a report in 2010 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs entitled *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US*

*Foreign Policy*, elaborated by a Task Force on Religion and the Making of U.S. Foreign Policy which was led by Scott Appleby and Richard Cizik. By critically reflecting on the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, it argued that Western governments failed to understand that, in collapsing and so-called failed states, local mainstream Islamic communities played a key role in providing education, sanitation and other social services when the state structure no longer existed. Framing religion through a counter-terrorist framework prevented it from being brought in constructively as part of the solution to build stability, the central objective of the international community's new comprehensive approach to security and development. The Chicago report contributed to conceptualising the idea of 'religious engagement' which informed the State Department's new 2013 "US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement" and paved the way under Obama and John Kerry for the creation in 2015 of the Office of Religion and Global Affairs. The aim of this new US strategy is to engage religious leaders and communities abroad to promote development and humanitarian assistance; advance human rights, including religious freedom; and prevent and resolve conflict. Quite a paradigm shift, at least on paper, from the post-9/11 framing of religion – read Islam – through the counter-terrorism prism only! But a policy shift that was made possible by the simple argument – sophisticatedly demonstrated – that religion is politically ambivalent. Religious engagement for the common good is possible and even necessary if we realise that religion is politically what we make of it!

And here again I have heard the first and only (sic) director of the Religion and Global Affairs office in the US State Department Shaun Casey publicly recognising the essential role that Scott Appleby's work has had in the creation of this major achievement in the foreign policy making world that unfortunately, I understand, has been recently re-sized by the current US administration but whose ideas have even become more applied globally by the international policy community. And here again what strikes me is that it is Scott's capacity to have constructed a clear and powerful argument captured by this simple notion of religious engagement.

This developments at the intersection of theory-practice have been reinforced by Scott's more recent work with the creation of *Contending Modernities* and the vision of the Keough School of Global Affairs around the notion of Integral Human

Development – again here pioneering an intuition that the international community has only in the last few years institutionalised with PaRD. It is always the idea of the political ambivalence of religion which opens the possibility for an innovative (religious) engagement in foreign policy is on the historically grounded conviction that religion have been and will continue to be sources of political innovation and can raise their prophetic voice, read the signs of time, denounce its injustices and even carry the promise of stretching the political imagination for the common good in our troubled state of international affairs.

So, I am truly delighted to have had the chance to honour the exceptional and exemplary intellectual journey of our colleague Scott Appleby. He has been a true pioneer of our field in theory and practice. I want to salute his leadership and give (secular) thanks for his distinguished scholarly career - well aware, of course, that as scholar of the history of Church, Scott Appleby wouldn't disagree with Spinoza that all of that is 'sub specie eternitatis'!

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