

Religious NGOs, Civil Society and the United Nations

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Theme: [Religion](#), [United Nations](#)

A new study by the University of Kent's Department of Religious Studies in the United Kingdom has revealed that more than 70% of the United Nation's religious non-governmental organisations are Christian. The report, *religious NGOs and the United Nations*, calls for better clarity in how religious NGOs are represented at the UN and for more emphasis to be placed on religious tolerance.

So far so good. The study also argues for more equitable inclusive processes which incorporate Asian religions more fairly within the world's premier political body. Now, this is all well and good, but what exactly would that entail? More religion influencing the course of world events? In my opinion this would be a disaster and if anything the world should be trying to reduce the influence religion already has rather than augmenting it.

As a new year gets underway we have yet another religion-anchored genocide on our hands. The Central African Republic (CAR) veers towards filling its own blood bath with religious based violence while a neutered world looks on in exasperation at butchery in a far off land. While religion may be just a guise to express long held ethnic divisions and competition for resources between the northern mostly Muslims and the southern mostly Christians in CAR, there is no denying that religion is the central expression of most hatred that characterises such carnage in the world. With nearly a million people displaced because of the fighting and countless people already dead CAR is bracing itself to descend into religious warfare that some predict will echo the slaughter Rwanda experienced in 1994. Once again another country divides itself into us and them.

Nothing says us and them quite as well as religion does. As a species we know it all too well, or at least we should by now. Our history is littered with needless death and mayhem neatly packaged up as religious burden. The Thirty Years War, the Crusades, Northern Ireland, the Israeli-Palestine conflict, Sudan – the list is endless. Religion has always been the excuse rather than the reason to express hatred, separation and greed. Is it time to place greater emphasis on the role that religion plays in world politics? I think not. It is time that this excuse, which has given the gravest licence to human suffering, is relegated to the history books once and for all. We need to move on by placing religion secondary to our common needs and decoupling it from our political processes.

I am not denying that religious institutions and organisations do a lot of good in the world. There are many examples of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu and Buddhist organisations that do meaningful and important work throughout the world. Just as there are many examples of secular organisations doing similar. The question is if our good deeds come from some political space that requires some duty of care to be given to our fellow man or if it is an instinctive human desire to help that motivates the good in people. If it is the former then that would rather nullify the humanity *raison d'être* of the UN. Far more likely is the latter.

Empathising, respecting, doing good and helping each are all central facets of being alive. They are not dependent on which religion, if any, that we subscribe to. Along with all the bad, we also have some good. Humanitarianism and caring for the less well-off and troubled comes from a social conscience that I believe is innate to our nature and not dependent on which God we believe in. Helping someone in need has a lot more to do with being human than being religious. Perhaps if religion gave more licence to this aspect of humanity than it does to division then places like CAR wouldn't be in the mess that they are in.

Defenders of religion may point to the codes of morality within various theological edicts to which our modern societies have based their judicial and social systems upon. Such an argument assumes that without religion humanity would have spiralled into an orgy of violence where man is pitted against man in his lust for power, resources and control. Kind of like what religion has enabled kings, popes and emperors to do throughout history. It might be a chicken and egg debate for some but when it comes to treating ones' fellow man with decency the moral compass points firmly towards inherent humanity rather than religiosity.

Another argument that may be put forward is that religious organisations constitute the ideals and wishes of large groups of people who count themselves as members of that religion. By this representation then surely a collective voice at international level should be called for? Indeed religions do represent large amounts of people but it is the job of the state to represent its citizens at international level rather than a hierarchical undemocratic institution that represents some of 'us' and none of 'them'.

The UN, for all its troubles, is the only global institution that binds all of humanity together. A call for a greater role for religion is counterproductive in trying to resolve our deep seated differences. We need to focus on our commonalities rather than our divisions if we are to truly address the problems we face together. Religion, it is time to move on.

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