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TRANSCRIPT | MARCH 2, 2005

Faith and Conflict: The Global Rise of Christianity

12:00-2:00pm
Council on Foreign Relations
New York, New York

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life and the Council on Foreign Relations co-hosted a luncheon roundtable entitled *Faith and Conflict: The Global Rise of Christianity* on March 2, 2005 at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

With more than two billion adherents worldwide, Christianity is both the world’s largest and, in some regions, its fastest growing religion, with most of that growth taking place in the developing world. In parts of Africa and Asia, the growth of Pentecostal, evangelical and unique and indigenous forms of Christianity brings Christians into contact and often conflict with Muslim and other communities. Michael Nazir-Ali, the Pakistani-born Anglican Bishop of Rochester, who has been mentioned as a possible Archbishop of Canterbury, joined Mark Noll, one of America’s most distinguished historians of religion, to discuss the implications of these important changes.

Speakers:
Mark Noll, Carolyn and Fred McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton College; Cary and Ann Maguire Chair in American History and Ethics, Library of Congress

Michael Nazir-Ali, Bishop of Rochester, Church of England; Member, House of Lords

Presenter:
Walter Russell Mead, Henry A. Kissinger Senior Fellow in U.S. Foreign Policy, Council on Foreign Relations

The discussion was part of a joint project on religion and U.S. foreign policy undertaken by the Pew Forum and the Council, designed to help policymakers and analysts better understand religion’s role and its possible policy implications through discussion with key experts. Although the roundtable was off-the-record, the speakers agreed to make their prepared remarks available online:

Remarks of Mark Noll

Since I am primarily a historian of Christianity and only incidentally a student of foreign relations, I will focus in my brief remarks on the **magnitude**, the **multiplicity**, the **material conditions**, and the **manifold political implications** of the epochal developments in the recent world history of Christianity. Although I will suggest a few possible policy implications that arise from this tumultuous recent history, I leave it to this distinguished group to do most of the work on that score.

First, **the magnitude**. In order to grasp the current situation of world Christianity concretely, consider what went on last Sunday. More Roman Catholics attended church in the Philippines than in any single country of Europe. In China, where in 1970 there were no legally functioning churches at all, more believers probably gathered for worship than in all of so-called “Christian Europe.” And in Europe (as reported by Philip Jenkins) the church with the largest attendance last Sunday was in Kiev, and it is a church of Nigerian Pentecostals. Last Sunday, more Anglicans attended church in each of Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda than did Anglicans in Britain and Canada and Episcopalians in the U.S. combined. And several times more Anglicans attended church in Nigeria than in these other African countries. In Korea, where a century ago there existed only a bare handful of Christian believers, more people attended the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul than all of the churches in significant American denominations like the Christian Reformed Church. In the United States, Roman Catholic mass was said in more languages than ever in American history. Last Sunday many of the churches with the largest congregations in England and France were filled with African or Caribbean faces. As a final indication of global trends, as of 1999 the largest chapter of the Jesuits was in India, and not as in the United States as had been the case for many decades before.

In a word, the world Christian situation is not what it was when your grandparents were born, or even when you were born.

Second, **the multiplicity**. Over the course of the last century, Christian penetration of local cultures has accelerated as never before. The great vehicle of that acceleration has been translation, primarily translations of the Bible into local languages, but also translations of liturgies, hymns, theology, and devotion from the vast archives of the Christian West into the emerging discourses of the world. As has been so well argued by Lamin Sanneh, the activity of Christian translation has brought unique spiritual empowerment to those who now, often for the first time, hear the message of Scripture in their mother tongue. Before 1900, portions of the Christian Scriptures had been translated into about 700 of the world’s languages; in the past century alone, over 1,600 new languages have received at least part of the Bible. Evangelical Protestants have been in the forefront of this translation effort, but Roman Catholics have not been far behind.

Results from this unprecedented effort have been—at one and the same time—conservative, ironic, liberating, and chaotic. Conservative—because once marginalized people are given literature in their own language they receive a tool that anchors them to their own past, their own traditions, their own culture. In one of Sanneh’s key interpretations, while the spread of Islam draws ever increasing numbers to the globalizing influence of Arabic, the spread of Christianity binds ever increasing numbers to their own linguistic localities. Then ironic—missionaries may know very well what they intend when they set out to translate the Scriptures, but local people often find in their newly translated Bibles things that the missionaries did not want them to see. In one such irony, straight-laced Victorians did not realize how much unintended support they brought to ancestral African practices of polygamy by putting the stories of patriarchs like Abraham and David into local languages. And then this wave of translations has been liberating: it has given to peoples all over the world a sense of being themselves the hearers of God’s direct speech. Thus it is in a world where fewer and fewer can escape modern electronic technology that an evangelistic tool like “The Jesus Film” from Campus Crusade for Christ takes on such importance—now available in over 870 languages, and having been viewed by over five billion people, this cinematic version of the gospel of Matthew offers the first high-tech voices that many native peoples have ever heard **in their own languages**. Finally, translation has weakened bonds of cohesion in world wide Christianity and pointed in the direction of religious chaos. According to David Barrett, the great enumerator, almost one-fourth of the world’s two billion Christians are “independent,” that is, unassociated with the churches, denominations, and traditions that most of us so easily equate with the essence of Christianity itself.

In a word, the world Christian situation is marked by multiplicity because of how deeply the Christian message, translated into local languages, has become part of local cultures.

Third, **the material conditions** of this new world-wide Christianity. The rapid diffusion of Christian adherence into parts of the world where churches barely existed 150 years ago has left a skewed distribution of resources. Today, unlike in almost any other earlier period, the money and the strong educational institutions of Christianity are in one part of the world, while most of the Christians are located in other parts of the world. The result is that a western Christian minority continues to exert great influence over the Christian majority of the non-West. To be sure, in theological education, training is now being offered to Nepalese in the Philippines, to Ukrainians in Romania, to West Africans in Kenya, to Latin Americans in Brazil, and to Chinese in Singapore. But Rome, London, Paris, Tübingen, Chicago, and Boston remain destinations of choice for Christians from all over the world who seek out the highest forms of higher education. Similarly, missionary activity has become genuinely global—the share of U.S. missionaries as a proportion of the world’s total has fallen from close to 70% in 1960 to well under 50% today; there are now something like 2,000 foreign missionaries from Asia and Africa at work in Great Britain; Brazil and Korea both account for over 12,000 Christian missionaries sent to other parts of the world. Yet even with this great growth in world missionary activity, the preponderance of funding for missions still comes from the West.

What is true for missions is also true for the elusive construct that can be called “Christian civilization”—i.e., societies marked by internalized self-discipline, respect for the law as an objective reflection of God’s righteousness, and altruistic care for those who are least able to care for themselves. To greatly over-simplify the situation that now exists in the world with respect to “Christian civilization,” if on a Sunday you want to attend a lively, jammed full, fervent, and life-changing service of Christian worship, you want to be in Nairobi, not in Stockholm. But if you want to walk home safely late at night, you want to be in Stockholm, not Nairobi.

In a word, the material conditions of the new world Christianity create great opportunities but also pose great challenges for all portions of the Christian community.

Finally, the new situation exposes **manifold political implications**. Let me mention only four of them as a bridge between considering the new world Christianity as a religious phenomenon and thinking about its meaning for foreign policy. First, as Philip Jenkins and others have underscored, both Christianity and Islam are expanding with great rapidity precisely in those areas of the world that have been most buffeted by the forces of colonization, decolonization, and now economic globalization. As David Martin has put it for the most rapidly expanding form of world Christianity, Pentecostalism is flourishing where people have been recently detached from “local practices, obligations, and authority.” But where Islam and Christianity both offer the balm of spiritual stability to growing numbers of people conscious of threat from outside, where that balm is offered in contiguous regions or in the same region, the potential for strife also grows.

Second, the rapid spread of Christianity in economically marginal areas of the world poses delicate questions for those interested in the global economy. In the great favelas and barrios of Latin America and the Philippines, as well as the teeming cities of Africa, Christian faith thrives among people whose economic existence is precarious. Sometimes that thriving comes about when Christianity is preached as a means to wealth; more often it results when Christianity is embraced as a point of stability in an economically insecure world. Interpreted either way, it would seem short-sighted for policy planners to discuss economic globalization without also considering religious globalization.

But third, it is a different story where Christianity spreads in regions of economic strength, as especially in China. In this rapidly strengthening Asian power, the systems of belief that once guided society are passing away. Before Maoism imploded, it badly damaged ancestral reliance on Confucian precepts. Christianity seems to be taking off in China because more and more Chinese seem to be seeking a new moral compass as China itself makes a commanding entrance onto the world stage. David Jeffrey, the provost of Baylor University who for fifteen years has been regularly invited to lecture on Christian subjects at premier universities in China, has asked a speculative question that should give foreign analysts pause. Once before, Jeffrey remarks, a great world power passed through tumultuous times as Christian ranks expanded on the margins of society. It was the late 3rd and early 4th centuries. In that turmoil the Emperor Constantine was converted and became, from the top of the imperial system, a supporter of Christianity as a new glue for empire. Is it impossible to imagine that a new Constantine might exist somewhere in the junior ranks of the Chinese communist party?

Fourth and finally, the rapid spread of Christianity into new regions of the world means that these regions of the world will be more and more likely to bring Christian moral principles with them to international venues. Those moral principles will reflect the character of the Christian faith that is spreading so rapidly, and that character is almost never liberal or modernist in either Catholic or Protestant forms. It is rather much more likely to be syncretistic, Pentecostal, strongly papal, neo-fundamentalist, or starkly supernaturalist. As the worldwide Anglican communion has experienced, the moral voice of the newer Christian regions of the world can be a strong voice indeed. For the Roman Catholic church, for ad hoc assemblies of evangelical Protestants, for older Protestant denominations, for regional and global ecumenical ventures—as also for policy analysts not keyed to religion—the attachment of the world’s new Christian communities to sterner interpretations of the Christian faith is likely to have an ever growing influence on international affairs.

The magnitude, the multiplicity, the material conditions, and the manifold political implications of the new world Christianity open a new epoch in religious history. They may also open something equally new for the economic and political realities of the twenty-first century.

Remarks of Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali

Well, thank you very much indeed. It is good to be here and to have heard Mark.

I have put out some books here which you may want to refer to later on, which set out some of the things that Mark has been saying and hopefully some of the things that I will say.

I also want to begin with a historical perspective, but perhaps one slightly different from Mark’s because I want to begin with the early church. Very often one of the problems with Western academia is that they trace the movement of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome via Athens, and the reason of course that they do this is that they are mainly equipped in the classical languages of Latin and Greek, and so that is what they can do.

But in fact, if you look at the spread of early Christianity, it spread from the earliest times in every direction. You only have to look at the stories about what happened to the apostles, for instance, to get a sense of that. Mark mentioned the Roman Empire. But actually, just as the faith was spreading in the Roman Empire, it was also spreading equally strongly in the other great superpower of that time. Which one was that? Where was the other great superpower at the time of the Roman Empire?

Yes, it was Persia. It was the Persian Empire. And the martyrologies that we have from that period in the Persian Empire of Christians who were martyred there are nearly as long as the martyrologies that we have from Rome.

Which was the first Christian nation – the first nation to call itself Christian? The Armenians, of course and then the Ethiopians. Mark mentioned translatability. Both Armenia and Ethiopia define their Christian understanding of themselves in terms of the early translations of the scriptures and of Christian writings into their languages: Gregory the Illuminator for the Armenians, and St. Mesrob, and the Syrian monks, who arrived in Ethiopia and translated basic Christian writing into Ge’ez—still the liturgical language of the Ethiopians.

The Church of the East – the so-called Nestorian church – was very strongly missionary in India and in China. And I was very saddened to read in David Aikman’s book, *Jesus in Beijing*, about a Chinese pastor saying – obviously he has observed Western orthodox in this respect – saying how St. Paul had taken the faith to Europe and now, 2000 years later, it had come to China.

Well, I am actually reading a history of two Chinese Christian monks who, in the thirteenth Century, came to the West – by which they meant the Middle East, of course. I mean, when Chinese Christians spoke of the West, they usually meant the Middle East. Rabban and Sauma – one of them became the Nestorian patriarch and the other was sent by him to visit Christians in Europe, and it was a wonderful encounter for this Chinese Nestorian to meet with European Christianity.

So the point is that the translatability of the gospel, to which Mark referred, is not something just discovered in the nineteenth century or the twentieth. It has always been the case. And of course, because it is intrinsically translatable, that is why it has become translatable today, whether into African or Asian or Latin American contexts.

Now I would actually just like to refer very briefly to what happened in between the early period and the nineteenth century – or the eighteenth and nineteenth century – because Mark mentioned that the Jesuits had become the largest chapter in the world now in India, and that’s true. There are over 3,000 Jesuits in India.

The fact is that the Jesuits were very innovative missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And particularly in India and in China, they experimented precisely with this question of translatability. De’ Nobili, in India, began what was called the *Adiaphorata*, which was really to render Christianity into a form that the Brahmins, the high-caste Hindus, could recognize and observe. This was quite separate from the ancient Indian-Christian communities that have always existed along the southwestern coast of India.

His efforts were suppressed by Rome eventually – that’s another story – but again, Matteo Ricci in China did exactly the same thing. So this, the present situation in China to which Mark was referring, is Christianity’s at least fourth visit in the course of Christian history: the Nestorians, Ricci, the nineteenth century protestant missionaries from Britain and the United States. And now the emergence of an indigenous church through indigenous missionary work after all the missionaries had been expelled from China.

Coming then to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – of course Mark is the definitive historian, as Walter has said, about this period, but one point that I would like to draw to your attention, and that is that while missionaries from America and Europe get all the glory, in fact much of the work was done by local people. If you look at the history of Christianity in East Africa, the missionaries stuck to the coasts in the initial period, and the people they converted then took Christianity into the interior. Very largely these were people movements of Kikuyu, of the Luo and of other tribes in East Africa.

Similarly, my CV will tell you that I was the general secretary of the Church Mission Society. Well, the Church Mission Society has tons – literally tons – of records of its native agents, as they were called, reporting back on what they were doing, and it is quite clear that most of the work done by CMS in the nineteenth century was done by these native agents.

I’ve been for long interested in one of them: a man called Abdul Masih, who was ordained deacon in 1823 and priest in 1824, who was a native agent in northern India. And it is very interesting to see how he describes his work of going to remote villages, how he gets there, how he gets back, the hardships he has to endure, and so on.

Apolo Kivebulaya took the gospel from Uganda to the Congo – to what is the Christian faith to what is now Zimbabwe. And it is very instructive to read about his missionary methods, his affirmation of the spirituality of the Mashona people, his translation of basic Christian material into their language in a way that was sensitive to culture, and all of those things.

So then we come to the situation today, and there are three things to be said. First of all, the growth in the mainline churches – Mark has referred to that already. The Anglican Churches in Nigeria are saying that in the next ten years they will double their numbers. They’ve already doubled their numbers in the previous 15 years from about 8 million to about 17 million. They’re now saying there will be over 30 million. That’s the kind of growth that you are talking about.

Singapore, similarly. There has been growth in all the mainline churches basically because the mainline churches have adopted some of the methods of the Pentecostals, certainly in Singapore and East Asia. So there is that growth.

Then there is the huge Pentecostal growth, which has been documented very ably but the famous sociologist, David Martin – particularly in Latin America and Africa but also in East Asia. Mark referred to the situation in Korea, but in Brazil you are now approaching a country which has a population of about 30 percent declared Pentecostals. And Pentecostalism is now, in some ways, a new establishment with its own institutions and members of parliament, and so on.

David Martin claims that Roman Catholicism and Pentecostalism are the two great currents engaged in the expansion of Christianity at this time, and I think he may well be right.

But there is a third element of this, which is not often talked about because it is quite fragmented, and that is independency. David Barrett, was mentioned by Mark. But David Barrett, the editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, began his work by studying independency in Africa. And even 20 years ago, he was able to identify 6,000 independent African churches – and maybe many more now of course. So there is a huge engine of growth, which is neither Pentecostal nor mainline but a third force if you like.

Why is the growth taking place at this rate in certain places? Well, the precariousness of life has been mentioned, the spiritual vacuum that certainly exists in some Asian societies has been mentioned, but it also has to do with what happens to people. Mark was hinting at that, I think.

In Latin America, it appears that the reason is that Pentecostals encourage a higher profile for the household. They are family friendly. They are hostile to male machismo culture, which is out in the streets and on the soccer fields and engages in, you know, weekend binge drinking and all those sorts of things. So it is the building up of the family.

It is also work friendly. People are encouraged in habits of work – of, well, punctuality, honesty, and so on, and that is naturally desirable for employers. And it is politically quietistic, generally speaking.

Now, this is true not only of Latin America, but also of Africa, and it is one of these ambivalent aspects of the rapid expansion of Christianity. In Latin America, quietistic Pentecostalism has replaced the base communities that were politically very active. Why has it done so? Well, some leaders of the base communities themselves have worked on this, and they have said that while they were concentrating on social, economic and political issues, they were missing out on the spiritual dimension. And so, this is one of the reasons for the spread of Pentecostalism.

It is quietistic. It is sometimes persecuted, particularly in Asia. The case of China has been mentioned, but many other countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran and Egypt can also be mentioned. And there is an enormous capacity among these Pentecostal Christians to take persecution.

I have personally been acquainted with many Pentecostals in Iran who have been imprisoned, some have been killed – a very close friend of mine was killed. And they continue to thrive, even in a very unpromising situation.

But that alerts us immediately then to the possibility of conflict. Mark said that in many parts of the world, growing Christian churches and growing Muslim communities are now cheek by jowl – in Central and Northern Nigeria, for example. And from time to time, this has resulted in open conflict. And the dangers elsewhere of further conflict exist already.

This raises questions about another field in which I am very interested, which is the dialogue between Christians and Muslims, and how Christianity and Islam have a particular responsibility, as the two great missionary religions of today, to be accountable not only to one another, but also at the bar of world opinion. And I am personally engaged in a number of dialogues where this is happening to some extent – though you may say perhaps not sufficiently.

I think that’s the kind of angle I would like to give on the intrinsic nature of Christianity – as one of that is translatable, and therefore missionary and expansionist. In every age, this has happened differently and so that the most recent missionary history of Christianity is just that: the most recent.

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