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POPE JOHN PAUL II AND THE ROLE OF WORLD RELIGIONS IN POLITICS

Robin Wright

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I'm delighted and honored to be here this evening to discuss two of my favorite subjects: Pope John Paul II and the role of religion in politics. But I have to be upfront with you. I'm neither Catholic nor a religious scholar. I came at both subjects as a chronicler of contemporary history.

But at an early stage in my career as a foreign correspondent, a pattern clearly began to emerge among many events I covered, from the black uprising in South Africa and the the Arab-Israeli conflict to the demise of the Soviet Union and the insurgencies in India's Punjab and Kashmir.

A common denominator in these -- and many of the other major developments of the past 20 years -- is the extraordinary role of faith in mobilizing dissen in defying governments of both left and right often far more effectively than any secular force, and sometimes even in justifying violence.

One aspect is illustrated by Pope John Paul II.

THE PAPACY OF JOHN PAUL II

The impact of John Paul II is incalculable. During his 17-year-reign, John Paul has been seen by more people than anyone in history--and that doesn't include television. In a single venue, especially in the early years, he could draw up to a million people. And it's not going too far to say that John Paul has virtually been to the moon and back. In more than 60 trips, he has been to more than 110 countries--many of them not predominantly Catholic or even mostly Christian--on all six inhabited continents. All totaled, he's spent more than a year away from the Vatican. No other state leader, past or present, has ever traveled as much, or as long, or as far--more than a half million miles, more than the equivalent of a flight to the moon and back. The last pope to have such a profound impact on world affairs was probably Innocent III, who reigned from 1198 to 1215, when medieval Europe was prostrate. He was an activist pope who helped Europe regroup. In small but significant ways, Europe is different today because of him.

In context of the century before his election, John Paul is even more remarkable. Since the 1870s, when the Holy See lost the last of the papal states, the reigning pontiff has had limited tangible clout. For almost 50 years after being stripped of temporal dominion, successive popes were virtual prisoners in the Vatican, unable or unwilling to leave, the result of a struggle symbolizing its loss of power in an increasingly secular world.

A pope - and a revamped modern papacy - didn't formally reemerge until the Lateran Treaty with Italy in 1929. But the Holy see's territory, which once spread across thousands of square miles, had by then been whittled down to just over a hundred acres. Its army of Swiss guards -- the former mercenary force first hired by the Holy See in 1506 and once numbering more than 12,000 -- is now down to a mere hundred men. They're better known today for the colorful 16th century uniforms than their military skills. As Stalin once quipped, "How many divisions does the pope have?" The bottom line is that, for much of the 20th century, the Vatican has been a peripheral player in international politics.

John Paul has frequently inferred that's just fine with him. In a 1982 address to King Juan Carlos and Spanish political leaders, he said "The church is a spiritual type of society with spiritual aims, without any desire to compete with the civil powers or deal with material or political affairs, which she recognizes with pleasure are not of her competence."

Yet, the reign of John Paul II--already almost twice as long as the eight-year papal average--is likely to be remembered most of all for the very political involvement he publicly eschews. His chief legacy is almost certain to be his leadership during what he once described as "an epoch-making turning point in the world's history." I saw it time and time again--not just in Poland. Indeed, while the pope is given abundant credit for changes in Eastern Europe, his impact elsewhere is just as great. One of my many memories is from Brazil, where John Paul held a special meeting with workers during his 1980 tour of one of the world's most inequitable societies. Just a few weeks earlier, the junta had quashed a groundbreaking strike against the automobile industry. It had also declared further strikes and strikers' meetings illegal. But the government couldn't veto a meeting between the workers and the pope, and interest was so high

that it had to be held at Sao Paulo's soccer stadium. Despite a bitterly cold rain and a nighttime setting, 120,000 workers packed a facility built for far fewer. For twenty minutes after he arrived, the stadium rocked with cheers and chanting, for the pope's presence was already interpreted as an indirect endorsement of their agenda.

But John Paul, who worked day-labor in a quarry during Poland's Nazi occupation, went further. He declared, "Power must never be used to protect the interests of one group to the detriment of the others....The persistence of injustice threatens the existence of society." Such blatant challenges were unprecedented in Brazil.

"This menace exists when the distribution of goods is grounded only in the economic laws of growth and a bigger profit," he continued, "when the results of progress reach only superficially a huge layer of the population, when there persists a big gap between a minority of the rich on the one hand and the majority of those who live in want and misery on the other."

Several times, it appeared John Paul might not get through the speech, especially as he kept punctuating it with references to the need for "solidarity" within societies. Spoken at a time Poland's daring young trade union was challenging another form of authoritarian rule, everyone listening--not only in the stadium--knew exactly what he meant. With each reference, the workers responded with ever-louder and longer rounds of "Solidarity, Solidarity, Solidarity!" The encounter was classic John Paul, who has repeatedly circumvented rulers to reach out, inspire and empower people when their own leaders refused and, in practical terms, in ways no other foreign government or leader could without being charged with meddling--or worse.

The week before the Baltics trip, one of the more candid archbishops at the Holy See explained to me, "He empowers people to take their rightful role in society, to call themselves for reform, to help effect peaceful change, to insist on human dignity and justice." In Sao Paulo, the pope empowered trade union workers whose activism, as in Gdansk, turned out to be a critical component in the subsequent pro-democracy movement that helped produce change. In 1985, Brazil held its first democratic election, as Latin America's largest state returned to civilian rule.

Another of my lasting images was his meeting with Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos and spouse Imelda--the "Shoe Lady"--during a 1981 Asian tour. The formal papal reception at Malacanang Palace was so tightly orchestrated that all men in attendance had to wear the filmy white barong shirts and all women the white full-length, puffed-sleeve dresses replicating Mrs. Marcos' favorite fashion. Attendees in residence in Manila received packages of material and patterns in advance; for late arrivals, like those of us on the papal plane, there were racks of used extras in a palace waiting room. Two throne-like wooden chairs had been specially carved for the occasion; red cushions were embroidered with the papal and Marcos crests. The palatial setting and the sea of white gowns and lacey shirts were a particularly stark contrast to the tattered poor who had lined the roads to welcome the pontiff to Manila.

In front of Marcos' family, friends and more than a thousand members of the cabinet, military and judiciary, as well as millions on live television, John Paul declared, "Even in exceptional situations, one can never justify any violation of the fundamental dignity of the human person or of the basic rights that safeguard this dignity." The state, he made clear, could never justify subverting human rights in the name of its own security or survival.

He then bluntly called on the Philippines' leadership to enact reforms so that all men, women and children receive what is due to them to live in dignity, where especially the poor and the underprivileged are made the priority concern of all.

The papal speech was a wringing and humiliating rebuke of Marcos' dictatorship. During Marcos' 21-year rule, no other visiting chief-of-state, before or after the pope, was ever so publicly candid. The pontiff then reinforced the message in meetings with small farmers and sugar cane plantation workers, university students, professionals and slum-dwellers, in masses, and even to lepers.

He told more than 100,000 desperately poor field hands and tenant farmers in Bacolod. "In justice reigns when within the same society some groups hold most of the wealth and power, while large strata of the population cannot decently provide for the livelihood of their families even through long hours of backbreaking labor in factories or in fields."

"The church will not hesitate to take up the cause of the poor and to become the voice of those who are not listened to when they speak up, not to demand charity, but to ask for justice." During his visit, the pope altered the political environment; the Philippines leadership was publicly held to account. The tone, as well as the content of the six-day trip, helped to lay the foundation for Marcos' demise five years later.

Among others who came under papal scrutiny and subsequently lost power are Chile's Pinochet, Haiti's Duvalier, Paraguay's Stroessner, Nicaragua's Ortega, and Poland's Jaruzelski. Suggesting papal cause to explain political effect would be seriously misleading. Indeed, on the face of it, John Paul has done nothing more on his travels than lay out millennia-old Christian principles, albeit with shrewd calculation. But a ranking foreign policy specialist at the Holy See conceded the intent. "I call his speeches time bombs," he told me, with a wry smile. "They're intended to transform, but we don't know when they'll explode."

Sometimes he didn't even need words to convey his messages. In Brazil, I watched as he spontaneously slipped off his gold ring, a gift from Pope Paul VI upon his elevation to cardinal, and gave it to a Brazilian parish in a Rio favela to be sold to help the poor. In Hiroshima, he prayed at Ground Zero, the site of the world's first atomic bomb explosion, and in Nagasaki he ministered to ailing radiation victims long forgotten by the rest of the world.

On other trips, he pointedly took his entourage, host officials and the world's cameras to the prisons from which Africans were shipped off to slavery in the Americas and to the Belgian city of Ypres, surrounded by 170 cemeteries filled with the dead from World War I's bloodiest battles. He'd also conducted

masses on a former Indonesian killing field and, defying security concerns, in Peru's Andean city of Ayacucho, a stronghold of Shining Path guerrillas and ruthless druglords.

And at home, in one of many gestures toward ecumenicalism, he held a joint ceremony in Rome's main synagogue with the chief rabbi. John Paul even spoke twice in Hebrew. It was the first time any pope has entered a Jewish house of worship--a deliberate response to an old Jewish proverb that "the persecution will end when the pope enters a synagogue." It was also the most conciliatory gesture by a Catholic leader in the two millennia of Christianity--and of sporadic tension and hostility between the two faiths.

It's not going to far to conclude, even in contrast to the activism of Innocence III, that the entire world is a little different because of JP.

Today, however, the question for John Paul is whether he can still make much of a difference. The first Slavic pope--and the first non-Italian in almost half a millennium, the last one being a Dutchman--was elected in context of a Cold War and amidst rhetoric about "evil empires." Since the onset of global change however, totalitarian rule has been eliminated in Eastern Europe. In Latin America, dictators have been replaced by democracies. Even apartheid, a regular theme during his African sojourns, has been relegated to history. His personal background--first surviving fascism and then enduring socialism--no longer seems as relevant in the so-called New World Order.

So, having covered the early years of this papacy, I went back two years ago to accompany JP to the Baltics--Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia--to see how relevant he still is at what is clearly the end of his papacy.

The image of the trip was at the Hill of Crosses in Lithuania. Local legend contends the first crosses were planted here in the fifteenth century, after Christianity took root in Europe's last pagan country. In the 1860s, to commemorate a failed uprising against Russian tsarist rule and the subsequent repression, the crosses began proliferating. Over time, adding a cross to the hill became a form of celebrating, praying, giving thanks or grieving. As the tradition grew, the Hill of Crosses also began to attract pilgrims from all over Europe who, in turn, added their crosses.

When the Soviet Union absorbed Lithuania, Russian troops repeatedly tried to destroy the hill and, by then, its thousands of crosses. They tried hauling them away in truckloads. They tried burning them and throwing them into the river. At least three times, the whole hill was bulldozed, and once it was strewn with sewage. Police were even posted to block access to the hill. But nothing worked. For half a century, the crosses, ten-foot tall or one-inch tiny, plain and ornate, just kept appearing.

On a cold day of gusting winds that colored his cheeks, John Paul went to the Hill of Crosses and prayed in front of one secretly erected during Soviet rule. The inscription on it read, "Christ the King, protect the pope. On its knees, Lithuania prays." It was dated May 13, 1981, the day Mehmet Ali Agca tried to kill the pontiff. Although Western intelligence agencies and Italian courts lacked sufficient evidence to convict three Bulgarians as co-conspirators, many at the Vatican and in Lithuania still suspect deep Moscow involvement. In that context, the first of his two messages on the trip was surprising. To indeed create a new world, John Paul used the dramatic Hill of Crosses to ask Lithuania to forgive Russia and its people for their occupation of the Baltics.

He presented the second of his two main themes in Latvia, a country that, during the groundbreaking papal visit, appeared to be doing far better than poor Lithuania. Since independence, also in 1991, Riga's quaint old downtown had been revived courtesy of capitalism. The brick alleys and streets were lined with private antique and handicraft shops, chic boutiques and open-air art stalls. Drivers could pick from Fiat or Mercedes dealerships, and diners from quality European restaurants or new fast-food joints, such as Viking Burger. But as dusk set in, the hookers with peroxided hair and thigh-high leather boots turned out on many corners, while young Russians peddled everything from Soviet military caps and medals to handpainted wooden nesting dolls from their backpacks. For the first time, beggars, including tiny children, were on the streets, often late into the night, and often hanging out near flashy new casinos reputed to have links to a new Baltic mafia. And for everyone, crime had become a chronic problem. While a few are prospering economically, the vast majority of Latvians are now worse off than they were under Soviet rule. Again, it was an apt setting.

In Riga, John Paul took on capitalism. The church, he pronounced, held the system now dominant in the world responsible for "grave social injustices." In its worst form, he said, it was ultimately responsible for creating the totalitarian and authoritarian alternatives that had divided the world for most of the twentieth century.

He declared, "The needs from which that system had historically arisen were real and serious. The situation of exploitation to which an inhumane capitalism had subjected the proletariat since the beginning of industrialized society was indeed an evil...This, basically, was Marxism's kernel of truth which enabled it to present itself as an attractive reality to Western society."

The implication, of course, was that it could happen again in fragile and volatile new democracies. Perhaps ironically, two weeks after the Baltics tour, the pontiff's native Poland voted for a new parliament. After pledging to slow the rapid and inequitable transformation brought on by free markets, former communists won.

Just as the first decade of his papacy was synonymous with an unrelenting confrontation to Eastern communism, so the second decade is shaping up as an equally bold challenge to the inequities and excesses of capitalism, the abuses of liberty, and what he basically sees as a return to laws of the jungle. Though he'd issued similar warnings on earlier trips, the Cold War's end has brought it to the top of his agenda. In the 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, he warned the world's new democracies about catching "the virus" of Western consumerism. In its worst forms, he said, capitalism is a form of "neopaganism." In a 1990 visit to Czechoslovakia, he warned against replacing communism with "secularism, indifference, hedonistic consumerism, [and] practical materialism."

He told the local clergy, "The dangers that regaining contacts with the West can bring must not be underestimated."

In Latvia, however, he went one step further. In a landmark address at the University of Riga, the pontiff, whose other occupations also included being a professor of ethics at Poland's Lublin University, laid out his vision of an ideal society. Although he kept denying that he was defining the long-illusive "third way" between the twentieth's century two dominant ideologies, his six principles were effectively a new model, even the basis of a manifesto for a new era.

The ideal state, he declared, is based on law that guarantees everyone an orderly existence and assures the most vulnerable enough support to avoid falling prey "to the arrogance and indifference of the powerful." The ideal democracy is always in the service of the common good. But, above and beyond its rules, it also has "a soul made up of the fundamental values without which it easily turns into openly or thinly disguised totalitarianism."

Within this ideal democratic state, the distribution of goods is "universal" and based on "solidarity." Private property is recognized, but in context of its social rather than its economic purpose. Work, critical to human dignity, must never reduce the individual "to a commodity or mere cog in the machinery of production." And all systems must promote "human ecology, implying respect for every person from conception to natural death."

Although it is enlightened, bold and ambitious, understanding, much less achieving, John Paul's utopia is probably beyond the reach of most of the nearly one-billion Catholic faithful. But whatever anyone concludes about the nature of JP's message, few could disagree that--in the broader political sphere--he has made the Vatican a major player again. He's also given the job he holds more relevance -- at least in the field of international affairs.

RELIGION IN POLITICS

John Paul is not alone. Nor is he singularly responsible for the changes in places he's been. His role should not be oversimplified or overestimated. He emerged in part because of the global environment that spawned a broader trend. The bottom line: At the end of the 20th century, arguably the most secular period in human history, religion has become one of the most dynamic and energetic forces on the world's political stage. It plays out in many forms, both positive and negative.

On one end of the spectrum are those who have grabbed the biggest and most sensational headlines--even bigger than John Paul on his global travels. They represent the REACTIVE side of the movement, which often plays out in NEGATIVE ways. This is the side so active in the 1980s, the side we often fear: The Egyptian extremists who blow up the World Trade Center. The Sikh extremists who bomb an Air India jumbo. The Palestinian militants who suicide bomb the Israeli military and a Jewish fundamentalist who massacres worshipping Muslims.

These acts often reflect a reaction, when people turn to their faith in anger. Because of disillusionment with current systems, because of impotence or malaise in society about how to change, or because of problems like overwhelming poverty & limited prospects, more people today are leaving IDEOLOGY on the road to THEOLOGY in search of political solutions to the miseries of our time.

I saw it so often when I lived in Beirut from 1981-85, particularly among the Lebanese Shi'ites. Although they were by far the largest population group, they were persecuted by Maronite Christian & Sunni Muslims. They were walked over by Palestinians who created a state-within-a-state on Shi'ite land. When the Israelis invaded, the Shi'ite community actually welcomed them with parades. Then the Israelis went too far and tried to virtually colonize Shi'ite territory. Finally the U.S. Marines were deployed in Lebanon, also in and around Shi'ite territory. Not surprisingly, the Shi'ites felt their rights had been trampled. They mobilized -- and went after all of them.

The story of India's Sikhs is similar. They were promised a Punjabi speaking province in the 1960s by Indira Gandhi - in exchange for their votes. But she, and later her son, reneged on the promise, the first and most serious of several aborted political promises that triggered the emergence of Sikh activism & then extremism. Sikh violence led the Indian govt in 1984 to send its army to the Gold Temple, the Sikh's holiest shrine, killing more than 1,000. Indira Gandhi was then murdered by her Sikh bodyguards, triggering a backlash in which 2,500 ordinary Sikhs were killed by Hindu nationalists.

Another reason for the emergence of religion in politics relates to issues of identity and culture--at a time of dehumanizing influences: Virtually all the modern ideologies, both major and minor, have relegated faith to a separate realm. Communism simply erased religion. Democracy privatized it. Zionism originally separated synagogue from state. Even apartheid - justified by SA's white Calvinist traditions and Old Testament quotations - was secular.

At the same time people are coming to understand their rights, they also have to face unprecedented problems: Life in megacities--with populations now totaling 12 to 20 million--that don't work; the rampant breakdown in law and order; overcrowding due to overpopulation; inadequate or limited leadership, locally & nationally. The 20th century accounts for the period of the greatest progress in human history, arguably greater than all other centuries combined. Yet the stark fact at the end of the 20th century, according to the latest U.N. human development report, is that the GAP between rich & poor has never been wider. In this context, religion becomes an important source of identity and sustenance for massive numbers of people. The turmoil of the world since the Cold War's end accentuates that need.

Religion is also often the only vehicle for change. Religion can offer physical or psychological sanctuary, particularly where legitimate opposition is banned. In one-party states or dictatorships, the church, mosque, temple and synagogue is often become the last refuge for those seeking a better secular life. All major monotheistic religions preach equality and justice, making them natural allies in opposing tyranny. They also usually have the resources, facilities and infrastructure with which to organize.

In Iran, for example, religion was the only force that had the following and the legitimacy to take on an authoritarian system of government - a monarchy - that dated back 2.5 millennia. In Haiti in 1986, the Catholic church -- through its pulpits, its radio station, its network -- was the only forum for opponents of the dynasty of Papa and Baby Doc Duvalier.

The bottom line: In the 1980s, many of these reactive forces played pivotal roles--peacefully and violently--in challenging the status quo and ultimately changing systems. They were a potent force in bringing us to the New World.

At the other end of the spectrum are the proactive forces and reasons for religious activism. In the 1990s, these are the forces that are increasingly emerging as cultures and societies look not just to shed totalitarian, corrupt, or ineffective systems, but to help find and define alternatives.

The growth of politicized religions is part of a broader political, economic and social upheaval which energetically seeks to address fundamental questions of existence. Just as diverse and disparate societies have turned to religion to react against systems -- locally, nationally or internationally -- so too are increasing numbers using religion as a proactive force with the long-term goal of looking for new relationships.

Again, there are several reasons: First, the continuum of various faiths -- which have survived centuries and outlived hundreds of political dynasties -- provide ideals and values by which to determine goals. In the Modern Era particularly, religion is untainted by failure, and thus supplies a context through which to pursue change. Second, religions also offer concrete alternatives, either for action or for systems of govt. This is particularly true, for example, of Islam, which offers a set of rules by which to govern society. In the 1990s, these proactive religious forces are going to be the most interesting, the most important, and arguably the ones leading us into the next round of global change.

Islam, the other religion I've spent lots of time tracking, is a prime example. Of all the religious forces active today, Islam is also the most contentious issue. Throughout most of the 1980s, as many of us remember painfully, resurgent Islam was most visible in violent ways. In Beirut, I lost friends during three suicide bombings at two embassies and the U.S. Marine compound. And Terry Anderson had the office next door. He was the longest held of some 130 foreign hostages from 22 countries. The names of the groups at the time--such as Islamic Holy War and Hizbollah or the Party of God, told the story.

But in the 1990s, something very interesting is happening. Some Islamic groups are abandoning the bullet for the ballot. In Kuwait, three Islamic groups have held two-thirds of the opposition seats in parliament since 1993 elections. In Jordan's 1989 and 1993 elections--the first free multiparty polls--the Islamic Action Front and its sympathizers became the largest bloc in parliament. In Yemen's In 1993 elections, the Islah party came in second of some dozen parties. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, although banned, became the largest opposition group -- by allying itself with a secular party -- in two parliamentary elections in the late 1980s. In Isarel, the Islamic Movement in Israel has won the mayorships in six town and council members in 16 towns. Israeli pundits now predict they could win up to 12 seats Knesset next year. Even in Lebanon, which held its first elections in 20 yrs in 1992, Hizbollah won the largest bloc in parliament.

In every Mideast country where Islamist parties have been allowed to participate in elections, they have demonstrated a willingness to work for peaceful change within system, not to destroy them by violent means from outside. In each case, they have proven that Islam can be a force for democracy and constructive, peaceful change. The names again are telling. In Kuwait, the groups are called the Islamic Constitutional Movement, the Islamic Grouping, the Heritage Society and the Social Reform Society.

In the 1990s, the correlation is clear. In societies that allow Islamists to run, they are peaceful. And Islamic extremism is highest in countries where Islamic parties are excluded and elections are either non-existent or government-controlled, such as Algeria and Egypt.

Like their secular counterparts in other parts of the world, Islamists of all ilk want a way in the way their govts rule. Because Islam is the most visible political idiom, the outside world tends to focus mainly on the Islamic component of the crisis rather than the real message: political participation.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, let me add a strong caveat about religion in politics. Religion is an increasingly important force in politics well into the next century, but primarily as a means to an end. The trend, like all trends, will peak and decline--at least in comparison with its current intensity. Ultimately, it is likely to be a phenomenon of the current global transition, an idiom first to reject and then to struggle to find something new. In places as disparate as Iran and Poland, religion was the prime means of mobilizing against a monarchy and a communist state then in defining an alternative, one religious and one secular.

In many ways, religion is arguably even more vulnerable than secular ideologies, because its promises are even more utopian than the communist vision. As Iran's failed revolution has proven, it can't live up to expectations as an alternative in itself. But what are likely to survive into a new era are religion's values of equality and justice and human dignity.

Thank you.

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