Article

Studying Religion in the Age of Globalization

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CURA’s summer seminars about major religions on the world stage

From 2002 to 2010, the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA) at Boston University held annual summer seminars to explore the world’s major religions. Sessions were taught by scholars from Boston University, partner institutions, and experts in religious studies as well as public policy analysts. These seminars were designed for professionals in the areas of public policy, journalism, and religious studies who were interested in the following questions: *How has each of the major religions responded to globalization? How has each contributed to world conflicts and solutions to those conflicts?*

Each session lasted two to three weeks with numerous scholars visiting Boston University to teach a class on one of the major religions and how they’ve adapted to the political, cultural, economic and environmental challenges of globalization.

Source: Anna Nekrashevich via Pexels.

The Seminars

Challenges of Religion in the Contemporary World (Summer 2002)

Week 1 explored "The Middle East and Islamic World" and was taught by Houchang Chehabi (Department of International Relations, Boston University) and Robert Hefner (Department of Anthropology, Boston University).

Week 2 was dedicated to "South Asia and East Asia." The instructors for this subject were: Tulasi Srinivas (University Professors Program, Boston University); John Berthrong (School of Theology, Boston University); and Joseph Fewsmith (Department

of International Relations, Boston University).

Week 3, “Media and Modernity Theory” was taught by José Casanova (Department of Sociology, The New School) and Uwe Siemon-Netto (religion correspondent, United Press International).

Religion and Democracy (Summer 2003)

Week 1 featured “Religions Resurgence and Its Implications for Democracy” taught by Peter Berger (School of Theology, Boston University) as well as “Religion and Democracy in Old and New Europe from Britain through Russia and Ukraine,” led by Alexandros K. Kyrou (Department of History, Salem State University) and Christopher Marsh (Department of Political Science, Baylor University).

Week 2 saw the continuation of the course by Kyrou and Marsh as well as “Islam and Democracy: Iran and Turkey” by Jenny White (Anthropology Department, Boston University) and Ali Banuazizi (Department of Psychology, Boston College).

Week 3 included “China on Democracy” by Joe Fewsmith (Department of International Relations, Boston University) and “Religion and Public Policy” and “Religion and US Foreign Policy” by Joseph Grieboski (executive director, Institute on Religion and Public Policy).

Religion, Democracy, and Public Policy (Summer 2004)

In Week 1, Peter Berger (School of Theology, Boston University) taught “Religion and Modernity” and José Casanova (Department of Sociology, The New School) taught

“Religion and Democratization.”

Week 2 featured “Muslim / Middle East” taught by Ali Banuazizi (Department of Psychology, Boston College) and “South Asia” led by Nancy Martin (associate professor of religion, Chapman University).

Week 3 saw “Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy” taught by Elizabeth Prodromou (associate director, the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs) and Joseph Grieboski (executive director, Institute on Religion and Public Policy).

Globalization and Religion (Summer 2005)

In Week 1 Swami Tyaganand (Harvard Hindu Fellowship, Vedanta Society) taught classes on Buddhism and Christal Whelan (Earhart Fellow, Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA), Boston University) led the discussion around Hinduism.

In Week 2, Timothy Samuel Shah (senior fellow in Religion and International Affairs, Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life) discussed Pentecostalism and Irfan A. Omar (assistant professor, Department of Theology, Marquette University) discussed Islam.

Week 3 “Globalization and Religion” was led by Grace Davie (professor of sociology/director of Centre for European Studies, University of Exeter).

Religion and Economic Globalization (Summer 2007)

The first week 1 “Religion in a Globalizing World” was taught by Peter Berger (School of Theology, Boston University). Peter Boettke (George Mason University) taught two

lectures on “Economic and Cultural Dynamics.” Robert Hefner (Department of Anthropology, Boston University)dedicated two lectures to “Globalizing Religion: Islam.”

In week 2, Timothy Shah taught two classes on “Evangelical Protestantism.” Robert Weller (Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA), Boston University) taught “Strategic Case: China,” and Christopher Marsh (Baylor University) taught “Strategic Case: Russia.” The 2007 session was concluded with a final class by Professors Berger, Marsh, and Weller.

Religion and Democracy (Summer 2008)

In week 1, Peter Berger (School of Theology, Boston University) delivered “Overview: The Global Religious Situation,” followed by a two-part lecture “Overview: Religion and Democracy” by Marc Plattner (National Endowment for Democracy). Closing out the first week, Ali Banuazizi (Department of Psychology, Boston College) taught “Islam and Democracy.”

In week 2, Timothy Shah (Council on Foreign Relations) taught “Evangelical Protestantism and Democracy”; Christopher Marsh (Department of Political Science, Baylor University) taught “Religion and Democracy in Russia”; and Robert Weller (Boston University) taught “Religion and Democracy in China.” The session concluded with a discussion led by Shah, March and Weller.

Religion in US Policy (Summer 2009)

Week 1 began with “Overview: Religion in a Desecularized World” by Peter Berger

(School of Theology, Boston University). He was followed by Walter Russell Mead (Council on Foreign Relations) who taught “Overview: Religion and US Foreign Policy”; Paul Marshall (Hudson Institute), “Issue: US Foreign Policy and the Promotion of Religious Freedom”; Charles Dunbar (Boston University), “Issue: US Relations with Religiously Defined States”; and Lawrence Harrison (Tufts University), “Issue: Religion and US Development Policy.”

Week 2’s classes included Richard Land (Southern Baptist Convention) on “Evangelical Influences on US Foreign Policy”; George Weigel (Ethics and Public Policy Center), on “Catholic Influences on US Foreign Policy”; and Ilan Troen (Brandeis University), on “Jewish Influences on US Foreign Policy.” These lectures were followed by Monica Toft (Kennedy School of Government), “Strategic Issue: Confronting Religiously Inspired Terrorism,” and a final discussion led by Professor Berger.

Globalizing Religion (Summer 2010)

In the final installment of the seminar series Peter Berger (School of Theology, Boston University) opened the session with “Globalization and Religion.” Michael Cromartie (Ethics and Public Policy Center) taught “Evangelical Protestantism.” Robert Hefner (Department of Anthropology, Boston University) led a class on “Global Islam”; John Berthrong discussed “Mainline Protestantism”; and Christopher Marsh (Department of Political Science, Baylor University) discussed “Eastern Christian Orthodoxy.”

In Week 2, Jo Renee Formicola (Seton Hall University) led “Roman Catholicism”; Ilan Troen (Brandeis University) taught “Judaism”; David Eckel (Boston University)

lectured on “Buddhism”; and Tulasi Srinivas (Emerson College) discussed “Hinduism”. Peter Berger led the wrap-up dialogue.

The Seminars as a Think Tank

Participants went on to produce a significant body of scholarship based on the discussions held during the summer seminars. The document below includes a select bibliography of works that stemmed directly from the seminars on Religion and Global Affairs.

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The Founders

This series was organized by the late Peter L. Berger, a renowned sociologist, and co-sponsored by the School of Theology of Boston University, under the guidance of the late Dean John Berthrong. Dr. Berger was known for his work on the sociological dimensions of knowledge, religion, and modernization. Berger was also the founder of CURA at Boston University. Much of Berger’s work in religious studies reflected his observation that major religious traditions have grown in influence rather than diminished with the advent of globalization. John Berthrong was associate dean at the School of Theology at Boston University.