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The Role of Religious Belief in the Formation of Political Opinions:  
Proposal for a Study in Delhi, India

*A secular society...values the equal rights of all citizens as well as freedom and equality among them. The function of the state is to ensure the access of these to all citizens, thus ensuring their well-being. Implicit in this are notions of democracy, and therefore the right of citizens to support as independent individuals their own views on issues before the state...citizenship, which confers human rights, such as...the right to education, health, and social welfare...In such a situation the religious control over social institutions decreases in importance since many of their functions should ideally be taken over by the state and by civil society (Thapar 2006, on secularism in India).*

Democracy and human rights have gained widespread normative endorsement across national governments in recent decades, diffused largely through international institutions that import “world culture” norms (Meyer et al., 1997; Boli & Thomas, 1997; McNeely, 1995) and visible in the spread of democratization in the second half of the twentieth century (Philpott, 2007; Huntington, 1991). These principles of “world culture” bear striking resemblance to those that modernization theorists predicted would characterize all modern societies. Theorists such as James Coleman and Alex Inkeless asserted that principles such as individualism, universalism, equality, rationalism, and a belief that human flourishing results from technical and scientific progress are ubiquitous elements of modernity (So, 1990). This theory informed the international development work that has expanded considerably since the mid-twentieth century. Therefore it is not coincidental that more recent theorists such as John Boli and George Thomas (1997) identify these principles as characteristic of the norms that international institutions diffuse to the “world polity.”

In contrast to modernization theorists, world culture theorists suggest that although these principles are formally endorsed by international institutions and governments that wish to be recognized as legitimate, this does not mean they are embraced by citizens at the local level (Boli & Thomas, 1997). However there seems to be a lack of research on how local populations in diverse cultures might diverge from these norms in their understanding and articulation of their beliefs. In particular, there is little understanding of how populations in societies that are non-Western but urban and modern may negotiate between their beliefs and formally endorsed “world culture” principles embodied in human rights treaties and democratic norms.

However it is clear that such divergences from world culture norms do exist. The most significant challenge in recent decades to the formal consensus around human rights and democracy may be the vastly increased presence of religion in political matters. In diverse parts of the world, religion has emerged in the last several decades as a driving force behind social movements, revolutions, and debates regarding national laws (Habermas, 2006). At times, religious political actors may diverge from liberal democratic norms by placing faith in absolute truth above adherence to the procedural norms of democracy (Reichley, 1986); seeking to undermine the legitimacy of the secular sovereign state (Philpott, 2002), or even by seeking to use the secular state to persecute minorities, as may be the case with the Hindu Right in India (Chatterjee, 1998). Accordingly, liberal political theorists typically assert that religion should remain private in liberal democracies (e.g. Rawls, 1993). However other political theorists insist that religious political actors can be legitimate participants in liberal democracies (e.g., Habermas, 2006; Taylor, 1998; Kalyvas, 1998). Furthermore, scholars point to the

historical and contemporary role of religion in supporting human rights and democracy movements (Johnston, 2003; Stepan, 2001; Appleby, 2000). These scholars assert that religion has been and can continue to be a powerful force in support of liberal principles, or what sociologists might call “world culture” norms.

### *Empirical Gap*

In spite of this lively theoretical debate, there is a dearth of empirical research that examines how every-day religious citizens draw from their religious beliefs to form political judgments, and the extent to which they believe they can and should confine religious beliefs to private contexts. This may be particularly important to understand in newly democratic, rapidly modernizing nations. Contrary to the predictions of earlier modernization theorists, more recent theorists emphasize that modernity will take different shapes depending on the place and time in which it emerges (Kaviraj, 2005; Eisenstadt, 2000). The way citizens draw from their religious beliefs to form political judgments and view the relationship between religion and politics may have important implications for the shape modernity takes in rapidly developing nations (Kaviraj, 2005). Furthermore, as religious-political movements may currently represent both the most significant challenge as well as an important source of support to human rights and democracy (Appleby, 2000), understanding the way religious citizens in modernizing societies form political judgments may have great significance for policy-makers and institutions seeking to promote world culture norms. Thus the importance of research on the role of religion in politics is increasingly noted by political scientists (e.g. Snyder et al., forthcoming 2010; Calhoun et al., forthcoming 2010; Hurd, 2007; Philpott, 2007 & 2002; Stepan, 2001).

The proposed study will examine how religious citizens in India draw from religious beliefs to explain their judgments about what is right, and the contexts in which they do and believe they should apply religious teachings to political judgments. This study will serve both academic and more “applied” purposes. It will contribute to our understanding of the way modernity is emerging in diverse settings by exploring the meaning of religiosity for judgments on what is right in a variety of “private” and “public” contexts. Research on how citizens draw from their religious beliefs to form and explain their judgments may also be a first step in understanding how political movements based on religion garner widespread support, and why quantitative studies have revealed correlations between religiosity and political judgments (Stepan, 2010 forthcoming; Patterson, 2005).

*Spread of Human Rights / World Culture Norms*

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, there was significant scholarly debate over whether human rights and democracy are appropriate normative models for all cultures (Sharma, 2006; e.g. Pollis & Schwab, 1979; American Anthropological Association, 1947). However academic discourse seems to have shifted in the last decade from *whether* such universal normative frames are appropriate for all cultures to *how* they have diffused so widely across cultures (e.g. Meyer et al., 1997; Boli et al., 1997). According to these scholars, formal adherence to “world culture” norms pertaining to diverse aspects of society, including “education, women's rights, social security programs, environmental policy, [and] constitutional arrangements” are pervasive across the globe (Boli et al., 1997).

This “world culture” does not only contain normative conceptions of moral action. It also includes ontological frameworks, including beliefs about human nature and the nature of the world. For example, world culture norms implicitly convey conceptions of human nature as universal, agentic, and infused with natural needs and rights, as well as a view of individuals as the natural unit of decision-making and identity (Meyer & Jepperson, 2000). The world in this “world culture” is “disenchanted” and characterized by the view that “rational social action is the route to equality, comfort, and the good life” (Boli & Thomas, 1997: 12). Each individual is viewed as equally possessing these qualities and potentials, regardless of national or sub-national affiliation.

The principles of world culture are embodied in the human rights movement, and formally articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Boli & Thomas, 1997). The human rights movement has grown in strength and breadth in the last quarter of the twentieth century, when a “proliferation of international laws, treaties, covenants, and other instruments devoted to the articulation and protections of human rights” emerged (Appleby 2000: 247). The appearance of compliance with the rights inscribed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has become an important part of proving the legitimacy of a state (Meyer et al., 1997).

### *Resurgence of Religion*

However, it may be that these world culture principles are sometimes contested by the global resurgence of religiosity and the increased presence of religion in politics. Aspects of some religious beliefs may inherently be in tension with world polity norms, which according to Boli & Thomas (1997) are characterized by individualism, universalism, rationalization and world citizenship. For example, for some religious

citizens, religious ethics based on the value of purity and community may supersede those based on individual rights (Shweder et al., 1997). Loyalty to one's group and obedience to authority may trump ideals of universalism and equality (Haidt & Graham, 2009). In addition, belief in a higher power that transcends time and space may be in tension with belief in human agency and the viability or desirability of rational, technical progress. Faith in absolute truth may also be contradictory to adherence to the process of democracy, which often privileges fair procedures over consequentialist truth claims (Reichley, 1986). For example, the belief that a particular behavior is sinful in absolute terms may make it difficult to accept a law allowing it, even if the majority in a democracy judges it desirable to do so. Similarly, the liberal democratic commitment to protection of minorities may be challenged if the minorities are believed to be in violation of religious principles that supersede the value of pluralism. Therefore some religious political movements may not share "world culture" principles of individualism, universalism, and in particular, rationalization and disenchantment. For example, the Indian Hindu nationalist party BJP has been accused of being "hostile" to Muslims (Engineer, 2000). Most famously, transnational Islamic movements may question the legitimacy of the secular nation-state and call for a government based on Islamic law (Philpott, 2002).

However, diverse religious actors are also centrally involved in the support of 'world culture' principles. As religious groups are often transnational in character, they may be particularly effective at mobilizing people across cultures for purposes in keeping with world culture norms (Thomas, 2005). For example, a substantial inter-religious environmental movement draws from religious teachings and works through secular

institutions as well as mosques, temples, and churches.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary religious INGOs play a significant role in the human rights movement, ranging from service delivery organizations such as Catholic Relief Services to those focused on using religion as a tool for building peace (Thomas, 2005), such as the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy. Historical examples of the role of religion in supporting liberal principles are numerous. Christianity furnished much of the ideological backbone of abolition and the modern civil rights movement (Morone, 2004). Interpretations of Islam that allow for violations of human rights are deeply contested by Islamic scholars and political leaders (Stepan, 2001: 235). In fact the state of Pakistan was founded with the hope that Islamic principles would ensure universal equality and personal liberty in contrast to the divisions common to India society, such as those based on wealth and caste (Iqbal, 1930).

It is clear that religious teachings can be drawn from to support a wide range of positions, from those that promote “world culture” norms to those that sharply oppose them. However, there is a dearth of empirical research that investigates how every-day religious citizens negotiate potential tensions between religious teachings and world culture norms. Research that explores how religious individuals draw from religious beliefs when they make judgments about what is right, the contexts in which religion is salient for how they make judgments, and how they explain the salience of particular interpretations of religious teachings compared to competing interpretations may provide insight into the relationship between religiosity and modern principles related to human rights and democracy. Considering the potential of religion to act as a powerful force in

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<sup>1</sup> For example the Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale University, which offers a Master’s degree in Religion & Ecology (<http://fore.research.yale.edu>).

support of and opposed to human rights, it is important to understand how religious citizens negotiate this potential tension.

*Reasons for the Increased Presence of Religion in Politics*

It is particularly important to understand the relationship between religious beliefs and political judgments in modernizing societies with relatively new democracies, as it may be modernization and the spread of democracy that has caused the increased presence of religion in politics. Theorists suggest that increased religiosity may be a response to the disorienting changes that accompany modernization. People may seek stability and comfort in religion as the world around them shifts (Huntington, 1996; Fukuyama, 1992). Other scholars suggest that the resurgence of religion does not indicate a revival of tradition, but rather embodies a dynamic response to the modern world. As secular ideologies such as communism lose legitimacy, new religious movements may be an effective way to mobilize people against the disruption of traditional social forms by modern phenomena such as market forces and authoritarian states (Casanova, 1994). The increased presence of religion in politics may also be related to the spread of democratization, which broadens the scope of political participation. As more people have a voice in the political process, or due to the diffusion of democratic norms believe they have a right to such a voice, formerly private religious beliefs may take on political significance (Snyder & Beck, forthcoming 2010). Thus in the new consensus, increased religiosity may be the result of modernization rather than in spite of it.

This challenges long-standing theory in the social sciences. Eminent social theorists such as Durkheim, Weber, Freud, and Marx agreed that as individuals and



societies become more modern, they would become less religious (Norris & Inglehart, 2004). The increased presence of religion in politics brings this “secularization hypothesis” into question. Furthermore, theories linking this increased religiosity to modernization and democracy call for a re-evaluation of how these changes affect individual beliefs. However there is very little research on how individual citizens living in rapidly modernizing societies negotiate between their religious beliefs and the expectations of the state within which they live. For example, the conditions and requirements of work and education often change dramatically in modernizing societies. Yet we have little understanding of how religious citizens draw from their beliefs to negotiate these changes, or how they experience the potential tension between a relatively new democracy and a significantly old religious tradition.

### *Re-evaluating modernity*

Flaws in the predictions of modernization theorists may be due to a faulty theory of modernity, which assumed that the way modernity emerged in Western Europe was prototypical for how it would emerge elsewhere. Instead, it seems that there are “multiple modernities” as the history and sociology of each society shapes the way modernity emerges (Eisenstadt, 2000). In particular, the sequence in which modern processes develop in a society may influence the form modernity takes. Previous theories of modernity assumed a functional interdependence of each aspect of modernity (e.g. urbanization, industrialization, democratization). In this view, each ‘ingredient’ of modernity facilitated the emergence of the others, so modern processes tended to arise together and were dependent on each other. However it may be that modern processes emerge in different chronological orders in different places, and the form of modernity

that emerges is deeply shaped by this sequence in which ingredients of modernity occur (Kaviraj, 2005).

According to this theory, in order for modern institutions to uphold the principles on which they are based, these institutions *must* take different forms in different places. For example, an institution that upholds the principle of democratic choice in one society will not necessarily be able to do so in another. Improvisation is required to adapt institutions to the societies in which they are located. In addition, even if modernity shares features in common, what we call ‘pre-modern’ takes diverse forms. That which comes before modern institutions and practices in any society will shape the modern institutions and practices that emerge (Kaviraj, 2005). Therefore, modernity may emerge uniquely at different times and in societies with cultural legacies and external pressures that are distinct from those experienced by Western Europe.

### *Modernity in India*

As a relatively new democracy with a complex civilization and history that is distinct from that of the West, India offers an ideal case study of alternative modernity. (Or, one could as easily say, a modernity to which the West is an alternative.) In India, the emergence of modern processes of democratization, rationalization of work and knowledge, political participation, and religion-state relations share principles with Western modernity, such as increasing emphasis on equality in social and political relations. However, the ways these new configurations have manifested themselves in the Indian context are neither “modern” in the Western European sense nor “traditional” in any sense. This may be due to the different sequence in which modern processes

emerged, the sociological organization of Indian society, and the history of beliefs and political power in India (Kaviraj, 2005). This study will focus on one particular element of modernity, considered essential by modernization theorists: secularism, or the aspect of secularism that concerns the relationship between individual religious beliefs and public, political processes.

The emergence of modernity in India shares principles with modernity as it has been theorized generally and witnessed in Western Europe, but these principles are realized in social forms and beliefs that diverge from this norm. For example, in contrast to the emphasis within modern liberal democracies in the West on individual rights, in India rights are currently often accorded to groups. India's first president Jawaharlal Nehru sought to establish a universal civil code based on the European and American model. However he conceded special rights for minorities to satisfy the pressures of the time, specifically the threat of partition and further divisions of the Indian state. As a result, personal law for minority religious groups (such as laws governing marriage, divorce, and inheritance) are governed by religious bodies and are thus different for Muslims and Hindus. Another unique feature of Indian modernity is in the nature of political identity. Political participation is often caste-based, rather than ideologically driven. On one hand, this could be considered "traditional" in that political identity and solidarity is based on ascriptive caste identity. Yet on the other hand, it is also uniquely modern in that caste groups mobilize for improved rights and access to services such as education (Kaviraj, 2005).

### *Secularism in India*

The unique shape of modernity in India is particularly well demonstrated by the form of secularism that has emerged. In Western Europe, democratic constitutions were largely introduced after secular institutions had become dominant. In India, democracy and secular institutions were introduced with the same constitution (Kaviraj, 2005). Thus, it was not universally accepted that secularism should characterize the relationship of the state to religion, or that religion should maintain a non-public, private identity. Therefore it is not surprising that Indian secularism should be distinct from the form it takes in the West. However, this does not entail greater liberty of religion over the state, as might be expected given the relatively recent introduction of secularism into a deeply religious society. According to Rajeev Bhargava, in India the state in actuality maintains not an equal but a “principled” distance from religious groups. The state may interfere with religious groups, either to support or restrain their activities, in order to promote democratic principles of equality and liberty. Furthermore, the state may do so unevenly across religious groups, provided the principles of liberty and equality are the basis for state actions. For example, Islamic groups receive more support from the state than Hindu groups, owing to the minority status of Muslims. The state may also interfere with religious practices that violate principles of liberty and equality, such as rules that discriminate against lower castes. In addition, religious groups may use religious rationales to motivate political action, provided those actions uphold liberal principles (Bhargava, 2007).

Some scholars (as well as politicians within the Hindu Right) suggest that secularism is “alien” to India. These scholars assert that secularism is a Western, Christian imposition that rejects widespread religious worldviews within Indian traditions

(Madan, 1998; Nandy, 1998). Scholars such as Ashis Nandy argue that given the nature of Indian religion, the division between public and private does not resonate with religious Indians (Bhargava 1998, 23). These scholars insist instead that the resources of Indian religions are sufficient to create a tolerant, democratic society without recourse to secularism (Bhargava, 1998).

Yet others disagree, claiming that secularism is not oppositional to religion. In this view, secularization is a process that changes the relationship between the state and citizens rather than marginalizing religion (Thapar, 2006: 89). However that which is changed in this relationship may have direct consequences for religion. A secular state seeks to make citizenship the primary mode by which human rights are realized, and these rights are to be equally accessible to citizens regardless of religion or the distinctions a religion may make based for example on caste or gender. This requires that the state be responsible for ensuring that these rights are realized. This may mean interfering with religion when religious bodies resist the acceptance of human rights norms. Therefore “the secularizing of society does not oppose religion but prefers that religious authorities should not control the institutions linked to social ethics, economic development, and cultural change” (Ibid, 85). In other words, according to scholars such as Thapar and Bhargava, the secular state is premised on the recognition of the equal human rights of its citizens. Religion can be both a protected right as well as that which stands between citizens and rights. The relationship of the state to religion will be determined by the position of any religion on these rights, rather than by any inherent ideology of secularism in regard to religion.

Therefore, religion is seen as a right of all citizens in a secular state, along with other human rights that the state is responsible for fulfilling. Scholars such as Thapar and Bhargava insist that there is no tension between the strength of citizens' religiosity and a state that actively grants human rights equally based on citizenship. Yet they also insist that in order for the state to ensure the fulfillment of these human rights, religious bodies must cede ultimate control of institutions governing education and social welfare to the state (Thapar, 2006). They further insist that at times the state may need to interfere with the practices of religious groups to ensure these human rights (Bhargava, 2007).

This suggests that religious beliefs, or at least the outlook of some religious groups, may at times maintain an uneasy relationship with the individual-based human rights framework that scholars such as Thapar state is an essential element of secularization. Yet, in a country with high levels of religiosity, it is likely that many of the citizens who comprise the modern secular institutions established to promote such rights are themselves religious. Understanding the way religious citizens in secular institutions make moral judgments may clarify the ways in which human rights are perceived, embraced, rejected and negotiated within a secular but religious nation.

### *Cross-Pressures*

In spite of the convenience of dichotomies such as religious versus secular, it is likely that many modern citizens do not fit neatly into either category but rather experience "cross-pressures" of belief and un-belief (Taylor, 2007). Particularly in rapidly modernizing societies, citizens may need to negotiate between inherited beliefs and the pressures of contemporary life. India is a deeply religious society, where

approximately ninety-three percent of people say they believe in God (Stepan, forthcoming 2010; Kumar, 2008). Furthermore, religious practice is highest among the well-educated in urban settings, compared to those who have less education or live in more rural settings (Stepan, forthcoming 2010; Kumar, 2008). Yet institutions such as universities that receive government funding in India are officially secular spaces, precluding the formation of religious groups or religious activities on campus<sup>2</sup>. Thus religious university students must navigate contemporary academic norms from the perspective of their religious framework. For example, religious students may negotiate both religious and secular epistemological beliefs, as religious and scientific norms about the source and nature of truth and knowledge may differ considerably. More generally, both religious and secular democratic principles may inform the way religious university students make judgments regarding what is right, and they may struggle to negotiate potential tensions therein. Understanding the way those of diverse religions in secular institutions draw from their beliefs to make judgments about what is right may provide insight into the course of modernity in India.

### Dissertation Research

#### Option 1: Religious Citizens in Modern Public Institutions

The development of modern institutions is typically considered a key element in the modernization of a country. Development and democracy-building projects often seek

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<sup>2</sup> Personal communication with Sudipta Kaviraj, need documentation.

to strengthen a vast array of such institutions, including: primary, secondary and tertiary education; an independent judiciary; and an uncorrupt government bureaucracy in which civil servants are placed by merit rather than nepotism. The perceived importance of these elements of the modern state explains why “statebuilding focuses primarily on public institutions – the machinery of the state, from courts to legislators to laws to bureaucrats” (Paris & Sisk, 2009). The ubiquity of such institutions may not be because they are universally more efficient or naturally sought after. As discussed above, this convergence may instead result primarily from the diffusion of world culture norms, such as through domestic and international development and state-building projects (Meyer et al., 1997). States may develop institutions to promote mass education, rational justice, and scientific / technical progress as they aim for legitimacy on the international stage (Meyer et al., 1997). Scholars further assert that in spite of the seeming convergence across states in these institutions, they actually diverge locally in diverse ways depending on the culture and history of the society (Kaviraj, 2005). However, there is little empirical research that examines the interaction between local and global norms within these institutions.

One way to begin such an inquiry is to focus on individuals within institutions that meet the expectations of modern statehood, such as professionals within the judiciary, lower and higher education, and the civil service or university students in publically funded universities.



*Option One: Professionals in Public Institutions*

One might expect that public institutions are governed according to the same “world culture” norms that justify their existence: the importance of the individual, rationalism, scientific progress, and human agency. However, past research in India has shown that in this deeply religious society, worldviews often diverge markedly from these norms (Shweder et al., 1997). For example, religious beliefs may not always support rationalism and trust in human agency. Familial obligations, obedience to authority, loyalty to one’s community, and rules regarding purity may be viewed as more important than individual development. Scholars suggest that these views may be characteristic of religious societies across the world and non-Western societies in particular (e.g. Haidt & Graham 2009a & 2009b).

However, given the fluid, porous nature of culture (Benhabib, 2002) it is unlikely that in an urban, modern city such as New Delhi, citizens who work in these institutions are wholly members of the “collectivistic” in-group-focused society described in much scholarship on non-Western cultures (e.g. Triandis et al., 1995). Yet scholars also assert that total convergence with world culture norms is unlikely given the variety of beliefs, practices and structures within which modern institutions emerge (Kaviraj, 2005). It is more likely that these citizens experience the above mentioned “cross-pressures” (Taylor, 2007) where competing obligations and beliefs are at play. This study would seek to understand the way judges, civil servants, and educational leaders such as school principals and deans negotiate these tensions as they make moral judgments in their work, as well as in their personal lives and in the political sphere. The study would examine how, in what ways, and in which public and private contexts religious beliefs are

salient for how people make such judgments, particularly related to “world culture” norms such as individual rights.

One possible case study could be to select participants in a Delhi-based human rights education program, the Indian Institute of Human Rights. This is a distance-learning program that enrolls students from diverse professions across India and grants Master’s certificates in human rights. This study could seek to understand how these students respond to the issues in the human rights curriculum, the beliefs that they draw from to explain their responses, and the meaning of a “human rights” program to these participants<sup>3</sup>.

*Option two: University Students*

This study would involve in-depth semi-structured interviews and surveys of religious Muslim, Christian and Hindu university students, as well as religious scholars and teachers. The aim of this study would be to understand how religious students and scholars draw from their beliefs when they make judgments about what is right, and how they experience possible tensions between expectations of contemporary secular society and religious beliefs. This study could select for depth of religiosity, for religiosity and

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<sup>3</sup> This was suggested to me by Dr. Monisha Bajaj, who has a relationship with the Indian Institute of Human Rights. She suggested that there is uncertainty within the institute about who enrolls in these distance-learning courses, the reasons they enroll, and the meaning or impact of the program for these students. She believes public employees often enroll, such as police and judges, and that there may be professional incentives to do so. The institute is unsure whether the students are personally invested in or affected by the program, and a study of the meaning of the program for students could be worthwhile.

political participation, or aim for religious diversity but not select for depth of religious commitment or political involvement.

If Charles Taylor (2007: 595) is correct that many modern citizens inhabit and negotiate a space that is neither unselfconsciously religious nor entirely secular, then religious university students and scholars in New Delhi, India are likely inhabitants of this 'cross-pressured' terrain. Like professionals in public institutions, they are likely to be well aware of "world culture" principles such as belief in individualism, rationalism, progress, equality and universalism through diverse sources, from media in New Delhi to the curriculum of their higher education. Yet as religiously engaged members of their faiths, they are also likely to be committed to religious teachings that may at times exist in tension with these principles. For examples, epistemological beliefs may be a source of tension for religious students and teachers. The "new order of knowledge" that emphasizes rational, critical inquiry and scientific progress is considered a central component of modernity (Kaviraj, 2005). This view may exist in tension with religious beliefs that see the source of truth and knowledge as transcendent or unknowable.

Furthermore, religious university students and scholars in New Delhi represent a sizable and surprising demographic: in South Asia, religious practice is highest and has increased the most among the well-educated in urban settings (Stepan, forthcoming 2010; Kumar, 2008). This suggests that education and urbanization, two factors that were predicted to "modernize" and hence secularize, do not necessarily have that effect, lending support to the theory that modernity is indeed 'multiple.' However, the successful integration of these students and scholars into urban, secular spaces suggests that they also do not operate on the basis of purely traditional religion alone. Understanding the

way religious university students and scholars in New Delhi negotiate tensions between religious beliefs, the universalistic principles of ‘world culture,’ and the pressures of contemporary life may thus provide insight into the way modernity is evolving in a particular, non-Western context, as well as how “world culture” norms are negotiated at the local level.

*Community – NGO Study*

*[This section is repeated from my previous seminar paper]*

Scholars assert that a rights-based conception of justice is not universal and is premised on particular beliefs about human nature and the world (Shweder et al., 1997; Asad, 2003; Taylor, 2007). Yet a paucity of research investigates the way particular communities judge questions of human rights, especially communities where a specific advocacy or development program is being implemented. For example, this study could be based in a community that is host to a program that promotes equal access to education, gender equality, or democratization (e.g. civil society promotion). This study would investigate community members’ judgments on what is right and the beliefs they draw upon to explain their ideals, with attention to: whether their conception of justice is convergent with or distinct from that of the human rights / development organization; the beliefs about the world and human nature that respondents draw from to explain their conceptions of what is right; and the implications of these beliefs and judgments for how the community responds to the human rights or development program. For example, the study would explore whether people in the community believe humans are endowed with natural rights and if so, what they believe those rights are, as well as who, if anyone, they

believe is responsible for ensuring that these rights are fulfilled. If they do not believe that humans are endowed with natural rights, the study would explore whether they believe people are endowed with rights by virtue of being part of a family, a community, or a nation. If people in this community do not think in terms of “rights,” this study would seek to understand the concepts they use to think about wellbeing, and the beliefs on which these concepts are premised. As the most successful educational and advocacy programs understand the values of the communities with whom they work (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Petro, 2004), the goal of this study would be to identify and understand the beliefs that conflict and converge with human rights and development goals. This will allow human rights and development organizations to frame their work in terms that connect to local beliefs, and increase their understanding of resistance to rights that conflict with particular beliefs.

*[End of Repeated Section]*

### *Qualitative Methodology*

Semi-structured interview questions will explore how religious citizens in India explain judgments on what is right in a variety of “private” and “public” contexts, such as issues related to their personal life choices, family, community, school, workplace, national political issues and international political issues. Respondents will be asked to discuss a time when they and when someone they know had to make a decision about “the right thing to do” in these different contexts. They will also be asked their judgments on any decisions of which they are aware that have been made by public figures, such as political and/or religious leaders. They will further be asked to explain issues that they

think are important or troubling in the local, national and international news. Finally, they will be presented with hypothetical scenarios in which the protagonist must make a moral decision, and will be asked their judgment on the right thing to do in this situation. They will be asked to explain why the judgment is “right,” the factors they consider important in making the judgment, and how they came to that conclusion, such as through consultation with family or religious leaders, independent reflection or religious activity such as prayer. Open-ended questions on participants’ own experiences with moral choice follow the methodology of Gilligan (1982) while hypothetical scenarios on moral reasoning follow the methodology of Shweder et al.’s work in India (1987; 1997).

#### *Qualitative Data Analysis:*

Interview transcripts will be analyzed with the aim of understanding the ways in which respondents draw from religious beliefs to explain what is right in diverse contexts, and the ways in which these judgments converge or diverge with “world culture” norms such as endorsement of human rights, individualism, rationalism, and universalism. Specifically, I will examine the way respondents reference explicit religious teachings, implicit ontological beliefs, and tensions between religious beliefs and other considerations. I explore each of these three aspects of interview analysis below.

#### Explicit Beliefs

I will analyze interviews to understand the contexts and ways in which the respondents draw explicitly from religious teachings when explaining how they came to a conclusion about what is right. For example, a respondent might explain that they spoke

to a religious leader or read a religious text when wrestling over the right thing to do. When explaining to me why their conclusion is right, they may reference religious teachings. I will analyze whether the extent to which religious teachings are explicitly referenced changes depending on whether the issue is “private” (related to personal life or family life) or “public” but not necessarily political (related to the workplace, school, or community) or political (domestic and international issues and events).

These categories are unlikely to be clearly bounded. Indeed, the division between public and private is contested, and the assumption that the home is “private” may have led to an underestimation of the political importance of issues related to women and girls such as divorce, inheritance, domestic violence, and treatment of children (Benhabib, 1992). Many of these “private” issues are the subject of intense political contestation in India, where “personal law” is subject to religious law for religious minorities. Furthermore, for those who work in public institutions such as the civil service, “work” may be explicitly political. Therefore this design does not assume that the categories of public and private are objectively set, but rather aims to understand whether and how there is contextual variation in respondents’ references to religious teachings. For example, respondents may explicitly reference religious doctrine when explaining what is right regarding their personal relationships but draw from secular democratic discourse when discussing public policy. Alternately, they may reference religious doctrine pervasively across contexts. They may draw from different aspects of religious teachings depending on the context as well. For example, respondents might reference a more liberal interpretation of their religion when discussing public matters and a more conservative interpretation when discussing the home.

*Implicit Beliefs*

Interviews will also be analyzed for references to human nature and the nature of the world that may be grounded in religious beliefs. Respondents may explain why a certain action or policy is right because of “what people are like” and “what the world is like.” For example, respondents may explain a judgment on how girls in their family should be raised by stating that girls are “naturally different” from boys or that all people have “different roles to play<sup>4</sup>.” Alternately, they may explain their judgment by suggesting that “everyone is basically the same.”<sup>5</sup> Respondents may not prioritize the promotion of individual rights because “people will eventually get what they deserve<sup>6</sup>” or they may prioritize legal rights based on the explanation that “this world is corrupt<sup>7</sup>.” If asked to explain these judgments, they may reference explicit religious teachings.

This follows the methodology of Shweder et al. (1987). Shweder et al. asked conservative Hindu Indian respondents to judge whether characters in hypothetical scenarios did the right thing, as well as to explain their judgment. Respondents referenced both implicit beliefs about human nature and the world, as well as explicit religious

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<sup>4</sup> As explored in past seminar papers, Richard Shweder’s (1997) research in India uncovered this kind of explanation, which the respondents based in Hindu beliefs. Shweder argued that this is an alternative form of moral reasoning from the Western equal rights-based framework.

<sup>5</sup> As explored in past seminar papers, the ethos of equality that is common to democratic societies is often traced to Christian doctrine on the equality of all in the eyes of God, and especially to Protestant doctrine that emphasizes direct access of the individual to God, unmediated by structures of authority (e.g. Tocqueville; Hegel; Nietzsche; Taylor).

<sup>6</sup> As explored in past seminar papers, Gandhi’s work suggests a belief that the world is ultimately just, and stresses that duties are more important than rights. He bases his ideas in Hindu religious teachings.

<sup>7</sup> Religious social movements such as the “social gospel” at the turn of the century were premised on the belief that God intended people to perfect the imperfect immanent world (Hopkins, 1940). This is also found in Iqbal’s conception of Islam (1930).



teachings frequently to explain their judgments about what is right. In this way, Shweder et al. were able to explore the ways in which religious beliefs informed the moral judgments of their respondents<sup>8</sup>.

### Tensions & Competing Factors

A vast range of beliefs, principles and concerns may influence any given moral judgment. This may be especially so in the modern world, where the proliferation of competing conceptions of the good and religious (as well as non-religious) options may have led to the “fragilization” of any particular belief.<sup>9</sup> Thus citizens in the modern world are likely to experience various cross-pressures between religious faith and secular views, as well as competing interpretations of each (Taylor, 2007). Furthermore, theoretical scholarship (e.g. Berlin, 1997; Taylor, 1989) as well as empirical studies (Shweder et al., 1997; Haidt & Graham, 2009) suggest that ultimately, the ideals to which people aspire may inherently be in tension. For example, the ideals of liberty and equality may both be valued by a respondent. However maximizing liberty may lead to unequal outcomes, just as maximizing equality may constrain liberty (Tocqueville, 1840; Fukuyama, 1992). Likewise, the ideal of fairness may be in tension with the ideal of compassion, if a punishment is considered warranted but would cause suffering.

According to past empirical studies, the weight given to these competing ideals

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<sup>8</sup> As explored in greater detail in my seminar paper from Fall 2009.

<sup>9</sup> “Fragilization” refers to the process by which a diversity of options makes it harder to accept any particular explanation for what is true and good. In earlier times and more isolated places, where there were few examples of defections from the faith or viable alternative beliefs, a more “naïve” assurance that a particular belief is true may have been possible. This does not require total homogeneity: a predominantly Catholic town could also include Jews, without conversion to Judaism considered a realistic option by Catholics (Taylor, 2007).

varies across cultures as well as between political groups. For example, liberals in the United States are very likely to emphasize the protection of individuals from suffering when making a judgment about what is right. Conservatives in the United States are also concerned with compassion for those who suffer. However competing values such as loyalty to the group and religious purity play a stronger role in their judgments than they do for liberals (Haidt & Graham, 2007 & 2009). Similarly, Western samples over all are more likely to place the most weight on protection of the individual. Respondents in India also show concern for protection of the individual. However, they also give weight (and sometimes more weight) to the good of the community and religious purity (Shweder et al., 1997).

Furthermore, people in different cultures may sometimes have different views of how the individual is best protected. Where a Western respondent may be more likely to see equal legal rights as the best protection for individuals, a Hindu Indian respondent may be more likely to see protection of individuals as resulting from a network of responsibilities that are differently defined depending on position within the family (Shweder et al., 1997). Similarly, a respondent in one culture may believe that individuals are best off when they are free to make decisions for themselves, while a respondent in another culture may feel that ultimately individuals may be better off when following the advice of their family and tradition. Thus the claims of the universal human rights movement that human rights values are found in all cultures may be accurate. However, it may be that depending on the cultural context, there is variation in the weight given to particular values when they are in tension, and in how people believe these values are best realized.

The analysis of interviews will give attention to two primary aspects of this possible tension between ideals: the principles to which respondents give weight, and the relationship of their religious beliefs to competing principles and concerns. I will identify which principles respondents seem to prioritize in making judgments about what is right, and in what ways these principles reflect or diverge from world culture norms. Empirical research has shown that high religiosity is related to more conservative judgments in diverse cross-cultural contexts (Jensen-Arnett, 1998). Therefore it is possible that university students or professionals in an urban, modern institution may experience a tension between liberal values that emphasize individual liberty and universal equality (e.g. of gender and religion) and their religious beliefs. Yet scholars also emphasize that religious belief is often the source of liberal values and campaigns for liberal politics, such as for civil and universal human rights (Appleby, 2000; Johnston, 2003). Thus it is also possible that students or professionals in this context will draw from diverse beliefs to support world culture norms.

I will also explore the role of religious belief in negotiating these tensions. For example, respondents may feel torn between religious beliefs and expectations of secular society, democratic norms, or other factors such as personal commitments and desires. Alternately, respondents may be torn among competing options, and view their religion as the ultimate arbiter between competing concerns. This may also differ depending on the context. For example, the respondent may reference religious reasons when explaining judgments about personal life, but less so when discussing school or politics. Thus this component of the study will involve understanding the relationship of religious beliefs to the diverse factors that respondents wrestle with when they make and explain

judgments about what is right, and how this might vary depending on the area of life in which the judgment is made.

### *Quantitative Methodology*

Four quantitative measures will be used to determine whether there are significant relationships between normative judgments on what is right, evaluative judgments regarding what is true about the social world and human nature, and religious beliefs. In order to test normative judgments, surveys will include measures of: (1) the factors respondents consider when deciding whether something is just (“Moral Foundations,” Graham et al., 2008); and (2) support for human rights (“Human Rights Questionnaire,” Diaz-Veizades et al., 1995). In order to test evaluative judgments, I will use (3) a measure of beliefs about human nature and the nature of the world (“Social Axioms,” Leung et al., 2002). Finally, I will use (4) a measure of religious beliefs, including for example conceptions of God and religious practice (“Multidimensional Measure of Religion / Spirituality”, Idler et al., 2003). Prior research has demonstrated significant relationships between evaluative judgments and moral reasoning. In addition, past studies have showed that religiosity is significantly related to moral judgments (Jensen-Arnett, 1998). However this study will make a unique contribution by exploring the interaction between all three variables in relation to each other. I will analyze if and to what extent there are beliefs about the world and human nature that correlate with particular religious beliefs and whether these beliefs are together associated with particular normative judgments. For example, the belief that God plays an active, guiding role in events may correlate with higher levels of social trust, which might correlate with a decreased belief that legal protection of individual rights is important. It is also possible that views of

human nature and the world independently correlate with particular normative judgments and that this relationship is moderated by religious beliefs. For example, agreement with “People won’t behave ethically without punishments” may predict lower levels of judgment in favor of individual liberty, but belief that God has given each person freedom of conscience may moderate this correlation.

These surveys will aim to determine whether general trends are evident in the relationship between judgments and beliefs for religious respondents in Delhi. However, it is likely that numerous factors influence how people form judgments about what is right. It is further likely that the influence of particular factors (such as specific beliefs) will not be a simple predictive relationship, but rather one of many sources that respondents draw from as they negotiate difficult judgments in life and explain those judgments to others. Therefore the focus of this study will be investigating how people understand and articulate their judgments and beliefs through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

### *Significance*

International human rights and democracy-building programs increasingly premise their work on the assumption that for religious communities, conceptions of what is right will be based partly on religious belief. For example, international organizations such as the Center for Religion and Diplomacy and the United States Institute for Peace attempt to transform conflicts and promote human rights by emphasizing the ways in which local religious teachings support these goals. These programs focus on engaging religion as a way to transform conceptions of what is right. This approach has gained

scholarly support (e.g. Johnston, 2003; Appleby, 2000) in recent years, as the role of religion in politics is recognized and emphasized by a growing number of social scientists (e.g. Calhoun et al., forthcoming 2010; Snyder et al., forthcoming 2010; Philpott, 2007).

Of course, a range of factors other than religious or moral considerations may influence how people actually behave. People will not always uphold their own principles in daily life. However, given the emphasis of peace-building, international human rights, and democracy-building programs on transforming or engaging moral and religious principles, it is worthwhile to understand these principles, the beliefs that underlie them, and the contexts in which these beliefs are most salient for the individuals who hold them. Although people may not always “live up to” their beliefs about what is right, much of the work of international institutions is based on the understanding that people have the capacity and the will to follow universal normative principles. Therefore understanding how people form and explain their normative judgments may support the work of institutions that strive to diffuse world culture norms, as well as increase understanding of beliefs and judgments that differ from these norms.

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