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# Response to Daniel

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# Response

Angela Schulz

I will begin my response by posing two questions that I consider fundamental to humankind and particularly relevant to this year's Roundtable. The two questions are: "Why are we here?" and "Where do we belong?"

During times of stability, answers to these two questions might appear simple, might not even be of primary concern to us. Yet during times of turmoil and great uncertainty, answers to these questions become not only more complex but also of foremost concern. Today, we experience a moment in human history characterized by tremendous disequilibria in the realms of economics, politics, ecology, and social organization. To capture the *zeitgeist* of this contemporary time requires great effort and I would like to thank Dr. Valentine Daniel for providing us with such a substantial argument, coupled with thoughtful insights.

My response will take the following form: First, I will challenge Dr. Daniel's principle argument that religion is not a universal. My challenge consists of three parts: (a) I will dare to offer a definition for religion, (b) I will articulate the vital role of religion, and (c) I will reveal the strong relationship between religion and civilization. My conceptualization of religion shall reveal that there are elements embedded within the concept that are universal and fulfill fundamental roles applicable to all civilizations. In the second part of my response, I will briefly capture the driving forces and manifestations of the global moment, which will bring forth my own thesis: the very nature of the contemporary world necessitates the re-envisioning of a worldview based on civic religion and civil society.

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Dr. Daniel's principle argument is that religion is not a human universal and, indeed, might never have been one. Furthermore, he suggests that religion is a predominantly Christian affair that has been conceptualized by Christian scholars and then attributed as a universal concept to all peoples of this world. The primary foundation for Daniel's argument lies in his assumption that religion equals belief or, more precisely, equals Christian belief. This assumption marginalizes the

idea of religion to a great extent and, consequently, I feel obligated to confront this point as well as the argument as a whole.

## **Religion**

Religion is a system of beliefs and practices that have been invented by humans to fulfill particular psychological and social needs pertaining to the stability of personality and culture. Before dissecting this definition, I would like to point out that any attempt to define religion is accompanied by dissatisfaction and dispute since the very idea of religion itself is probably the most widely debated and least agreed upon phenomenon of human history. Nevertheless, the concept requires serious exploration and an articulated meaning. The following five aspects of the definition require elaboration: belief, practice, psychological and social roles of religion, and relationship to culture.

## **Belief**

As Daniel points out, belief constitutes a fundamental component in the conceptualization of religion. It is, first and foremost, a belief in supernatural beings. Yet, it is not only belief vested in the supernatural but also in symbolic expressions which reveal a particular meaning. Accordingly, people have agreed upon the phonetic system of their respective language as a means to communicate with each other.

With respect to belief in general and religious belief in particular the question then arises: Why have belief? Belief is a matter of symbolic meanings that are linked to ideas that prescribe a general order. Universally, the existence of belief, general and religious, is quintessential in the giving of meaning—the interpretation of the principle nature of reality—and the prescription of order.

Although I agree with Daniel that the cultivation of religious belief might be a very Christian affair, the evolution of belief systems appears to be a phenomenon found throughout humankind.

## **Practice**

Beliefs isolated from action carry little consequential meaning. The significance rests with enactment in which religion finds its most vivid expressions. The transformation of thought into action might be perceived as two-dimensional: on the one hand, it is a unifying transfor-

mation, bringing individuals of diverse backgrounds together. On the other hand, beliefs that are not shared promote frictions—frictions that are not just carried out in academic discourses but also in physical encounters as well, in real places, such as the former Yugoslavia, Chechnya, East Timor, and Kashmir. This aspect of transforming belief into practice is particularly troublesome and ought to be of substantial concern to us.

Belief and practice can hence be seen as the primary foundation of religion and lend their diverse meanings and implications to the complexity of the concept as a whole. As stated in my definition, religion is a system of beliefs/ideas that are imagined. Indeed, it is the most powerfully enacted and institutionalized imagination that I can perceive, not only within Christianity but throughout all great religions. Accordingly, an exploration of the role religion fulfills follows.

### **Role of Religion**

Two aspects loom immediately: psychological needs and social functions. Let me first consider the psychological role of religion.

Religious beliefs and practices provide models of the universe that are acceptable for people. These can be perceived as worldviews and, since they are being constructed in the realm of belief/thought, they distinguish themselves in the style in which they are imagined according to space, time, and culture. Although worldviews might vary greatly, they all fulfill the universal need to offer a cosmic perspective of order. In doing so, life becomes comprehensible, intellectually as well as existentially, especially during times of tremendous turmoil. Hence, the psychological role religion fulfills serves to reduce the anxieties caused by the unknown and crisis.

The social function of religion might be perceived in the following way: Religion does not just constitute a part of culture but rather the organization of beliefs and practices shared by a community. Accordingly, religion and culture are similar in their roles by giving meaning and order to life and conveying the sense made. Again, I contend that this is a universal phenomenon.

More specifically, religion sanctions societal behavior in that it establishes moral conduct for society. I am putting particular emphasis on the word “society” here since I am treating religion as closely connected to society and not the individual. Does my argument imply that society needs religion to be moral/ethical? Yes it does, by virtue of

providing a recipe for order within society. And order appears to be a *sine qua non* for the existence of society.

Religion, furthermore, fosters social solidarity and creates a sense of belonging by unifying people in the performance of rituals and reinforcing the identity of the group. Lastly, religion does not only provide a moral framework and a sense of solidarity but motivates human progress by continuously debating the questions of what *is* and what *ought to be*. Out of that perennial debate, a common vision for a community becomes established and offers a potential vehicle for change.

### **Civilization**

To highlight the argument for the universal application of religion, I would like to turn briefly to the relationship between civilization and religion. Although my definition entails the term *culture*, the concept of religion is more appropriate here for the following reason: every civilization has cultures but not every culture creates a civilization. And, civilizations are the most enduring form of human association, characterized by a long historical continuity. Using Huntington's definition, civilization is the "overall way of life of a people," encompassing values, norms, institutions, modes of thinking, and a particular conceptualization of the world.<sup>1</sup> What appears to set civilizations most apart from each other today is religion. People may share similar cultural backgrounds or the same ethnicity and language, yet differ in their religious perspectives, promoting either friction or unity.

What makes the relationship between religion and civilization particularly relevant to our discussion is their long historical continuity—the antithesis of what constitutes the Global Moment.

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### **The Global Moment**

The most obvious and most powerful force of globalization is the emergence of a global economy, one that is rapidly altering the concepts of space and time. The economic dimensions of globalization are bringing the world together into a single space, allowing for an intimacy of civilizational encounters not witnessed before. The centrifugal forces of globalization appear to grow stronger, excluding many people from the promises embedded in the globalization process. As

Tirosh-Samuelson points out, the values manifesting the phenomenon of globalization are maximization of profit, competition, efficiency, and individualism.

The speed of change and the underlying values are altering the questions of identity and belonging dramatically. By virtue of the great complexity and uncertainty of the contemporary *zeitgeist*, humankind appears to return to first principles relevant to the questions posed and provide compelling answers—principles that are found in the realm of religion.

When religious differences are elevated, as in the present epoch, we witness clashes at civilizational boundaries, or what Huntington refers to as fault lines.<sup>2</sup> It is at these locations that gods contend and religious differences find their expression in extreme violence. It is a kind of violence that often does not catch the attention of the so-called global community—unless it takes place in Europe. And even there, it is usually a violence of no transformative value. Rather, the urge is a return to first principles, promising continuity, a sense of eternity, a sense of security. Yet the forces of globalization bring a challenge: rapid changes, speed, and turbulence and insecurity. The emerging distance between the deep time of religion and the instant time of the global moment is creating a conjuncture filled with conflict. I suggest that such a condition is not only undesirable but is not sustainable. One approach to address this danger might be the inception of a different worldview. I will reflect upon two crucial agents in the construction of such a paradigm: civic religion and civic society.

### **Civic Religion**

The idea of a civic religion implies that religious communities commit themselves not only to their respective faiths but also recognize the importance of those common and shared values existing in other religions.<sup>3</sup> Civic religion is, then, the commitment to challenge the claims to uniqueness and absoluteness inherent in the major religious communities and move from an exclusive truth to an inclusive truth. Religious resurgence is a reaction against moral relativism and self-indulgence. It seeks the reaffirmation of order and human solidarity. We need a recipe for order not just within religious communities but among them as well. The idea of civic religion might provide just such a point of departure. The disequilibrium of the global moment motivates the reflection on questions of identity and belonging and, by

addressing these questions, the fundamental nature and desire of humankind might be re-articulated in the form of a new worldview.

The reality of the global moment does not offer many alternatives, I think. Or, do we consider the dramas taking place in the Balkans, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, East Timor, and Kashmir as valid alternatives? I hope not. The mythical conception that religion is absolute has to be challenged and, as Diana Eck reminds us, religions are by no means static, unchanging. They are in motion. They are dynamic. And, to relate it to Fernand Braudel's discussion of civilizations, if religions do not adapt to the challenges they are confronted with, they might and will become extinct.<sup>4</sup>

Civic religion thus rests on the assumption that religious beliefs and practices do change, particularly when confronted with great anomalies. And the challenges emerging from globalization are tremendous and faced by all religious communities: for example, growing polarization of humankind into two camps, the haves and the have-nots; environmental degradation; and the breakdown of social institutions. The global moment poses sharply these difficulties and, so far, we seem to lack the imaginative intelligence to cope with them in a civil and human way. The idea of civic religion might be able to provide us with an opportunity to construct a worldview that will respond effectively to the tasks at hand.

Let me stress that I am not advocating a universal religion. Instead, I perceive a civic religion as a transgressive imagination that embraces other religions while at the same time preserving one's own religious identity. To know oneself fully does require, more than at any other time, the inclusion of the *Other*. Consequently, how to preserve one's own identity in the face of pluralism becomes a daunting yet necessary task.

### Civil Society

Borrowing from John Hall, civil society can be understood as "the opposite to despotism, a space in which social groups could exist—something which exemplified and would ensure softer, more tolerable conditions of existence."<sup>5</sup> Civil society is composed of groups independent from the state, allowing for relationships with the state that are either in cooperation or in opposition to its policies. That particular relationship to the state carries certain promises that make the idea of civil society relevant for the re-imagining of a worldview.

The diminishing powers of the state and the still embryonic nature of international civil society have left a vacuum that has attracted other forces, especially in the form of exclusionary movements, such as extreme right political groups, the emergence of xenophobic racism, and religious fundamentalism.

Robert Cox argued that civil society is a potential agent to fill that vacuum and from which more equitable forms of society and social order might arise—by virtue of challenging the ideology of globalization and providing spaces of inclusion rather than exclusion.<sup>6</sup> The articulation of an alternative vision of the world that is based on social equity, solidarity, and non-violent resolution to conflicts could be the rightful assignment for the forces of civil society. To do so, civil society would first have to create mechanisms that address the differences among various groups and the vulnerability of those groups caught on the downside of globalization. The provision of equitable forms of economic, political, and social organization is indispensable. Second, civil society would have to mount a challenge to the economic logic and values embedded in globalization by emphasizing strong, inclusionary, participatory movements that strengthen the communitarian actions of a democratic state. Here, civil society would have to reconcile differences in order to tame the forces of globalization that often create polarization and the breakup of social institutions.

The re-envisioning of the dominant worldview thus entails the imagining of more equitable economic relationships, political accountability, and social inclusion based on the principles set forth in the concepts of civic religion and civil society. To reiterate a point made earlier, worldviews are distinguished in their style according to space, time, and culture. Space and time are collapsing into one entity at this global moment and cultures and civilizations are universally confronted with the challenges and threats brought about by this reconfiguration. To me, the only viable alternative evolves from the articulation of a common worldview that draws from the moral values of civic religion and the promises embedded in international civil society. Such a project implies creative daring and faith in human progress.

How realistic is this approach to address the relationship between religion and globalization? I am not certain. What I do know is that it is a vision worthwhile to entertain and strive for; the alternative seems frightening. A common worldview rests on the release of human imagination. The next stage would be the organization of thought into con-

cepts such as civic religion and civil society. The final step would entail the transformation of those concepts into reality. In the beginning was imagination — we imagine the world we live in and act accordingly. This rising Global Moment deserves no less.

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**Notes**

1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Press, 1997), 43.
2. See Huntington.
3. I have derived the concept of civic religion by drawing upon Michael Ignatieff's exploration of civic nationalism in Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (New York: Farrar, 1994).
4. Fernand Braudel, *A History of Civilizations* (New York: Lane Press, 1994), 21.
5. John A. Hall, *Civil Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 1.
6. Robert Cox, "Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium: Prospects for an Alternative World Order," *Review of International Studies* (1999): 3–28.