

BRICs of faith: Religion and the four emerging powers

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When the U.S. government imagines the global future, the term BRIC features prominently. The concept was created in 2001 when researchers at Goldman Sachs identified four critical emerging powers—Brazil, Russia, India and China. By 2050, claimed these experts, the BRIC powers would be challenging the U.S. for worldwide economic supremacy. U.S. officials have taken this forecast very seriously. Hillary Clinton recently listed these four “major and emerging global powers” as vital partners in any future attempts to solve the world’s problems.

The BRIC theory has political, strategic and military implications, but it also raises intriguing questions about the world’s religious future. The BRICs will be the scene of intense debates about faith and practice—about coexistence and rivalry between different faiths; about the proper relationship between religion and state power; and, conceivably, about the use of religious rhetoric to justify an imperial expansion.

Brazil and Russia are deeply rooted in their Christian heritage. Brazil has one of the world’s largest Christian populations, and the country has a flourishing tradition of confessional-based parties and ideologies. Judging the strength of Russian Christianity is a thorny business, with estimates for the number of Orthodox believers ranging from 20 to 80 percent of the population—anywhere from 30 million to 120 million faithful. Certainly the lower figure would be accurate in terms of committed church members or attenders, but even 70 years of homicidal secularism failed to eliminate a deep core of Christian belief in the Russian people. Since the fall of communism, the country has seen a stirring revival of monasticism, and some of the most ancient and cherished Christian landmarks have been restored. And as in Brazil, the old established church faces unsettling competition from upstart faiths, including charismatic Protestants and new sects. To combat this development, the Russian Orthodox Church has sought the aid of the increasingly authoritarian Russian state, which would be only too happy to invoke religion to justify state power. The great age of church-state politics—of Holy Russia, in fact—might not be

entirely dead.

Very different issues arise in India and China, neither of which is likely to acquire a Christian majority any time in the foreseeable future. But both countries have substantial Christian populations. China has anywhere from 60 to 100 million Christians—more than any European country—and most observers forecast steady growth in years to come. And while nobody doubts that India will remain overwhelmingly Hindu, the country probably has 40 million Christians. In both countries Christians are influential, with a strong representation in booming sectors of the economy. In both, Christianity is associated with social and individual progress—with literacy, education and social mobility.

Both in India and China, Christians have to live in ways quite different from anything that has been known in the West for many centuries. They are small minorities, living among much larger populations holding very different religious and political beliefs and having to negotiate the conditions of coexistence on a daily basis. Although neither persecution nor violence is common or inevitable, such threats can break out with minimal provocation. While states normally exercise tolerance, that fact cannot be assumed.

Although the Asian BRICs are not going to “go Christian,” at least not in our lifetimes, religion could yet play a key political role. However different their religious histories, Russia and China share some common political and imperial views. Both countries aspire to control a vast sphere of influence beyond their national borders, and in both cases they can justify such outreach by claiming to protect their “own people.” Many Russians have never accepted the loss of the former Soviet republics in Central Asia—the “-stans,” where millions of Europeans of Christian heritage now live as minorities among mainly Muslim populations. The current Russian government has already been accused of wishing to restore the old Soviet Union. It would not be hard to imagine a future regime expanding its power into Central Asia and justifying its move as a way of protecting fellow Christians.

China too could well see a similar version of religious politics. Tens of millions of ethnic Chinese live around the Pacific Rim, where many have become enthusiastically Christian. This ethnic-religious presence creates tensions with mainly Muslim societies in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, where popular violence has erupted. Might a future Chinese government cite the need to protect overseas Chinese Christians in order to justify a military expansion into Southeast

Asia?

Whatever the political future holds, religious ideologies should matter greatly in a BRIC-dominated world.