

The “Turn to Religion” in International Relations Theory

Written by Vendulka Kubalkova

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VENDULKA KUBALKOVA, DEC 3 2013

To do justice to the subject of the “turn to religion” in International Relations theory “in 2000 words or less” is impossible. I can only make some general comments based on my personal observation and impressions from following closely the exegesis of this “turn to religion” from its beginnings.

Much has happened since the topic of religion and international relations was first noticed in the studies of International Relations (IR)[1]. A conference, most likely a foundational event, titled “Religion and International Relations” was convened on May 27, 1998, at the London School of Economics by Fabio Petito and Pavlos Hatzopoulos, both of whom were still PhD students. Addressing the topic of religion and International Relations was path breaking and showed incredible foresight and courage.[2] IR *and* religion together has been something of an oxymoron. IR has been a field regarded by definition as *par excellence* secular; in IR, religion did not or, indeed, could not figure as a subject of concern. As religion was regarded to have been removed from the public sphere and from international relations, it was considered a domestic issue of states and viewed as a private affair of their citizens.

As the world was to be supposedly “modernized,” it was at the same time also to be, “secularized.” The secularity of international politics was postulated, and the system of states, with its concept of sovereignty and non-intervention, acted as a shield against any inter- or intra-religious excesses, such as the internecine Christian wars of the 17th century in Europe, which the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 brought to an end. During the last three hundred years, in the modern era, through imperialism and colonization, the system of nation-states expanded from what was a part of Europe in the 17th century to the rest of the world, dislodging or replacing any other forms of political organization. We refer to religion in exile and returning from exile, but it was really “locked up in the basement,” or so we thought.[3] In all the states that follow the Westphalian model, spanning now the entire world, religion was to be locked up in the basement— stay there and, eventually, vanish. However, both modernization and secularization have failed.

After a very slow start, interest in the subject of religion and international relations began to pick up. Around 2007–2008, the number of publications, special issues of journals, conferences, and sections of professional organizations dedicated to religion and IR or politics began to suddenly and significantly grow. A comprehensive bibliography on this subject to list this literature will be published shortly on a dedicated website.[4] The literature on religion and international relations is extensive and includes articles, book reviews, special journal issues, monographs, and edited volumes. I can only refer to those that are, in my view, representative of the recent trends.[5] These are, however, my personal choices.

Who is Taking this “Turn”?

It is important to note that the authors of these publications, including the participants of the 1998 LSE conference, were not always identified or associated with International Relations. They come from across the Western academy, not from just one field, and from different countries. This multidisciplinary and cosmopolitan feature has generally characterized the “turn to religion.” As a result, we do not have just one “turn” but many, ranging from just a side

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glance, a *coup d'oeil*, and, indeed, a dismissal at one end of the spectrum, to a sustained gaze, resulting in a debate that involves social theorists, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, historians, historians of religions and scholars of religious studies, literary studies, development studies, communication studies, cognitive sciences, and post-colonial studies. Further, this list is incomplete. Public figures, journalists, and even the last Pope (none of whom usually figure in IR scholarship!) have expressed their views on the return of religion in the context of the general condition of the world in the 21st century. Various academic superstars – for example, Peter Berger, Jürgen Habermas, William Connolly, Alal Assad, Charles Taylor, José Casanova – all prominent scholars, influence or redirect academic debates. When IR scholars talk about the “turn to religion,” they frequently refer to the early stages of the development of IR on both sides of the Atlantic in the 20th century, discussing scholars steeped in or advocating Judeo Christian perspectives, both early English School, and prominent American, scholars as well as public figures such as Reinhold Niebuhr. The lineage and pedigree that these scholars established goes as far back as St. Augustine (e.g., Troy 2012, 2013). However, the parallel voices on behalf of Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism are rarely engaged, or, at least, not to the same extent as Christianity. The ongoing debate is mainly Western.

Referring to the varied intellectual backgrounds of those who take the “turn to religion,” a crucial point needs to be made. Religion, it can be agreed, is difficult or perhaps even impossible to define (Fountain 2013). It is deemed as too narrow a concept and does not cover faiths across the world. Further, religion is viewed as one half of the many Western, modernist, and, some claim, artificially-created, hierarchical binaries, juxtaposed with reason. As with modernist binaries, one part is characteristically regarded as superior and dominates the other. This line of reasoning, the construction of the faith/reason binary, leads directly to the analysis of modernity: that is, what is going on in the world now and what happens next. Thus, the attention to religion, due to its “return,” has triggered much broader concerns regarding the current stage of late modernity, or what Habermas (2010) among others term the “post secular age,” with other monikers for the current and future era still being proposed. Religion has been the tip of the iceberg, indicative of an awareness of something much more profound going on in the world at large, a global *tremblement de terre*. Christian theologians give it a different twist, seeing international relations as a *Katechon*, a biblical term found in 2 Thessalonians 2:6-7, referred to by Carl Schmitt as “the power that prevents—or delays—the long-overdue apocalyptic end of time from already happening now” (quoted in Julia Hell, 2009: 305; see also Guilhot 2010, Troy 2012). It may delay, perhaps, but certainly does not ameliorate any aspect of the condition of the world.

However, why mention voices of scholars who are not IR specialists when I am to write about International Relations? IR students are frequently told to “leave philosophy to philosophers.” However, whether the debate centers on the concept of religion per se or on the post-secular age, it invariably turns to International Relations as an international political scaffolding of modernity in need of profound and radical reform. Wherever their participants come from, these debates are relevant to all of us in IR. **The turn to religion becomes the turn to, or on, international relations.** International relations (lower case) is no longer the exclusive domain of the one hundred-year-old Western (initially Anglo-American) IR discipline. Far from it. IR, in the hands of what Barbato and Kratochwil refer to as “international elites,” is implicated in the creation of today’s “world of our making” (Onuf 1989, 2012).

To describe what is going on in the world in the 21st century, most participants in the discourse use dramatic expressions, such as ‘rupture’, ‘discontinuity’, ‘transition’, the ‘end of the road for the modernity’, the ‘need for something new’, the ‘New Enlightenment’, the ‘post-secular age’, the ‘world of becoming’, the ‘end of the West’, and the ‘rupture between the West and Islam’. Even if the IR scholars do not share these apprehensions, this is of relevance to IR scholarship, for, to use a clumsy metaphor, it is as though we sit on a branch of a tree studying its every minute detail, and others, who do not sit with us on the same branch but are looking at the tree from afar, are saying that the tree, if not the entire forest—and we with it—might topple over. Or, as Barbato and Kratochwil put it, “Most international relations experts . . . still hope to round up the wagons and fight back at the passing raids of the challengers who largely oppose their designs for running the world” (2008: 21), the world in which a “global rebellion” is taking place (Juergensmeyer 2008). We can either stay behind the wagons, huddled on our branch, or think about what the study of world affairs for the changed world of the 21st century might look like. Following are some brief observations about these choices.

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On Turns in IR

I preface my observations by noting that I studied IR in the UK. My PhD diploma indicates “International Politics” as my field, and I spent time working in the department led by Hedley Bull, before he knew he was going to be called posthumously one of the founders of the “English School.” I now work in the US IR, which, since the 1970s, made the massive “turn” of the entire discipline to positivist rigorous science. In my view, IR was effectively downgraded to one of many subfields or subdisciplines of political science (Bellin 2008),^[6] to whose methodology it is subordinated. My professional trajectory colors my biases.

Since the positivist turn, the US IR has been overwhelmingly and predominantly committed to quantitative methods, as is empirically documented in its self-study, published in the 2011 issue of *International Studies Quarterly*, a house publication of the International Studies Association (ISA) (Maliniak et al. 2011). For those interested in taking a turn to religion in the US IR subfield, it is compulsory reading, as it describes the main three paradigms of the US IR and defines positivism and positivist methods as they dominate US IR. Since this massive collective turn to positivism, no subsequent “turn” has significantly influenced the direction taken by the US IR subfield, although these turns might have been echoes of major turns outside the US IR. The “linguistic turn,” for example, a major movement in European philosophy, was of interest only to those who took the post-positivist – or reflectivist turn in the 1980s, which left its dissidents on the margins. When the constructivist turn was introduced to IR, the fact that it was presented from the position of the post-positivist and linguistic turn (Onuf 1989, 2012) was immediately overlooked. In the US IR, the constructivist turn was turned into a positivist version of constructivism and incorporated into the US IR as one of its three mainstream paradigms. It served as a repair “patch,” covering theoretical weaknesses recognized after the end of the Cold War, which none of the main US IR paradigms managed to predict, much less explain (Kubalkova 2001). I mention it apropos of what will become of the “turn to religion” in the US IR, or what is already happening, when religion is subordinated to the political science frameworks.

The US IR, of course, did react to 9/11 and its aftermath, and there is a great deal of literature on terrorism, the war on terror, etc. One of the most influential US IR scholars, Robert Keohane, attempted to redefine terrorism as “large-scale violence by non-state actors reflecting new patterns of asymmetrical interdependence, calling into question some of our assumptions about geographical space as a barrier” (2002: 30). Keohane hastened to point out, however, that he has “few insights into religious motivations in world politics . . . [leaving] this subject to those who are more qualified to address it [my emphasis]” (ibid). Alas, this is the point. The views of those who are so qualified do not pass the strict scientific test of political science. This is made clear in a book review by Bellin in *World Politics* (2008), where he compared the treatment of religion in the two subfields of political science. Because of the clarity of its main argument, often implied rather than spelled out in other works, a summary of the main points of this rather large book review and quotes from it follow (2008, 315-347).

When comparing the advance in regard to studying religion of the two subfields of political science, i.e., Comparative Politics and International Relations, Comparative Politics prevails. It has, according to Bellin, managed to gain insights in regard to the rationality of religious behavior. However, no progress yet was made in determining the power of “religion as an independent variable”. In an IR subfield, “few of the new studies go much beyond exhortation for a paradigm shift in IR”, which she regarded as unwarranted (2008: 316). Further, Bellin stated, “Far too many succumb to epistemological debates about the validity of causal inquiry in human affairs . . . [missing] the opportunity to get on with the project of puzzle-driven research to gain . . . middle-range theoretical insights on questions of when and how religion matters in international affairs,” and failing to “generat[e] hypotheses, to be linked to larger theoretical debates in political science, to be cumulative in theoretical sense” (Ibid: 317-8). Bellin suggested doing in IR something similar to what was done in Comparative Politics, namely, establishing a religious economy school or the religious market theory, applying microeconomic analysis and the logic of rational choice to the study of religion, embracing an economic model of church behavior as an economic firm.

IR books that deal with religion, claimed Bellin, want to bring religion back into international relations, bemoaning the exile of religion from IR, insisting that religion matters, and calling for a paradigm shift that would acknowledge the centrality of religion in international affairs. Much of this work is characterized by “majestic ambition, announcing the inauguration of grand theory but largely eschewing middle-level theorizing or empirically driven puzzle solving” (Ibid:

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338). Thus, the problem, argued Bellin, is not that the question of religion has been overlooked in international affairs so much as that it has been *undertheorized* [sic] along the lines of theoretical guidelines of political science. A good deal of this literature, she argued, is the work of historians, sociologists, and theologians. While these studies are analytically rich and insightful, they also are largely idiographic rather than nomothetic in ambition. They offer excellent case studies of transnational religious institutions that broker peace or religious fundamentalist movements that embrace violence. However, they rarely undertake the kind of “structured comparison that a political scientist would embrace—a comparison that can yield generalizable hypotheses about when religious difference is likely to spell transnational conflict or about which conditions foster the transnational contagion of religious terror” (Ibid: 340).

Bellin (343) also rejected the argument that Scott Thomas made in his 2005 seminal book, namely, that a positivist approach to the study of religion in politics is precluded because, as Thomas argued, in a “conscious world of human beings with intention and meaning,” it may be inappropriate to assume that events are “governed by general laws, patterns, and regularities like the natural world/physical world.” The reviewer disagreed that meaning and conscious intent in human affairs precludes the goal of discovering law-like regularities with predictive power that can be discovered and tested. Religion, after all, according to Bellin, is a subset of ideas and is handled adequately by liberal IR scholarship. Jack Snyder’s 2011 edited volume is much more sympathetic and more nuanced, but it, too, amounts to an absorption or inclusion of religion into the political science on the terms of political science.

The Other “Turns” to Religion and International Relations

When turning to those “turns” outside IR, I am reminded of comments by Robert Gilpin and the late Kenneth Waltz, as they responded years ago to a post-positivist critique by Richard Ashley of their neorealism/structural realism. Gilpin wrote in his reply to Ashley that he could not really respond since the editor “failed to send an English translation with the original text [and thus]... I have no idea what it means.” It is this needless jargon, this assault on the language that gives us social scientists a bad name (Gilpin 1986: 303). Kenneth Waltz adds that when reading post-positivist piece by Ashley he feels like “entering a maze. I never know quite where I am and how to get out (Waltz 1986: 337). The US IR subfield of political science developed its own vernacular too, but those fluent in it might feel lost, even more so than Gilpin and Waltz did, in the contemporary debate that surrounds Habermas’ concept of a post-secular age. However, unlike Ashley’s critique, aimed specifically at one IR approach, such debates that now go on also outside US IR go to the heart of the future of humanity, imagining it without international relations as we know them today.

As a constructivist, I refer to Habermas’ work due to his emphasis on the role of language and texts. Habermas, who does not seem to be an adherent of any religion, recognizes nevertheless that religion helps people who live in the modern secular society from being overwhelmed by an all-encompassing demand of a materially driven life and worldly success of a capitalist society. Religion, he has claimed, offers a much-needed dimension of otherness: the religious values of love, community, and godliness to help to offset the global dominance of competitiveness, acquisitiveness, and manipulation characteristic of Western society in its current global, multifaceted crisis. Habermas sought to overcome what he believes is the incoherence of secular discourse with its pathologies by “translating” into the secular language from religions that which is missing, their moral and motivational nature, and their semantic strength. This translation is necessary to render religious idioms publicly available albeit subordinated to the language of reason. This is obviously a form of linguistic constructivism of the Wittgenstein language games variety, but it is difficult to imagine how it would work.

Fred Dalmayr (2012) seems to share the concern about the possible “translation”, with a long list of quotations from religious texts to show that these are far more understandable than secular language, and certainly more so than the entire debate about Habermas’ post-secular future of humanity. Dalmayr challenged the assumption that there is a standard public discourse with a readily accessible language, while religious language is odd, obsolete, esoteric, and essentially irrational. The “translations” of vernaculars have not been very successfully tried but it is important to keep trying. In a series of articles published for the benefit of the US IR audience, Ashley made more accessible the continental philosophy of the post-positivist, post-structuralist variety[7]. It is even more important that IR scholars do not ignore the debates on religion and international relations even if their participants hail from outside their discipline (or subfield) just because they are written in a technically very difficult idiom – different from their own – but equally

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technically difficult.[8]

What Do We Make of This?

The return of religion brought with it a greater degree of worldwide intellectual dissonance than did any other debate that I recall. There is also a large scholarly literature on Islam not referred to here, which compounds the dissonance. Other than among the US IR scholars, who do not seem to perceive any major crisis, there seems to be a consensus that the world is going through a profound change, i.e., a highly unstable period, disjuncture, or discontinuity that may change the way we think: a watershed between modes of thinking. In a world so rapidly changing after a long period of stability, sudden shifts in what Michel Foucault (1971, xi, xxii-iii, 168) termed “space of knowledge,” or disjunctures with regard to systematic thought, seem to be now taking place.

Humanity has passed through historical stages: Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the modern era. Each of these, according to Foucault is characterized by its own “space of knowledge,” which puts limits on what human beings within that space are able to make of their experiences. Thus, according to Foucault, “[i]n any given culture at any given moment, there is always only one episteme that defines the conditions of [the] possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice” (ibid.) In other words, in every culture, there were the fundamental “codes of a culture.” These codes governed the culture’s “language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, [and] the hierarchy of its practices” (Foucault 1971).

The Renaissance began with individuals treating things that seemed to be alike as, indeed, alike. The cosmos was made of one thing, and matter and human beings were part of it. The laws of matter applied to both. This led to a certain way of thinking about social matters; moreover, it did so with such force that it has continued to permeate our thinking to this day, even as the Classical and Modern episteme, commencing in about 1650 and 1800, opened new spaces for *what it is possible to know*. In effect, each larger space is superimposed on the one before. Thus, the Renaissance belief in similitude – i.e., that we should treat things as alike that seem to be alike – is what enabled “positivist” methodologists to isolate things such as human beings and national states and to measure their properties in space and time. Only once this was done, was it possible for observers to make causal inferences about the relationship between them. It was 19th century physics that provided the archetype for the positivist thrust toward modernist social science in IR, as well as to different degrees in other disciplines. At the beginning of the twentieth century a significant discontinuity took place which Foucault missed but – as Onuf points out – does help explain certain subsequent changes, namely, it was at this point that modernism spawned new human sciences: political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology – and IR (Onuf 2012: 115). What might be the “space of knowledge”, which if we follow Foucault, will emerge from the turmoil with which the 21st century has begun?

My main concern is with what we teach before it becomes clear in which direction humanity might advance. I propose to broaden what we teach in IR classes to include the gist of debates set in motion by the return of religion to IR, irrespective of the disciplinary provenance of such views. It is also mandatory that students of world affairs know what the major religions have to say about what is going on in the world. To complement Foucault’s “space of knowledge,” I conceive of a future way of teaching what is going on in the world not in newly created disciplines, subdisciplines, or subfields. Those, too, as they have mushroomed since the beginning of the 20th century, have been a part of the space of knowledge, i.e. that which is possible to know and how, and may pass. To show the connection to the “space of knowledge” of Foucault I propose to call the framework for educational purposes a “zone of knowledge” (Kubalkova 2014 forthcoming).

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Soviet Marxism – Leninism and the total inattention to any form of Marxism at that time in IR. Later she worked on the much-misunderstood Gorbachev’s New Thinking, which she interpreted as inspired by Gramsci’s concept of counter hegemony. With Nicholas Onuf she co-chaired a (post-positivist) constructivist Miami Theory group and has co-edited a M.E. Sharpe series, International Relations in a Constructed World. Having been raised in Soviet Marxism-Leninism, she began following very early the inattention in Western IR to religion, and has proposed the creation of an approach to IR called International Political Theology (IPT). She argued against the binary distinction between religion/faith and reason, rational and irrational. Her most recent concern is with what we teach in IR and the use of information technology to facilitate a broadening of the very narrow scope of what the American IR discipline covers. She can be contacted on vkubalkova@miami.edu.

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[1] I follow the established practice where International Relations, capitalized and abbreviated as IR, refers to the study of lower-case international relations, or what is going on in the world. I refer to the discipline of IR in the United States as US IR.

[2] The proceedings of the LSE conference were published in the special issue of *Millennium* on Religions and International Relations (2000) and as a book *Religion in International Relations: The Return from Exile* (Petito, Hatzopoulos eds. 2004), the latter published as a part of the Palgrave series Culture and Religion in International Relations, edited by Yosef Lapid and Friederich Kratochwil.

^[3] Many authors dispute the accuracy of the IR favorite narratives of what exactly happened in 17th century Europe, referring to those events as Westphalian myths (Scott Thomas). It has been pointed out that we repeat these myths in most, even the most widely used, IR textbooks (see a critique of what we put in IR textbooks by Benjamin de Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, 2011).

[4] The website, with a comprehensive bibliography and other resources, is expected to be online soon; its launch will be announced in the addendum to this article.

[5] e.g. Bellin 2008, Gill 2001, Snyder ed. 2011, the 2012 Special issue of the *Review of International Studies on The Postsecular in International Relations* (Issue) 05 (The Postsecular in International Relations), the 2009 Special issue on religion and IR in *Perspectives: Review of International Affairs*, vol. 17, No 2, the 2013 Special issue of *International Development Policy* (4 | 2013 Religion and development), and the many seminal works by leading authors in the study of Religion and International Relations such as Scott Thomas and Daniel Philpott. I find particularly useful overview of the recent debate on post secular age in a paper by Barbato and Kratochwil (2009). As far as the US IR and its views on religion I am listing here and referring only to a few works that are either recent or

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published in key journals such as *World Politics* or *American Political Science Review*.

[6] The definition of political science, from the site of APSA, the main political science professional organization, is: “the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior. Political science subfields include political theory, political philosophy, political ideology, political economy, policy studies and analysis, comparative politics, international relations, and a host of related fields.” See https://www.apsanet.org/content_9181.cfm

[7] see bibliography in Keohane 1986

[8] “And thus what was written was fulfilled,” and a common language was lost. Books, articles and conference papers explaining the world at the turn of the millennium are a Tower of Babel (Genesis 11). For half a century, English has been the unofficial but universal language of scholarly exchange. Today, scholars speak in many, highly specialized English languages, and they barely manage to understand each other. Specialized languages have always characterized disciplines, the subjects of study that scholars have delimited among themselves, as if these subjects were the natural and inevitable way to arrange the production and dissemination of knowledge. What is unusual and has reached truly biblical proportions is the way that specialized languages have swept across traditional disciplinary boundaries. International Relations is a conspicuous case, in part because its status as a discipline is not secure, in part because its subject matter has undergone a spectacular transformation within a decade’s time (Kubalkova, Onuf, Kowert 1998a, 3)

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