

# Religion in IR: That Cousin We Never Knew

Written by John A. Rees

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JOHN A. REES, APR 1 2015

Welcome to *The Religion Gap*, an international relations (IR) blog exploring the impact of religious actors and interests on the dynamics of world politics. We begin by briefly considering the place of religion within the discipline itself, an enquiry that could also be framed by the saying 'You can choose your friends but you are stuck with your relatives'. Let me explain.

IR conferences can be like family reunions – behind the panels and presentations lies a great deal of reconnecting, reengaging and reminiscing within very established social networks (and with perhaps a little wine). What can sometimes make family reunions memorable is the arrival of an unfamiliar member of the clan, generating whispered conversations about where this person, caught somewhere between kith and kin, has come from and what their connection to the group might be: 'He's related to Khaled, I think, but has been living abroad for the past twenty years'; 'I don't recognize her accent, but she certainly has Aunt Harriet's nose'; 'Sergei tells me he's in the shoe business but that doesn't explain the Bugatti parked outside.' Attention and intrigue meets caution and concern, all worthy responses in the interest of upholding the family name.

So it is that the status of religion in IR has changed over time, from that of a stranger in the world of IR conferences, publications and classes, to the academic equivalent of that cousin you always knew existed but didn't know much about. Yet, as with awkward family gatherings, whilst religion is now recognised by the IR clan, what to talk about next remains in many ways a fumbling work in progress. 'So', we might dare to ask whilst pouring another drink, 'what have you been up to for the past, ooh, twenty years?' That question is not as ridiculous as it sounds, for in the answers we find evidence of family resemblance between IR and religion in both theory and practice: when we were working on 'development' policy, cousin religion was living in a faith community working with the poor; when we were theorising about security, cousin was theologising about the ethics of war; when we were discovering gender in IR, cousin had been working on feminist religious approaches for decades; when we were engaged in track-1 diplomacy, cousin was assisting through track-2 negotiation. We assumed cousin religion was predisposed to conflict and violence, but in talking we discover just as many accounts of cooperation and peacemaking. And so on and so forth.

Established narratives now exist to explain how religion's transition into IR occurred. Principal among these is one paralleled by the intellectual journey of the renown sociologist Peter Berger. Once an advocate of secularisation theory in the 1960s (an assumption that modernisation necessarily leads to the decline of religion) by the 1990s Berger had become a champion of the de-secularisation framework (an evidence-based view that religion remains a vibrant and often influential element of modern industrial societies). Likewise, the treatment of religion as an IR category has changed from assumed irrelevance for a quintessentially secular discipline to intense interest in a world-wide political phenomenon that can no longer be denied.

Although the change has been significant, it is equally true that the conversation is only just beginning. As Timothy Shah wrote in 2012, 'religion has become one of the most influential factors in world affairs in the last generation but remains one of the least examined factors in the professional study and practice of world affairs.' It is hoped *The Religion Gap* can make a small contribution to advancing a knowledgeable discussion within the IR community about faith actors and interests in the international sphere. We look forward to your feedback and thanks for your interest.

Postscript: I had the honor of meeting Professor Berger at a conference held at Calvin College in Grand Rapids,

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November 2005. By pure accident, and at his generous invitation, we spent a brief moment smoking cigars outside the conference venue, watching the Michigan snow begin to fall, and talking – of all things – about the potential impact on EU policy of a Pentecostal revival sweeping through Romani communities. This wonderfully bizarre combination of elements seem to be utterly disconnected were it not for the binding thread of religion creating communities of knowledge and constantly disorientating our understanding of the world of power. It is a conversation I will never forget. Family gatherings are the strangest of things.

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### **About the author:**

**John A. Rees** is Professor of Politics and International Relations at The University of Notre Dame Australia. His research interests are related to themes of religion and international development, religion and foreign policy and the IR discourse on post-secularism.