

The Religious Resurgence: Problems and Opportunities for International Relations Theory

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STEPHEN DAWSON, SEP 8 2015

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A number of books have been published in the past ten years on the conviction widely shared by scholars across a variety of disciplines that we are currently experiencing a worldwide religious resurgence. In this chapter I examine more closely the very notion of a 'religious resurgence' and its theoretical implications for International Relations (IR). There are two points I wish to make. First, one way to understand the religious resurgence is in terms of a theoretical shift: as IR scholars move beyond the secularisation thesis, religion becomes more obvious as a variable in global politics. Second, the return of religion qua theoretical shift requires rethinking the fundamental idea of religion, as making sense of the religious resurgence requires a critical concept of religion.

The Religious Resurgence and the Secularisation Thesis

In the mid-1990s, when Peter L. Berger declared that a religious resurgence was underway, scholars took notice.[1] Since the 1960s, Berger was renowned as one of the leading proponents of the *secularisation thesis*. Briefly, secularisation describes three interrelated social processes: first, the differentiation of secular institutions (the state and the free market, for example) from religious institutions (such as the church); second, the decline of religious beliefs; and third, the privatisation of religious belief and practice.[2] In short, secularisation describes a process of social change. It is a hypothesis that attempts to explain what is unique about modernity. For this reason, secularisation is 'twinned', as it were, to the process of modernisation. With respect to traditional religion (and traditional ways of life, for that matter), modernisation acts like a solvent. As a society modernises, religion loses its distinctive features—for instance, the public prominence and influence of religious institutions and leaders, the social utility of religion (as, say, a source of moral value), and epistemic claims to revelatory authority. Religion recedes from public life into the private. Its universal claims to truth are transmuted as deeply felt personal convictions.[3]

As a process of social change, secularisation and its effects were thought to be irreversible. In a phrase indelibly linked with Max Weber, secularisation would end in a 'disenchanted' world, or a world largely free of religion. Throughout the twentieth century, the 'disenchantment of the world' acquired the status of a general law among social scientists. This is why Berger, in a 1968 interview in the *New York Times*, confidently predicted that, by 'the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a world-wide secular culture'. Berger allowed that this prognosis was based on his reading of the current situation, which 'could be changed by a third world war or some other upheaval'.[4]

Such upheaval was soon provided by real-life events, such as the election of the evangelical Christian Jimmy Carter to the White House, the mobilisation of conservative fundamentalists under the banner of the Moral Majority, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland. The cumulating effect of these events was not unlike that of the iceberg and the Titanic: empirical reality punched a hole in what was seemingly an

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unsinkable hypothesis. Scholarly *mea culpas* followed. Berger retracted his earlier prediction and admitted that the 'world today ... is as furiously religious as it ever was ... [the] body of literature by historians and social scientists loosely labelled 'secularisation theory' is essentially mistaken'.^[5] The events of 11 September 2001 emphatically punctuated Berger's claim that the world is as 'furiously religious' as ever.

Furiously is perhaps the operative word here. The concept of secularisation does not simply describe a historical process. It is also a normative claim about the proper relationship between religion and politics. This normative claim is founded on two political myths. The first, dubbed the 'myth of religious violence' by William T. Cavanaugh, claims that religion is a universal component of human culture, honeycombed with irrationality, divisiveness, an inability to compromise and tendencies towards authoritarianism.^[6] The only hope for lasting peace is to separate the religious sphere from the secular sphere (politics, the economy and public life, generally). This in turn leads to the second, labelled by Scott M. Thomas the 'myth of liberalism'.^[7] According to this myth, the hazards of religious violence can only be controlled by the imposition of the modern liberal state in which politics becomes secular and religion is privatised. In short, religion (and, in particular, its propensity for violence and disorder) is the problem, and the order fostered by the secular liberal state is the solution.

These two myths worked together (though *colluded* might be a better word) not only to separate politics from religion but also to make the particular historical terms of that separation normative for both politics and religion, generally. In other words, the collusive effect of these two myths charged the descriptive concepts 'religion' and 'politics' with normative authority. These two concepts no longer simply describe human phenomena; rather, they distinguish normal and abnormal varieties. For example, secularism becomes the new normal for politics. Thus, widely utilised theories of International Relations, such as realism and liberalism, presume the absence of religion from the outset simply because religion is supposed to be *outside* politics. In this respect, both realism and liberalism can be described as secularising theories insofar as 'religion' and 'politics' are separated prior to analysis.^[8] Religion asserting itself politically (as in the case of the Moral Majority in the United States or the Islamic Revolution in Iran) is seen as an anomaly. In the 1990s, politically active religion was thought to be, perhaps, a new type of religion altogether.^[9] Fundamentalism, for example, was envisioned as a new form of religion, the primary characteristic of which was opposition to modernity.

Two empirical examples can be offered to demonstrate the extent to which religion has been excluded from International Relations theory and analysis. Both are provided by Timothy Samuel Shah. The first comes from the *American Political Science Review*.^[10] For the 100th anniversary issue (2006), Kenneth D. Wald and Clyde Wilcox surveyed the *APSR* archives and found that 'prior to 1960 only a single *APSR* article sought to use religion as a variable to explain empirical phenomena'. The situation did not noticeably improve with the rise of politically active religion in the 1970s. The years following 1980 are devoid of articles focused on religious factors, save one essay on American Government and two in Comparative Politics. Shah's second example cites a similar study undertaken by Daniel Philpott, who reviewed the leading journals in International Relations.^[11] Philpott discovered that 'only six or so out of a total of about sixteen hundred [articles published in leading IR journals] featured religion as an important influence'.^[12]

The religious resurgence challenges conventional assumptions on two levels. Empirically, as Berger and many other social scientists have observed, religion is alive and well in the modern world. It's not exactly clear, however, what this observation means. Is the world more religious than it ever has been before? Is it more religious than it was at an earlier time? Answering either one of those questions is difficult. Not only is religiosity difficult to measure, it is also difficult to express conceptually. Perhaps these are not the best questions to ask. It's quite possible that the world looks different simply because social scientists and other scholars have removed their secularisation goggles. In other words, the world hasn't changed so much as the way in which scholars look at it has. The theoretical shift presumed by the religious resurgence speaks to the second challenge: integrating religion into existing theories of International Relations. The easiest way to do this would be, to use a cooking analogy, add and stir: add religion and stir it into already existing theories. The key question begged by this strategy is, of course, whether religion is the sort of concept one can simply add and stir.

Theorising Religion in International Relations

The Religious Resurgence: Problems and Opportunities for International Relations Theory

Written by Stephen Dawson

At first glance the word 'religion' seems relatively straightforward. Most people use words like 'religion' and 'religious' in everyday speech. Problems arise, however, when we try to define 'religion'. It's not that 'religion' is indefinable; rather, 'religion' suffers from a sort of definitional satyriasis: no matter how many suitors there are, 'religion' is ready to accept another. Beneath the sheer variety of competing definitions, however, two fundamental marks characteristic of the specifically modern category of religion can be discerned. First, religion is something that is ontologically unique—that is, religion is a transhistorical, transcultural object. While it takes empirical form in a dizzying variety of ways, its core or essence can be concisely expressed in different systems of propositions and beliefs about reality. Second, in order to be known, religion requires the epistemological contrast of 'not-religion', or the secular. Religion and the secular together form a binary opposition, which is a pair of related concepts that are mutually exclusive in meaning. A simple example would be the binary opposition 'up' and 'down'. Secular and religion are likewise connected. An important point to keep in mind is that both religion and the secular are historically located in European Latin Christendom. Not only is religion identified with Christianity, but the secular is originally a theological category unique to Western Christendom.[13] In short, the roots of the religion–secular binary run deep in the Western tradition.

Problems with the modern category of religion become apparent when scholars attempt to use religion as an analytic or descriptive category. In sorting 'religious' and 'non-religious' phenomena, we simply reproduce the normative claims specific to the category of modern religion—that is, religion is something *sui generis* standing in binary opposition to the secular. More generally, the normative claims projected by the modern category of religion electrify descriptive treatments of 'religious' phenomena with a prescriptive charge. This leads to what I have called *going rogue*—when an ostensibly descriptive or analytic term becomes charged with normative authority, which causes analysis to slice (in the golfing sense) west, as in the direction of Western civilisation.[14] What is more, rogue concepts have a strong tendency to enfold normative assumptions and commitments into scholarly analysis by continued uncritical application. The power of rogue concepts is their protean ability to mimic 'normal' concepts and, once insinuated within analyses, metastasise. Once that happens, the analysis is, in a manner of speaking, possessed. Analysis of global politics, which aims to produce knowledge, becomes instead the re-inscription of normative claims about 'religion' and 'politics' and the normal relationship between the two. Scholars in the field of Religious Studies have recognised this problem, and some advocate dispensing with the concept 'religion' altogether.[15] While sympathetic with this argument, ultimately I think it goes too far—it's a utopian gesture rather than a methodological strategy. The word 'religion' is too finely woven into the fabric of our thinking to be simply cast aside. What we can do, however, is rethink the way that we critically understand and deploy the concept of religion.[16]

I hope it is clear at this juncture that religion is *not* the sort of concept that can be added and stirred into established theories. There are other ways, however, to integrate religion into IR theory and analysis. Some of these attempts clear new ground; others succumb to a variety of problems. [17] Many of these problems can be traced back to insufficient theorising or a tendency to rely uncritically on the conventional understanding of the word 'religion' (frequently the two are combined). Concepts of religion can be too closely identified with a particular religious tradition (many concepts of religion, for example, amount in practice to a generalised description of Protestant Christianity). Concepts can be reified—that is, they are insufficiently sensitive to the historical and social contexts in which particular religions develop. Concepts can become ensnared in theological disputes over whether God, the gods, or transcendent reality are necessary criteria for determining the category of religion. Any of these problems, unchecked, allow concepts of religion to go rogue.

The religious resurgence is at once a return of religion to global politics as well as to International Relations theory. While a number of theoretical challenges arise, opportunities open up as well. When IR theorists stalk religion, they should do so critically. They should keep in mind Jonathan Z. Smith's admonition that 'religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalisation. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy.' [18] The upshot of Smith's remark is that the concept of religion used as a scholarly term of art should be carefully distinguished from the notion of religion we use in everyday speech. Religion in everyday speech depends on the secular for its meaning. In analysing religious phenomena we want to be critically aware of differences in history, society and culture, both with regard to the phenomena being studied and the concepts we are utilising. A critical or self-aware concept of religion is thus

The Religious Resurgence: Problems and Opportunities for International Relations Theory

Written by Stephen Dawson

necessary for scholars to understand the religious resurgence.

Notes

[1] Peter L. Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," *The National Interest* 46 (1996/97): 3–12.

[2] My presentation of secularization as three interrelated social processes is indebted to Jose Casanova. For discussion, see his "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–74, as well as his *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994)

[3] There is a great amount of material on secularism and secularization. For a short version of the narrative of secularism, see Charles Taylor, "Western Secularity," *Rethinking Secularism*, 31–53; for the longer version, see Charles Taylor. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). For discussion of the secularization thesis, see Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), and Rob Warner, *Secularization and Its Discontents* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010).

[4] 'A Bleak Outlook is Seen for Religion', *New York Times*, 25 February 1968.

[5] Berger, "Secularism in Retreat," 3.

[6] For discussion, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), *passim*.

[7] For discussion, see Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 21–69.

[8] Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah argue that the secularism of international relations theory is the product of the same historical transformation that created the modern world of sovereign states. See their 'The Fall and Rise of Religion in International Relations: History and Theory', *Religion and International Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34–37.

[9] A good example of this is provided by the Fundamentalist Project, a well-funded, multi-year research project under the direction of Martin Marty that examined the phenomena of "fundamentalism" across religious traditions. Five thick volumes issued from the Project before it ended in 1995.

[10] Kenneth D. Wald and Clyde Wilcox, 'Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?' *American Political Science Review* 100:4 (2006), 523–29.

[11] Daniel Philpott, 'The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations', *World Politics* 55.1 (2002), 66–95.

[12] Quoted in Timothy Samuel Shah, 'Religion and World Affairs: Blurring the Boundaries', *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

[13] Casanova, 'The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms', *Rethinking Secularism*, 56.

[14] I have discussed the notions of 'going rogue' and 'rogue concepts' elsewhere. See my 'The Religious Resurgence and International Relations Theory', *Religious Studies Review* 39.4 (2013), 201–21.

[15] For one well-known argument in support of this position, see Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

The Religious Resurgence: Problems and Opportunities for International Relations Theory

Written by Stephen Dawson

[16] Since the 1980s, no scholar has been more influential in critically rethinking the concept of religion than Talal Asad. See his *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity. Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); *ibid*, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); and *ibid*, 'Reading a Modern Classic: W.C. Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*', *History of Religions* 40.3 (2001), 205-222. Some other scholars have built on Asad's work. Some provide genealogies of religion: Peter Harrison, '*Religion*' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1990]); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Guy G. Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010). Still others study the intersection of religion and politics (and the ways in which "religion" obscures the terms of that intersection): William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, *The Sacred Is the Profane: The Political Nature of "Religion"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Russell T. McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redefining the Public Study of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); and *ibid*, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Scholars have also examined the construction of "religion" in the context of the rise of Religious Studies: Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[17] For three examples of the skilful integration of religion into International Relations analysis, see Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Daniel H. Nexon, 'Religion and International Relations: No Leap of Faith Required', *Religion and International Relations Theory*; and Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations*.

[18] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), xi.

About the author:

Stephen Dawson works at the intersection of religious studies, philosophy and the social sciences. His current research focuses on the Thomist understanding of religion as a virtue embedded in a disciplinary program. Currently he is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Lynchburg College in Lynchburg, Virginia. He holds a BA in English from George Mason University and a PhD in Religious Studies from Boston University.