

Little Do They Know. How (Not) to Theorise Religion and International Relations

Written by Jodok Troy

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JODOK TROY, SEP 11 2015

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One example of the many fluctuating academic 'working groups on religion and International Relations' eloquently summarises the *agreement* of scholars in International Relations (IR) when it comes to the intersection of religious 'issues' and IR: (1) the marginalisation of religion in the subject, which is, (2), due to the thinking of secularisation theory is, finally, (3), unwarranted.[2] It is by now also commonplace to understand 'secularisation' as a more nuanced term—and therefore to make a distinction between secularisation (as an empirical phenomena) and secularism (as, more or less, an ideology; an 'ism'). However warranted those claims may be, and no matter how much consensus they achieve in the academic community, they nevertheless at the same time point to complications in theorising religion and IR.

I will outline how, and how not, to theorise on the topic from a classical Realist point of view, seeing IR primarily as practical philosophy, relying in its analysis on interpretative methods, normative theory and anthropological insights. I do this along the following steps. First, I reflect for a moment on the ongoing trend of 'de-marginalising' the topic and, at the same time, point out grievances when it comes to secularisation theorising. Second, I reflect on shortcomings when talking about 'religion as religion', i.e. to categorise religion as a 'variable', therefore pointing out how the Western understanding of religion shapes and limits theorising. Finally, I reflect on some of the alternative and complementary approaches of addressing religion in IR.

De-marginalising the Topic

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is a prominent study dealing with religion and politics with great impact.[3] His central concept is the 'immanent frame', an attempt based on a liberal agenda to exclude anything metaphysical from the public (i.e. political) sphere.[4] This is certainly useful and contributes to philosophical problems and understandings of many current issues.[5] The central thesis, that we live in a secular age, however, cannot hold up to reality.[6] In other words, what is missing in theorising on the topic are (empirical) insights from the sociology of religion.[7] When it comes to the agreement over the shortcomings of secularisation theory, we therefore encounter two phenomena that are relevant for matters of religion and IR. As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd's *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* outlines, there is a difference between the actual *practice* of *secularisation* (i.e. separation of church and state) and belief in the *concept* of *secularism* (i.e. secularisation leads to modernisation).[8] It is a matter of constructing what both terms actually mean. Hence, one problem is the misunderstanding of interdisciplinary (or at least trans-disciplinary) research; the other is the absence of it. 'How to cite a sacred text',[9] for example, can be a tricky business.

9/11 shed light on religion for IR, encouraging more mainstream engagement with the subject. Whereas studies on religion and IR written before 9/11 focused on religion and violence, nowadays many focus on one particular religion: Islam. The problem is not the fixation on one particular religion. The problem, in terms of scientific analysis, is the

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dualism in which it is framed.[10] This dualism is either the framing that religion is about peace and that problems are only posed by misguided fanatics or lunatics who just don't get it right (i.e. the 'proper' religion). On the other side, there are the well-known, often atheistic criticisms trying to point out that religion as such is a problem no matter how it is interpreted. Another problem is the categorising of religions as cultural forces opposing each other, most famously argued for by Samuel Huntington.[11] What likely follows is that different religious traditions are differently developed in terms of modernity. Hence the assumption that what is necessary for those religions and cultures is to start a process like the European Enlightenment. The problems here described build on the understanding of 'religion' as a modern, Western *construction*,[12] but this leads to some subsequent epistemological shortcomings.[13]

Go, Measure Faith

The above-mentioned selection of problems and disputes on religion and IR are caused by one prevailing problem of social science epistemology: the desire to *code* religion as a *variable*. This is based on a 'Protestant' understanding of religion: to characterise religion as a *set of beliefs*, effectively reducing religion to theology—and, for that matter in IR, to political theology. The more extensive theoretical underpinning of this discussion is the differentiation between functionalistic (not what but *how* people believe; i.e. the 'doing') and substantive (what people believe; i.e. a set of beliefs or doctrines; i.e. the 'being') approaches to religion.[14] Again, Huntington's work is illustrative for this point. If we understand the set of beliefs of a given actor, we will be able to deduce that actor's behaviour. This is the belief that faith can be measured, based on the assumption that a certain set of beliefs can influence political behaviour or political choices and can therefore be categorised just like any other variable in the standard rational actor model. This understanding of religion leads to several theoretical and practical problems.

First, it underestimates what Scott Atran in the case of terrorism and religion research terms the 'devoted actor'. This is a type of actor, 'regardless of utilitarian calculations', willing 'to make extreme sacrifices based on a deontological evaluation of "appropriateness" rather than an instrumental calculus'.[15] Second, as outlined above, it leads to the desire to code and measure religion (i.e. particular believers). The resulting studies are valuable for IR theorising. However, and primarily, they are just that: coding faith according to the certain set of beliefs to which a group of people adheres. What follows is most often a confusion of correlation and causation. Most causal claims in IR studies relying on such research are nothing other than (assumed) claims.[16] Simply put, if two actors with two different coded identities are engaged in conflict, it is easy (and alluring) to jump to the conclusion that the reason for the conflict is their respective identities.

Third, it resembles the social science fixation on the 'why' question. Why does religion cause violence—that is, why does religion lead to violent political actions? What social sciences tend to ignore is that there is a considerable difference between *abstract* ideas (e.g. just war, jihad, pacifism, etc.) and 'informal religious ideas, practices, symbols, or social structures',[17] as Ron Hassner outlined. Thus, it is said to be necessary to explain *identities* in order to make statements on religious influence on political behaviour.[18] Identities are defined as 'a person's conception of which of his characteristics make him distinct from others according to his social role: is he a Lutheran, a Catholic, a German nationalist? Identities are made up in part of ideas, which people hold stably over the long term. A person with a Protestant identity, for instance, persists in holding Protestant ideas'. However, 'identities can change and do so when people come to hold new ideas and self-conceptions'.[19] Going further, Michael Oakeshott reminds us that identity 'is nothing more than an unbroken rehearsal of contingencies, each at the mercy of circumstance and each significant in proportion to its familiarity. It is not a fortress into which we may retire.'[20] 'Measuring' faith while following their research agenda is what many social scientists can certainly do very well. Nevertheless, the question remains whether we are not just measuring a certain set of beliefs and habits and expected practices which do not, in the end, provide much insight and is prone to lead to hasty conclusions.

The fourth problem arising from this understanding of religion and IR, after the desire to frame religion as a variable, is the general desire to 'integrate' religion into IR theory along the lines of Liberalism–Realism–Constructivism. This, of course, goes beyond the above-mentioned attempts and problems caused by attempts to explain and understand research puzzles where traditional IR and religion intersect. It resembles the will to integrate religion into IR theory. This can even lead to outcomes such as integrating religion into Neorealism.[21] One laudable outcome of this kind

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of research is that there are some textbooks on the topic available.[22] Nevertheless, the outcomes are inevitably reductive and sometimes idiosyncratic readings and interpretations of the already existing theoretical framework. Take, for example, Realism: 'Little do they know that they meet under an empty sky from which the gods have departed'—so Hans Morgenthau concedes for the universalistic aspirations of foreign policy.[23] This phrase and other selected phrases from Morgenthau and other Realists have often been taken to argue that in and for Realism, religion and ethical principles do not matter, or are at least of secondary importance.[24] However, it can also be understood as: 'whether Morgenthau's sky is empty of gods or not, what people believe about it matter..[25]

The 'new' nationalism, detached from religion, was, in Morgenthau's eyes, the main problem in the international sphere. 'The state has become indeed a "mortal God", and for an age that believes no longer in an immortal God, the state becomes the only God there is'[26] is therefore a very easily misunderstood phrase. Nicolas Guilhot aptly pointed out that Morgenthau's Realism was a criticism of the secularising tendencies that nationalism unleashes.[27] 'Little do they know ...' indeed that critique was—at least *also*—directed against liberal internationalism as the new (secular) paradigm unleashed from the national interest (which, for classical Realism, is itself more of an epistemological category than an ontological one). This episode on Realism illustrates two things. First, it shows there are many ways of reading the historiography of theoretical traditions. Along those ways we tend to confuse the theoretical and philosophical assumptions of theories. Second, it illustrates that there are beneficial engagements of IR thinking with political theology.[28] Most obviously they concern our understanding of particular terms and concepts such as the political, the state, sovereignty and many more.[29]

Pure and Unseparated: Additional Approaches

Making sense of religion and IR in epistemological terms seems a bit like overcoming the distinction between oil in water: pure and at the same time unseparated, as already outlined in my examination of the problematic concepts and terms of 'religion' and 'secularism'. To illustrate this point more comprehensively, I revisit, via the work of three authors, the practicability of the statement that religion and politics are not genuinely distinct from each other: René Girard, William Cavanaugh and Michael Walzer.

Girard's mimetic theory illustrates how a theory of the origins of culture and religion remains apt for explaining modern politics: human behaviour is shaped by the imitation of the desire of others.[30] Thus, we end up in a competition imitating the other's desires.[31] It is sameness that is a problem in the social sphere, not difference. People fight because they are the same; they fight over the same goods. Where difference and differentiation vanishes, the 'narcissism of the minor difference', as Sigmund Freud called it,[32] becomes overwhelming. In quantitative and qualitative terms, the most violent conflicts take place not between but within groups. Religions have been aware of this dynamic and in the past solved mimetic crises by sacrificing an innocent victim. It is, according to mimetic theory, no coincidence that the founding moment of religious traditions is most often a murder or human sacrifice—a scapegoat. The purpose of this is not least to canalise violence. Similar mechanisms are at work within the political sphere. The modern excess of responsibility, seeking to bring individuals to justice, is arguably a tendency that confirms some of the basic assumptions of mimetic theory, such as the scapegoat mechanism. 'Blaming and shaming' individuals, i.e. bringing them (e.g. warlords) to justice, is certainly a legitimate liberal achievement. At the same time, however, this tendency largely ignores the social conditions that led to the outcomes (e.g. mass murder).[33] More generally, mimetic theory illustrates that our modern judicial system and the arising international criminal law rests on scapegoating.[34]

In *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Cavanaugh argues not that religion is peaceful but that its opposed secular outputs (such as ideologies).[35] Further, and in line with Daniel Philpot's conclusions,[36] Cavanaugh argues against the popular IR narrative that the Protestant Reformation 'divided Christendom along religious lines' and that the 'wars of religion ... demonstrated to the West the inherent danger of public religion. The solution to the problem lay in the rise of the modern state'. Henceforward, the story gained foundational importance for the secular West, because it explains the origin of its way of life and its system of governance. It is a creation myth for modernity.[37] Consequently, a good question to ask is, 'what's so "religious" about "religious terrorism"?'[38]—and, for that matter, 'religious violence', since 'the dominant narrative is that religion caused the bloodshed of the Thirty Years' War, which European nation-states finally resolved through widespread adoption of secular forms of government'.[39]

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Finally, the communitarian Walzer pointed out that 'Drawing the Line', i.e. between the 'twin toleration'[40] of religion and politics, does not make much sense, even for a liberal understanding of politics:

So long as there are different ideas, no realisation can be definitive. On the religious or ideological side of the line, the good society can have an absolute form; on the political side, it is always provisional... It doesn't matter whether the conceptions are religious or secular; their protagonists have exactly the same right to join the competition.[41]

What is important here is not the way of managing the politics that Walzer defends in his argument. What is important is that the 'religious' and 'secular' spheres are not two absolutely distinct configurations of *power*. 'What counts as religious, secular or political in any given context is not only socially constructed; it is a function of different configurations of power surrounding the construction of the categories the religious, the secular and the political—and the boundaries between them.'[42]

Conclusion

During the course and aftermath of the so-called 'Salman Rushdie Affair', some early attempts at interpretive research and narrative theory on religion and politics were conducted. They can be summarised with the statement that '[w]hereas the Western liberal tradition places priority on individual autonomy, the Islamic tradition presents a communitarian view in which the concept of the self is realised collectively in the community of Islam and is defined through traditions and concepts of honour'.[43] 'Because' as Cecelia Lynch concludes, 'no religious doctrine can guide believers to appropriate action in all contexts, what should be done must be *interpreted*'.[44]

Less *theology* (i.e. understanding religion in substantial terms), therefore, and more religious *sociology* (i.e. understanding religion in functional terms) along with the study of *political* theory (i.e. in understanding what constitutes the political sphere) would constitute better research conduct and contribute a more nuanced understanding of 'Nations under God'. At the same time, theology remains a necessary part of the analysis and the essentialist–functionalist gap is a narrow one. In a 'spiritual' age, however, formalised and measurable (patterns and systems of) belief may no longer matter that much.[45]

Notes

[1] Acknowledgements: Austrian Science Fund (FWF) project P 25198-G16 *Which Structure, Whose Virtue? Realism's Premises on Men and Power*.

[2] Working Group on International Relations and Religion, 'Conclusion', in *Religion and International Relations: A Primer for Research*, 184–6, 184.

[3] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

[4] Interestingly enough, Taylor set out as a genuine liberal Philosopher and eventually became one of the foremost Catholic ones in recent years.

[5] See, for example, already John W. Meyer et al., 'World Society and the Nation-State', *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 1 (1997): 144–181.

[6] Peter L. Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A global overview', in *Religion and foreign affairs: Essential readings*, ed. Dennis Hoover and Douglas Johnston (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2012), 21–32.

[7] For that matter the work of sociologists of religion such as Peter L. Berger, Robert Wuthnow, Brian Grim, or Rodger Finke may be recalled. Peter L. Berger, 'Secularization Falsified', *First Things*, February 2008; Robert Wuthnow, 'Understanding Religion and Politics', *Daedalus* 120, no. 3 (Summer 1991); Brian J. Grim and Rodger Finke, 'Religious Persecution in Cross-National Context: Clashing Civilizations or Regulated Religious Economies', *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 4 (2007).

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- [8] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- [9] Ron E. Hassner, 'How to Cite a Sacred Text', *Politics and Religion* 6, no. 04 (2013).
- [10] Jonathan Fox, 'Multiple Impacts of Religion on International Relations: Perceptions and Reality'.
- [11] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2003).
- [12] Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A history of a modern concept* (New Haven Conn. u.a: Yale Univ. Press, 2013). Concerning IR see also Timothy Fitzgerald, *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth* (New York: Continuum, 2011).
- [13] Cecelia Lynch, *Interpreting international politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 88-91.
- [14] Mona K. Sheikh, 'How does religion matter? Pathways to religion in International Relations' *Review of International Studies* 38, no. 02 (2012).
- [15] Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran, 'Sacred Values and Cultural Conflict', in *Advances in Culture and Psychology, Volume 4*, ed. Michele J. Gelfand, Chi-yue Chiu and Ying-yi Hong, *Advances in Culture and Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA, 2013), 273–301, 276.
- [16] See, for example, Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011); Jonathan Fox, *A World Survey of Religion and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- [17] Ron E. Hassner, 'Religion as a Variable', in *Religion and International Relations: A Primer for Research*, 68–86; Ron Hassner, *Religion on the Battlefield* (Cornell University Press, forthcoming).
- [18] Sebastian Rosato, 'The Sufficiency of secular International Relations Theory', in *Religion and International Relations: A Primer for Research*, 176–83. For examples of the mentioned research see, for instance, Jonathan Fox, 'State Failure and the Clash of Civilisations: An Examination of the Magnitude and Extent of Domestic Civilizational Conflict from 1950 to 1996', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 2 (July 2003); Fox, *A World Survey of Religion and the State.*, Jonathan Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory & Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- [19] Daniel Philpott, 'The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations', *World Politics* 52, no. 2 (January 2000): 217. Philpott, at the example of the Protestant Revolution's impact on the Westphalian (states) system, illustrated that ideas which shape identities, in this case religious ideas, indeed alter the social role. Philpott, 'The Religious Roots of Modern International Relations', Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Still, this example reflects the prevailing acceptance and promoted thinking that a certain "set of ideas", a belief-system, is the reason for a certain kind of action.
- [20] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methnen, 1962), 170–1.
- [21] See, for example, Nukhet A. Sandal and Jonathan Fox, *Religion in international relations theory: Interactions and possibilities*, Routledge studies in religion and politics (London: Routledge, 2013).
- [22] See, for example, Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics*; Sandal and Fox, *Religion in international relations theory*. For another, and perhaps the very first of its kind, see particularly Jeffrey Haynes, *An Introduction to*

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International Relations and Religion, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2013).

[23] Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 233–4.

[24] See, for example, Sandal and Fox, *Religion in international relations theory*, 32–3. Counter evidence quotations are easily found but such a selective engagement provide first of all historiographical insights to Realism.

[25] Rebecca A. Glazier, Religion and realism: Charting a middle path for International Relations theory', in *Religion and the realist tradition: From political theology to international relations theory and back*, ed. Jodok Troy, Routledge studies in religion and politics (London and New York: Routledge), 176–84, 176.

[26] Hans J. Morgenthau, The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil', *Ethics* 56, no. 1 (October 1945): 15.

[27] Nicolas Guilhot, 'American Katechon: When Political Theology Became International Relations Theory', *Constellations* 17, no. 2 (2010). Some even claim a genuine religious heritage for Morgenthau's Realism. Ben Molloy, *Power and Transcendence: Hans J. Morgenthau and the Jewish Experience* (Lanham, Md: Lexington, 2002).

[28] See, for example, Nicolas. Rengger, 'On theology and international relations: World politics beyond the empty sky', *International Relations* 27, no. 2 (2013).

[29] Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, state, and self; the Gifford lectures* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Vendulka Kubálková, "Towards an International Political Theology," *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000); Péter Losonczi, Mika Luoma-aho and Aakash Singh, eds., *The future of political theology: Religious and theological perspectives* (Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

[30] René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore Md.: John Hopkins University Press, 1986); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (London: Athlone Press, 1988), translated by Patrick Gregory.

[31] For a recent primary source on mimetic theory see, for example, René Girard and Benoît Chantre, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

[32] Anton Blok, 'The Narcissism of Minor Differences', *European Journal of Social Theory* 1, no. 1 (1998).

[33] Kirsten Ainley, 'Individual Agency and Responsibility for Atrocity', In *Confronting evil in international relations: Ethical responses to problems of moral agency*. Edited by Renée Jeffery, 37–60 (New York, N.Y: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

[34] Nathan Kensey, 'Scapegoating the Guilty: Girard and International Criminal Law', In *Violence, Desire, and the Sacred: René Girard and Sacrifice in Life, Love, and Literature*. Edited by Scott Cowdell, Fleming Chris and Joel Hodge, 67–80 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

[35] William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[36] Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty*.

[37] Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 123.

[38] Jeroen Gunning and Richard Jackson, 'What's so "religious" about "religious terrorism"?', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 4, no. 3 (2011).

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[39] Cecelia Lynch, *Interpreting international politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 89.

[40] Alfred Stepan, 'Religion, Democracy, and the "Twin Tolerations"', *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 4 (October 2000).

[41] Michael Walzer, *Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), Selected, edited, and with an introduction by D. Miller, 159–60.

[42] Scott M Thomas, 'Culture, Religion and Violence: Rene Girard's Mimetic Theory', *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 1 (2014): 308–327, 317.

[43] M. M. Slaughter, 'The Salman Rushdie Affair: Apostasy, Honor, and Freedom of Speech', *Virginia Law Review* 79, no. 1 (1993): 153–204, 155.

[44] Cecelia Lynch, *Interpreting international politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 91. Talad Asad, 'The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam', *Qui Parle* 17, no. 2 (2009): 1–30.

[45] Harvey Cox and others see the world after an age of faith (i.e. understood as confidence) and an age of belief (e.g. opinion) in a spiritual era where traditional (hierarchical and structural sets and structures) of beliefs are on the retreat. Harvey Gallagher Cox, *The future of faith*, (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009).

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