

Politics of secularism and IR

Written by Elizabeth Shakman Hurd

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ELIZABETH SHAKMAN HURD, NOV 18 2008

It has been suggested that the rise of religion confronts IR theory with a theoretical challenge comparable to that of the end of the Cold War or the emergence of globalization. I agree. To understand why we need to turn to the politics of secularism. How might we think about secularisms, in the plural, as forms of political authority in contemporary international relations? What does this mean for IR theory and the resurgence of religion? What kinds of politics follow from different forms of secular commitments, traditions, habits, and beliefs?

My work brings debates from sociology of religion, philosophy, and political theory into international relations with the intention of refiguring a field that has virtually ignored questions involving how the categories of religion and politics shape international affairs. The secularist division between religion and politics is not fixed but socially and historically constructed. The failure to recognize that this is the case helps to explain why IR—both IR theory and in terms of the practices of international politics—has been unable to come to terms with secularism and religion (they go together) as forms of authority in world politics. Overcoming this problem—opening up the black box of secularism, digging into the complex negotiations that take place inside this box—allows for a better understanding of empirical puzzles in international relations involving the politics of religion such as conflict between the United States and Iran, controversy over the enlargement of the European Union to include Turkey, the rise of political Islam, and global religious resurgence.

Secularism refers to a series of social and historical traditions. These sets of practices have developed over time, and each has a history. These traditions both rely upon and help to produce particular understandings of “religion,” of political Islam, of religious resurgence, of “normal” politics, and so forth. Think about the fact that we don’t hear much about political Christianity, or political Judaism—this is subsumed for the most part under “normal politics”, but we do hear about political Islam. To figure out why this is the case, and what the consequences are politically, was one of the motivating puzzles of *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*. The division between religion and politics embodied in various secular traditions is neither stable nor universal. Take Craig Calhoun’s suggestion that we approach nationalism as a discourse within which political struggles are conducted. Secularism, adapting his formulation, “is not the solution to the puzzle [of politics and religion] but the discourse within which struggles to settle the question are most commonly waged.” Secularism is an authoritative discourse, a “tradition of argumentation.” It is a resource for collective mobilization and legitimation, a language in which moral and political questions are settled, legitimated and contested. It is a form of political authority, a language of politics.

Two trajectories of secularism have been influential in international politics: laicism, and what I call Judeo-Christian secularism. Laicism refers to a separationist narrative in which religion is expelled from politics, and Judeo-Christian secularism to an accommodationist narrative in which Judeo-Christian tradition is perceived as the fount and foundation of secular democracy. These varieties of secularism don’t map cleanly onto one country or one individual—both appear in different modes in different times and places. They are discursive traditions, collections of practices with a history. Each defends some form of the separation of church and state, but in different ways, with different justifications and political consequences.

Let me say something about secularism and Christianity, to convey a sense of how I developed the category of Judeo-Christian secularism. One way that I posed the question in the course of developing this category was, to what extent have we inherited particular religious traditions in our forms of secularism? Or to what extent does Christianity, or

Politics of secularism and IR

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after World War II, Judeo-Christian tradition, with all of the contradictions inherent in that hyphen, animate contemporary lived practices of secularism? It took Charles Taylor 900 pages to answer this question in *A Secular Age*, so let me just say that I regard secularism as a series of lived traditions which are indebted to religious tradition and practice in significant ways, but the nature and significance of this debt varies according to the form of secularism and the historical context in which it is operative. We need to study varieties of secularism in particular historical, cultural, and political contexts, rather than in the abstract (on Taylor's book see my review in the June 2008 issue of *Political Theory*). The varieties of secularism that I write about are indebted to Christianity in interesting and complex ways, but laicism in particular is also indebted to French Enlightenment thought which is deeply anti-clerical.

The first implication from a global and comparative angle of thinking about secularism in these terms is that it becomes clear that there are many traditions or varieties of secularism (Turkish Kemalism, French *laïcité*, American "Judeo-Christian" secularism). Each represents a contingent yet powerful political settlement of the relation between religion and politics. Secularisms, then, are constantly evolving, never fixed in stone. They are produced and renegotiated through laws, practices, customs, traditions, and social relations, including international relations. Yet forms of secularism become so entrenched that they claim to be and are often seen as exempt from this process of production. This is a powerful move. Secularization may be understood as the social and historical processes through which a particular settlement becomes authoritative, legitimated and embedded in and through individuals, the law, the state, and other social relations, including international relations.

A second implication for global and comparative politics is that secularism cannot be fully understood without reference to European and global history, including colonial history. This is one point at which I part ways with Taylor's rich genealogy of the secular—for me it cannot be fully understood absent this global context, for him it can. Secularisms have been created through actions and beliefs and cannot be abstracted from the historical contexts and circumstances from which they emerged. So while on the one hand French *laïcité* emerged out of and remain indebted to both the Enlightenment critique of religion and Judeo-Christian tradition, on the other it has been constituted through global relationships, including negative representations of Islam.

A third implication of opening up the question of the politics of secularism is that it presents an alternative to realist, liberal and constructivist accounts of international relations that work on the assumption that religion has been privatized. I challenge the assumption that after the Westphalian settlement religion was privatized and thereby rendered largely irrelevant to power politics. Modern forms of secular authority emerged out of a specifically Christian-dominated Westphalian moral order. The influence of this tradition upon the Westphalian secular settlement makes it difficult to subsume the current international order into realist and liberal frameworks that assume that religion was simply privatized. Modern forms of secularism contribute to the constitution of a particular idea and practice of state sovereignty that claims to be universal in part by defining the limits of state-centered politics with "religion" on the outside. Yet this attempt to delimit the terms and boundaries of the political and to define religion as a private counterpart to politics is a historically and culturally variable claim. Different varieties of secularism perpetuate this claim about the limits of modern politics in different ways. From this perspective, they appear not as unchanging or obvious, as we may be inclined to perceive them, but as contingent political settlements operating below the threshold of public discourse.

A final implication for IR involves the domestic/international question. Shared interests, identities and understandings about religion and politics developed at the domestic and regional levels are influential at the systemic level. This is constructivist theorizing that makes domestic politics a central part of the story. I take up Ole Wæver's complaint that "constructivism has started out working mostly at the systemic level," and there is a need to consider the "benefits of the opposite direction." My emphasis counteracts the tendency in IR, identified by Rodney Hall, to "relegate domestic-societal interaction, sources of conflict, or societal cohesiveness to the status of epiphenomena." This is a constructivist approach to the social, cultural and religious foundations of international relations.

If I'm right about the politics of secularism, then the answer to the question often thrown about among students of religion and IR, "what is religion and how does it relate to international relations theory/practice?" misses the point. For there can be no universal definition of religion. This is as Asad argues "not only because its constituent elements

Politics of secularism and IR

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are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.” We need to go deeper. If the categories of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ are themselves the products of complex cultural, historical and political negotiations, then how do these categories take shape and become authoritative, at what costs, and with what political consequences? To define the secular and the religious is a political decision. Religious beliefs and practice are interwoven with political authority in complex and changing ways that don’t align with state boundaries or conventional secularist assumptions. IR theorists need to examine secularist assumptions about religion that are embedded in the hypotheses and the empirical tests of IR scholarship.

I conclude with four take-away points for IR scholars:

- International relations theorists need to pay closer attention to how foundational cultural and normative categories such as the secular and religion operate politically in international affairs. Varieties of secularism are not reducible to material power or resources but play a constitutive role in creating agents that represent and respond to the world in particular ways. They also contribute to the international normative structures in which these agents interact.
- Until recently, a consensus separating a Judeo-Christian “sacred” from an allegedly universal “secular” reason has defined the terms through which the sacred and the secular are conceptualized in the field of international relations. Yet as other formulations of the sacred-secular binary make themselves heard this consensus is showing signs of strain. How these strains are addressed is critical to the future of world politics: in a pluralistic world claims to universality grounded either in the claim to have overcome all religio-cultural particularities (as in laicism) or to have located the key to successful moral and political order in a particular religio-cultural heritage (as in Judeo-Christian tradition) are both problematic.
- Secularisms developed at the domestic and regional levels are influential at the systemic level in international politics. These secularisms, reflecting shared interests, identities, and understandings about religion and politics, are part of the social and cultural foundations of international relations. They contribute to the construction of national and supranational interests and identities and play a role in international conflict and cooperation.
- The historical particularities and philosophical contingencies of various forms of secularism suggest that realist, liberal and constructivist theories of international relations, international law, and international order that consider “religion” to be a private affair need to be reconsidered.

*Elizabeth Shakman Hurd writes and teaches about political culture, political theory, international relations and foreign policy, specializing in relations between Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. Her first book, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, was published by Princeton University Press in 2008. Recent articles include “Political Islam and foreign policy in Europe and the United States,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2007), “Theorizing religious resurgence,” *International Politics* (2007), and “Negotiating Europe: The politics of religion and the prospects for Turkish accession to the EU,” *Review of International Studies* (2006). Professor Hurd is currently developing a new book-length project that will examine interactions between law and religion in international politics. She is also co-editing, with Linell Cady, a volume entitled *Varieties of Secularism: Religion, Politics, and Pluralism in a Global Age*, and working on contributions to several other edited volumes on secularism, religion, and international affairs.*

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Politics of secularism and IR

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