

Review - Religion and the Realist Tradition

Written by Brent J. Steele

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - Religion and the Realist Tradition

<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/09/26/review-religion-and-the-realist-tradition/>

BRENT J. STEELE, SEP 26 2015

Religion and the Realist Tradition: From Political Theology to International Relations Theory and Back
Edited by Jodok Troy
New York: Routledge, 2014.

This edited volume has two related purposes—to explore the role religion has played upon the development of realism (or upon particular realists), and to assess how realism addresses religious issues in global politics. It definitely has identified a hole in most discussions of religion and international relations (though Sandal and James 2010 represents a noteworthy exception) by picking what seems to be the low-hanging fruit of how religion influences a pluralistic but still regularly-invoked perspective of IR theory: realism.

Although the contributors spend much of their efforts focusing upon realism's past, there is no doubt that the present looms large in their essays. Indeed, realism is strategically situated to serve as a vehicle for thinking about religion, since it focuses on 'human and moral choices, even if they are tragic,' in the Introductory words of Jodok Troy (1). Yet, my guess is that the reason why realism resonates with this purpose *right now* is because its skepticism, rather than its confrontation of religious issues related to global politics, is on the whole accepted by most of the contributors. In this sense, this is another work of what I once titled 'reflexive realism' (Steele 2007, 207), a recovery of 'practical ethics important for contemporary world politics'.

However, while this is a further example of a study and group of scholars using classical realism to grapple with the somewhat apocalyptic visions circulating in global politics for at least the past two decades, there is an additional purpose served by this volume in the wake of the past decade in particular. Especially after American invocations of Christianity for all kinds of messianic purposes, this volume goes a long way towards restoring the possibility that religion could have a more meaningful, contemplative influence—like the role it once played—upon the development of international thought in the near and distant future. I would suggest that many scholars of my generation—and there are several of my contemporaries making forceful arguments in this volume—wince a bit when religion or religious themes are brought out simply because it has been associated with messianic, dour, violent, or problematic practices in the past (see, for example, Lynch 2014). Take, for instance, the 'torture' debates of the past decade. Not only has torture received substantial support in the United States, but the sub-group most enthusiastically supportive of the practice includes evangelical Christians and non-Hispanic Catholics. Further, the more 'religious' individuals are, the more likely they are to support torture (Steele 2013, 181). Like the torture debate, similar episodes that played out during the 2000s demonstrate how a religious group's blind but admittedly real 'faith' in authority facilitates decidedly unchristian-like preferences. Yet this volume refreshingly restores a more chastened and even skeptical sensibility, found and fostered by a focus on the intersection between religion and realism.

If on this metric—the ability to clear a path for utilizing religion to understand IR theory and vice-versa—and not on the well-trodden (but still productive!) path of using Niebuhr and Morgenthau (the two main resources consulted by contributors) to speak to contemporary debates, then the volume's contribution emerges clearly and somewhat powerfully.

That said, one issue that I hope readers will be able to get past so they can engage this volume enthusiastically is the somewhat unconventional Introduction by Jodok Troy. Most Introductory chapters to edited volumes provide a

Review - Religion and the Realist Tradition

Written by Brent J. Steele

background to the topic, defend the scope of the inquiry and the necessity for it, and then introduce the sections of the volume as well as the contributions. Troy's introduction does *some* of this, but seems equally preoccupied with providing some kind of take on Morgenthau and his relationship to religion. It also critiques the second chapter by Ben Mollov, saying it may 'go too far' and that its arguments remain 'vulnerable' (13). I am all for debate in a volume—it definitely can make for lively reading—but I remain unsure about the logic of undermining some of the contributions that follow before the reader supposedly gets to them.

Troy also has mixed results in his efforts to define the scope of the main concepts or referents of the volume—namely, realism and religion. He concludes (5) that realism 'is a broad theoretical framework of international affairs which cannot be captured in one definition'—this only paragraphs after evaluating other attempts to do just that. The fallback position for Troy is a familiar one—adjectivizing realisms: Neorealism, Neoclassical realism, Ethical Realism, and the like. His engagement of 'a notion of religion in international relations' is a bit more useful, delineating religious traditions as incorporating both an inclusive and exclusive tendency (7). Yet even here the discussion moves on to realism without any real appreciation for what religion is. And this too is a tension that the volume's contributors grapple with to varying degrees—is religion about 'morality', or something more narrowly defined? If the former, no one would argue that realism has something to say about 'religion' (or moral issues that religion but also secular perspectives can speak to). If the latter, then really most of the contributions are dealing with the influence of particular religious traditions upon realists, rather than *realism*, a distinction that could be noted more explicitly in this somewhat uneven Introduction.

Readers should not be too distracted by the Introduction or its difficulties. Though it does not adequately set the reader up for the trenchant and effective contributions that follow, Troy deserves accolades and credit for recruiting an extremely talented, lively, and insightful group of contributors to speak to this topic in accessible and vibrant ways.

The Layout of *Religion and the Realist Tradition*

Organized into three sections, the book's chapters include contributions in section one on the role of religion in the worldviews of Morgenthau (Mollov), Niebuhr (Carlson and Lynch), and Butterfield (Lynch). Amanda Beattie's fascinating exploration of Augustine's thought, as well as Aquinas's, explicates their role in the development of Christian Realism. Section two looks at the value added by realism for addressing religion and religion's role in contemporary global politics, beginning with a critique of liberalism's deficiencies in this regard by Eric Patterson. Perhaps my two favorite chapters appear in this section, including an examination by Hartmut Behr and Felix Roesch of Morgenthau's theme on anti-hubris, and Christoph Rohde's chapter utilizing Niebuhr, and the contemporarily sexy 'virtue ethics' approach to reveal the norm 'constituting' potential of religion within a political community.

The third and final section may be the one, as a whole, that provides the most impact going forward. With contributions from Kubalkova and Luoma-aho, Nexon and Henne, and Glazier, that concluding section assesses how IR theory more generally not only can but must take from the realists engaged in the preceding chapters a set of instructions for how to engage religion in future studies and developments in the field of IR.

Religion, Realism, and Method

There are two general methodological issues that the volume confronts, albeit obliquely in some instances. One centers on which examples suffice to demonstrate religion's influence on realism (or realists) and/or realism's engagement with religion. Put another way, how does one 'demonstrate' either of these relationships? Mollov has one suggestion:

Evidence for the Jewish influence on these aspects of his work and activity can be derived from both direct testimony from Morgenthau himself and circumstantial evidence connected to Morgenthau's background as a German Jew and émigré (22).

This makes sense, at least initially, as a good method or tactic to disclose the influence of one particular religion, faith, or culture (or some combination of all) upon one of the founders of modern realism. Additionally, this will open

Review - Religion and the Realist Tradition

Written by Brent J. Steele

the way to some unfamiliar but fascinating vignettes about Niebuhr's relationship with Morgenthau, which may even surprise some scholars that have followed their relationship, or the literature on it, fairly closely over the years. Niebuhr, the Christian Realist and theologian, actually served, in Mollov's words, as Morgenthau's 'Judaic mentor.' In fact, 'Niebuhr quite possibly acted as a catalyst and conduit for Morgenthau for evoking stimulating aspects of Jewish philosophical doctrine and outlook' (30).

Yet when we get into other contexts treated in Mollov's presentation, it seems some of the Jewish experience and background important to Morgenthau is collapsed into his views on Israel. Mollov asserts that 'Morgenthau's harsh view of international relations was reflected in its sharpest form in the case of Israel, which as we have seen was affected by his Jewish experience' (25). Yet that seems to conflate two processes or experiences which obviously *could* relate to one another, but don't necessarily have to. Morgenthau seems to have been influenced by a variety of resources, sources, and experiences (see Mollov 2006; Lebow 2003; Williams 2007; Lang 2007; Frei 2001; Tjalve 2008). While not per se incorrect, it seems a little too convenient to reduce Morgenthau's 'harsh' views of International Politics to his Jewish experiences vis-à-vis Israel.

Yet, overall the evidence gathered for both the influence of religion on realism (and realists) through the aforementioned sources, and the presence of realism for grappling with religion in international relations (through empirical applications of realists and their assertions), is fairly compelling.

There is also another methodological issue that comes through and is fairly well-resolved in the contributions—that of interpretation and reconstruction (or what Carlson calls a realism that is 'reconstructed for our times' [39]). Put another way, how do the authors take studies and arguments issued towards one particular set of contexts (largely in the early-to-mid 20th centuries, but in Beattie's chapter even earlier via Augustine) and 'reconstruct' (Steele 2011; Teson 1998) these texts or voices for contemporary concerns? Most of the contributors answer this question quite persuasively.

A good example of how this is done effectively comes from Cecelia Lynch's chapter on Niebuhr and Butterfield. Regarding Niebuhr, Lynch acknowledges other interpretations and 'readings', noting that their focus on his views of economic justice left Niebuhr with an 'ongoing commitment to act', rendering him more optimistic rather than pessimistic about the world. Lynch, however, moves to 'a different view ...one that [she] finds more accurately reflected in Niebuhr's writings' and one that reveals the 'disconnect' in some of Niebuhr's writings and faith in God's law. Niebuhr for Lynch, and others she cites, becomes more paralyzed or restrained than active due to a 'Political Theology [that] ultimately leaves him more dependent than ever on the mystery of redemption rather than any actual ability to act ethically in the world' (89-90). Of course, the 'truth' of how to read Niebuhr could be a combination of both—what's described elsewhere as the recognition of limits to realize freedom (Steele 2007). Yet, what is important here is that Lynch's contribution demonstrates *how* one should go about reconstructing these texts and scholars' voices for contemporary purposes—by both acknowledging other readings and then arguing for one's own in a particular context and applied to a particular purpose.

Opportunities Missed, Opportunities Taken

There are a couple of missed opportunities or issues that emerge in the volume. For while there is a focus on Judaism and Christianity vis-à-vis realism and realists, there is little focus or only sparse acknowledgment of religious *institutions* that are global 'actors' in their own right. In this case, the limited treatment of the role of the Catholic Church in International Relations is noteworthy, especially given Troy's (2008; 2013) interest in the subject. Perhaps it was not germane or of interest to the realists examined in the volume, but one guesses that a contributor or two could have marshaled a realist reading *of* the Catholic Church's influence on a variety of international developments over the years. We might think of Liberation Theology's influence on some of the social movements of Central and South America throughout the late 20th century, or perhaps the very different approaches Popes Pius XI and XII took toward the emerging threat of Nazism prior to and then during the Second World War?

Second, the applications to the field and perspectives of International Relations, found in the concluding chapters of the volume (9-11) are at once both the most accessible and useful for IR scholars trying to get a 'take' on the big

Review - Religion and the Realist Tradition

Written by Brent J. Steele

picture that emerges from the volume, yet also the most vulnerable to critique, perhaps because of their general assertions or statements. Take, for instance, one concluding implication issued by Henne and Nexon about 'constructivist' treatments of religion and realism, namely that they presume 'all ideas are principled and all ideational effects on politics are positive' (171). Of course, others have made the same generalizations about constructivism, that it is liberal or idealist in its formulation (see Barkin 2003). Yet, it is ironic that these authors, and Nexon especially (see Nexon and Jackson 2004), would categorize 'constructivism' and its treatment of religion in such optimistic tones, considering the *many* constructivist works appearing in the 2000s that use both realism and at-times even post-structuralism to render that violent decade in anything but optimistic terms (see Steele 2010, conclusion, and Barder and Levine 2012, for engagements). Many of those constructivist-minded scholars would surely agree with Henne's and Nexon's claims that 'classical realism therefore provides us with a counter to overly optimistic ... approaches to international relations' (171), but that was precisely the end to which many 'post-second-generation' constructivist scholars utilized classical realism throughout the 2000s, a trend they do not identify.

This is only to suggest that the more general and accessible the contributions to this volume are (a type of valuable contribution to be sure), the more prone or vulnerable to critique they may be by other scholars focused on similar big picture concerns. Nevertheless, there are some specific treatments of themes or concepts that deserve to be identified precisely for their richness, not to mention their promise as a tonic to the contemporary global political conditions. In this respect, I found the Behr and Roesch chapter engaging the 'ethics of anti-hubris' in Morgenthau's work especially inspiring. Theirs is both diagnosis and prognosis—explicating what exactly the purpose of an ethics of anti-hubris served in Morgenthau's work and how we can go about identifying hubris and resisting it today, *wherever* it may be. Although it runs counter to the proclamations issued to graduate students and junior scholars especially to 'market' themselves with confidence and certainty, an ethics of anti-hubris could lead to a more tolerable and collaborative field of International Relations as much as it could facilitate 'citizens in Western democracies to actively and constantly engage in the construction of their democracies' (122-123).

References

- Barkin, S. (2003). Realist-constructivism. *International Studies Review*, 5(3), 325-342.
- Frei, C. (2001). *Hans J. Morgenthau: An intellectual biography*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.
- Lang, A. F. (2002). *Agency and ethics: The politics of military intervention*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Lang, A. F. (2007). Morgenthau, agency, and Aristotle, in M. C. Williams (ed.), *Realism reconsidered: The legacy of Hans Morgenthau in international relations*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 18-41.
- Lebow, R. N. (2003). *The tragic vision of politics: Ethics, interests, and orders*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lynch, C. (2014). A neo-Weberian approach to studying religion and violence. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43(1), 273-290.
- Molloy, S. (2009). Aristotle, Epicurus, Morgenthau and the political ethics of the lesser evil. *Journal of International Political Theory*, 5(1), 94-112.
- Nexon, D., and Jackson, P. (2004). Constructivist-realism or realist-constructivism? *International Studies Review*, 6(2), 337-341.
- Sandal, N. A., and James, P. (2010). Religion and international relations theory: Towards a mutual understanding. *European Journal of International Relations*, 17(1), 3-25.
- Steele, B. J. (2007). 'Eavesdropping on honored ghosts': From classical to reflexive realism. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 10(3), 272-300.

Review - Religion and the Realist Tradition

Written by Brent J. Steele

Steele, B. J. (2010). *Defacing power: the aesthetics of insecurity in global politics*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Steele, B. J. (2011). Revisiting classical functional theory: towards a twenty-first century micropolitics. *Journal of International Political Theory*, 7(1), 11-39.

Steele, B. J. (2013). The insecurity of America: The curious case of torture's escalating popularity, in E. A. Heinze (ed.), *Justice, sustainability, and security: Global ethics for the 21st century*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 171-204.

Téson, F. R. (1998). Kantian international liberalism, in D. Mapel and T. Nardin (eds.), *International society: Diverse ethical perspectives*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 103-113.

Tjalve, V. S. (2008). *Realist strategies of republican peace: Neibuhr, Morgenthau and the politics of patriotic dissent*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Troy, J. (2008). The Catholic Church: An underestimated and necessary actor in international affairs. *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, 9(1), 65-73.

Troy, J. (2013). Invisible legions: The pope and international relations. *E-International Relations* [online]. 10 April 2013. Available from <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/04/10/invisible-legions-the-pope-and-international-relations/>.

Williams, M. C., ed. (2007). *Realism reconsidered: The legacy of Hans Morgenthau in international relations*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

About the author:

Brent J. Steele is the Francis D. Wormuth Presidential Chair and Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah. He is the author of *Alternative Accountabilities in Global Politics: The Scars of Violence* (Routledge, 2013); *Defacing Power: The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2010); and *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (Routledge, 2008). He is also the co-editor of three books, most recently *Reflexivity and International Relations* (Routledge, forthcoming 2015), and has published articles in a number of international studies journals. He is currently researching restraint in global politics.