

## Religion and Culture

Written by John A. Rees

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# Religion and Culture

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JOHN A. REES, JAN 8 2017

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Religion and culture seem like complex ideas to study from the perspective of International Relations. After all, scholars and philosophers have long debated the meaning of these terms and the impact they have had on our comprehension of the social world around us. So is it an impossibly complicated task to study religion and culture at the global level? Fortunately, the answer is ‘no’, for we can recognise and respect complexity without being confused about what we mean by each term. In this chapter, which completes the first section of the book, we will explore why thinking about religious and cultural factors in global affairs is as integral as the other issues we have covered thus far.

What do we mean by the terms ‘religion’ and ‘culture’? Where can we see examples of religion and culture at work in the domains of world politics? How do religious and cultural factors impact on our ability to live together? Our investigation will begin to address these questions. As we do so, we shall keep in mind the encouragement of rabbi and political philosopher Jonathan Sacks, who wrote that ‘sometimes it is helpful to simplify, to draw a diagram rather than a map in order to understand what may be at stake in a social transition’ (1997, 55). There has indeed been a transition in IR thinking about the value of religion and culture.

How can we define religion and culture in a way that is useful to the study of world politics? It is important to sketch each term separately before bringing them back together to form a composite picture. We begin with religion, a category that scholars and policymakers once considered irrelevant to the study of IR because it was not believed to be important for the economic and security interests of modern states and their citizens. Yet, many scholars now hold that religion cannot be ignored. While the idea of culture has equally been underplayed in IR, its inclusion in analyses of world affairs predates that of religion and is considered less controversial. We shall consider four elements of each category and then make important linkages between them so that religion and culture make sense as whole, rather than fragmented, ideas.

### Elements of religion

Following the Al Qaeda attacks on the US on 11 September 2001 (often called 9/11), studies of religion in world politics increased sixfold. In the words of Robert Keohane, the events of 9/11 provoked the realisation that ‘world-shaking political movements have so often been fuelled by religious fervour’ (2002, 29). Indeed, whether it is the disruptions of religion-led revolution, the work of religious development agencies responding to natural disasters, peace-making efforts of religious diplomats or a myriad of other examples, even a glance at global affairs over recent decades seems to support the comment of sociologist Peter Berger that ‘the world today ... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever’ (1999, 2).

Such a view also seems supported by the numbers as ‘worldwide, more than eight-in-ten people identify with a religious group’ (Pew 2012, 9). Are you numbered among the 20 or 80 per cent? Do you think religious influence on global affairs is a welcome inclusion or a significant problem? Regardless of where we stand, it appears a closer look at the ‘religion question’ is in order if we are to establish a fuller picture of IR. The following four elements of religion

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may provide a useful introduction.

## *1. God(s) and forces in the public square*

The first element of religion is the belief that divine beings and/or forces hold relevance to the meaning and practice of politics today and throughout history. These beings are sometimes understood as a knowable God or gods, sometimes as mythical and symbolic figures from our ancient past and sometimes as impersonal forces beyond the physical realm.

Different religious traditions understand the influence of religion upon politics in different ways. Traditions that we might call 'fundamental' propose that politics is a matter of organising society according to divine commands. In Iran, for example, the highest court in the land is a religious one, drawing its principles from the Shia branch of Islam – the second largest Islamic tradition worldwide after the majority Sunni tradition. This court has the power to veto laws of parliament and decide who can hold power. Likewise, in Myanmar (formerly Burma) an influential group of religious monks has started a movement intent on imposing Buddhist principles on the whole country, including non-Buddhist minorities. Thus, some religious politics is based on 'fundamentals' that, in the view of adherents, cannot be changed without the standards of society also being compromised.

By contrast, traditions that adopt a 'contextual' approach hold that politics is a matter of influencing society according to divine principles but as part of a wider tapestry of influences. For example, religious development organisations such as the Aga Khan Development Network (also from the Shia branch of Islam) work in areas of health care and education in countries of Africa and Asia without seeking to control entire political systems. Likewise, in Myanmar, the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007 saw Buddhist monks stand with the poor against the ruling military dictatorship and support the beginnings of multi-party democracy. In these examples, religious politics is adapted to changing circumstances and takes into account diverse interests and beliefs across society.

What is common to both fundamental and contextual religious traditions is an understanding that politics is in some sort of interactive relationship with the intentions of, or traditions shaped by, gods (or God) and spiritual forces. This contrasts strongly with secular approaches that demote, and sometimes deny altogether, a role for religion in political affairs.

Do you believe that religion has a role to play in public debates or should it be confined to private spirituality only? From an individual point of view, we could address this question by asking what it would be like to live in societies that are either entirely controlled by religion, or entirely without religion. What would the benefits and losses be in each situation? It can be strongly argued that neither scenario exists in pure form. When religion has been used to dominate the public square, a diversity of groups (non-religious and religious) have risen in opposition. Likewise, when religion has been expelled from the public domain, religious actors and interests go underground waiting for a chance to re-emerge.

## *2. Sacred symbols (re)defining what is real*

The second element of religion are rituals that re-order the world according to religious principle. Although the word 'faith' can be associated with belief in unseen realities, humans throughout time have needed to see, touch and smell the sacred. Our senses are portals to the spirit. Therefore, rituals function as tangible symbols of the intangible realm. For examples of different studies that consider the public rituals of Judaism, Islam and Hinduism respectively see Beck (2012), Bronner (2011) and Haider (2011). While some religious rituals are private or hidden, many are performed in public spaces or in ways that are openly accessible to wider society. As such, they are a part of public life – which is one of the original definitions of the word politics.

For religious adherents, rituals symbolise spiritual truths but they can also redefine how power can be understood in the material world. Thomas Merton once described his experience of watching Trappist monks perform the rituals of the Catholic Mass in very political terms. He wrote:

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The eloquence of this liturgy [communicated] one, simple, cogent, tremendous truth: this church, the court of the Queen of Heaven, is the real capital of the country in which we are living. These men, hidden in the anonymity of their choir and their white cowls, are doing for their land what no army, no congress, no president could ever do as such: they are winning for it the grace and the protection and the friendship of God. (Merton 1948, 325)

Merton's experience of redefining power and influence through sacred symbols is true for millions of people practising thousands of different religious rituals each day. Beyond the experience of individuals, states also seek divine blessing. For example, over one-fifth of states today have a monarch (such as a king, queen or emperor). Although monarchs differ in the extent of their powers – from figureheads controlled by parliaments to absolute rulers to variations of these – they all draw their power from some form of religious or spiritual authority. The elaborate rituals of monarchies worldwide are understood by their subjects to symbolise divine blessing for the realm and its citizens, redefining where the real power lies.

### *3. Sacred stories connecting past, present and future*

The third element of religion is teaching traditions based on stories of significant figures, events and ideas from the past and beliefs about the future of time itself – like a spoiler alert about the end of the world. For some religions, however, time itself is an illusion and the main focus is living in the now according to sacred ideas rather than the connection of past–present–future. These elements – interpreting the past, projecting the future, living now – are basic to the development of political ideologies also. Therefore, sometimes religious and political groups can appeal to the same stories or ideas even though the interpretation or intent may differ significantly.

For example, both Jews and Christians uphold the idea of 'Jubilee' as central to understanding the story and/or future promise of a Messiah who would usher in a new era of justice with peace (or 'shalom'). In the 1990s members of both communities appealed to one aspect of Jubilee – a tradition of debt cancellation found in the Hebrew Bible – as the basis for addressing the debt crisis facing developing nations. Only a few years later, this sacred story was used for very different purposes by US president George W. Bush, who celebrated the 2003 invasion of Iraq by quoting a Jubilee text from the Book of Isaiah: 'To the captives come out, and to those in darkness be free' (Monbiot 2003). Sacred stories, ideas and teachings from the past have a richness and power that can influence political affairs today and the aspirations we hold for tomorrow. It is no wonder that the anthropologist Talal Asad once observed that what we today call religion has 'always been involved in the world of power' (2003, 200).

### *4. A community worshipping and acting together*

The fourth element common to most religions is the need for believers to belong to a faith community in order to practice sacred rituals and reinforce the truth of sacred stories. Some religious traditions could be described as high demand, requiring strict adherence to rules and standards in order to maintain membership of the faith community. Other traditions are low demand, adopting a more flexible approach to the requirements for belonging faithfully to the community. Both forms of faith commitment are expressions of religion as 'identity politics' connected to who we are (that is, who we understand ourselves to be) and how we live.

The connection between religion and identity politics can have individual and international significance. For instance, empowered by belonging to a faith community, individuals can act in ways that they might not otherwise have done in isolation. Rosa Parks, an African American woman who famously refused to obey American racial segregation laws and sparked a nation-wide civil rights movement in the 1960s, is often lauded as a heroic individual. This may be true, but as a member of a religious community that affirmed human dignity and the divine principles of racial equality, Rosa Parks was never acting in isolation (Thomas 2005, 230–240). This can be understood internationally also, as many (if not most) faith communities have a transnational membership, and some of these exert significant influence on political issues varying from religion-inspired terrorist action against 'Western' values (after all, not all religious politics is peace-orientated) to faith coalitions for environmental sustainability.

The four elements of religion described above – the significance of gods and spirits, the power of holy rituals, the telling of sacred stories and belonging to faith communities – seem in their own ways to be a core aspect of the

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human condition in the twenty-first century. Although many dimensions of the religious experience can be 'politics-free', both history and contemporary events remind us that these combined elements of religion can have a political impact on individuals, nations and international society.

## Elements of culture

We can approach the term culture in the same way we have considered religion. There are many proposed meanings of culture, and these vary from the simple to the complex. While each approach has real value for understanding the social world around us, we will opt for a simple version that still gives us plenty to work with. As such, we begin with an understanding of culture as the combined effect of humanly constructed social elements that help people live together. We will explore four elements of culture, illustrating each element through individual and international political experience.

### *1. Common life practised in society*

The first element of culture has to do with common or shared life. While media reporting seems to constantly prioritise stories of war, conflict and controversy, it is equally the case that local, national and international society requires a remarkable degree of cooperation. How do we live together? Common bonds can sometimes be forged through family ties (as the saying goes, 'you can choose your friends but you are stuck with your relatives'), economic interests ('what matters most is the colour of your money') or security concerns ('the enemy of my enemy is my friend'). Yet, there are other bonds that are forged at the social level as peoples of difference find ways to live together in the same space by forging common beliefs, habits and values. It is from this practice of common life that culture often emerges.

Sport provides good examples of culture as common life. Let us think about football (also known as soccer). Local football clubs can be founded on distinct community identity. For example, local Australian players from a Greek background can play for a team sponsored by the Hellenic Association. Clubs can equally represent a locality rather than a particular group. For example, the Smithfield Stallions of Sydney might have individual players from Greek, Ethiopian, British and Turkish background. Regardless of background, at the international level all players in these clubs have a loyalty to the Australian football team. Football is the common bond – a sporting pastime but also cultural practice. Think about the way entire nations can be said to embody the activities of its national sporting heroes. Supporters from different countries will identify their team as playing in a certain style, even if these are stereotypes and not entirely accurate: do all Eastern European teams play with structure and discipline? Do all South American sides use flamboyance and spontaneity? The larger point, for both individuals and nations, is the tangible power of a sporting pastime to generate common bonds from the local to the international (Rees 2016, 179–182). That bond is an expression of culture.

### *2. Symbols of group identity*

The second element of culture are symbols of identity. Constructing and interpreting 'signs' is a basic activity in any society. The kinds of sign I am referring to are tangible reminders in modern societies of who we are as a people. They include styles of architecture (such as bridges or religious buildings), land or waterscapes that influence the activity of life (such as in harbour cities), monuments, flags and other identity banners, styles of clothing and habits of dress, distinctive food and drink – and so on. These signs are more than a tourist attraction, they are symbols that inform members about who they are as a group and that help the group live together cohesively.

Consider, for example, the individual and international significance of national flags as cultural symbols. For individuals, a flag can be so powerful that citizens are prepared to die on the fields of battle fighting for its honour, representing as it does the 'way of life' of the nation. The Star-Spangled Banner as the anthem of the United States of America describes the power of a national flag to inspire individual and national devotion. Written by Francis Scott Key in 1814 after he spotted the symbol of America still flying following a night of fierce British bombardment, Scott's moving ode to freedom includes the famous words, 'O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave; O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?'. The answer for Key was yes, the flag symbolising defiance and the promise of

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victory.

Equally, persecuted communities within a country might see a national or regional flag as a symbol of oppression rather than freedom, symbolising a dominant way of life that excludes them. In all regions of the world nationalist groups fight for autonomy or independence from a country or countries that surround them, and do so under alternative flags that represent their own cultural identity. The flag of the Canadian province of Quebec, for example, employs religious and cultural symbols reflecting its origins as a French colony in the new world. Quebec nationalists campaigning for independence from Canada have employed the flag in the promotion of French language, cultural preservation and Quebecois identity. National separatist groups worldwide are similarly inspired by symbols of culture they are trying to preserve.

### *3. Stories of our place in the world*

The third element of culture is the power of story. Like the cultural use of symbols, societies need to tell stories. These may be about individuals and groups, of events in the distant and recent past, of tales of victory and defeat involving enemies and friends – and so on. Such stories are told to reaffirm, or even recreate, ideas of where that society belongs in relation to the wider world. As such, stories are performances designed to influence what we understand to be real (Walter 2016, 72–73). Sometimes cultural difference can be most starkly understood by the different stories societies tell about themselves. It is no surprise, therefore, that ‘culture change’ often involves a society accepting a different story about itself (or struggling to do so) in order to embrace a new social reality or accept a new view about its own history. Likewise, what is sometimes referred to as a ‘culture war’ occurs when different stories clash and compete for public acceptance (Chapman and Ciment 2013).

For example, indigenous (or ‘First Nations’) peoples readily, and with significant justification, contest the stories of settlement in countries like the United States, Australia, Canada and elsewhere. In such places, national holidays can be mourned as commemorating invasion and dispossession. New Zealand offers somewhat of a contrast, with the story of the nation including the drawing up of the Treaty of Waitangi signed in 1840 between the British colonisers and the indigenous Maori tribes. Although the terms of the treaty are still debated, particularly in relation to ‘the lack of Maori contribution’ to those terms (Toki 2010, 400), they did grant Maori peoples rights of ownership of their lands, forests, fisheries and other possessions. Such ownership, as an attempt to uphold the sovereignty of the Maori nation(s), was central to the preservation of their cultural story. Sadly, this is not the history recounted by Australian indigenous nations or most Native American tribes in the United States and Canada. Taken together, these depictions of preservation and loss illustrate the importance of language, ritual, place and tradition in the cultural story at the individual and international level.

### *4. Agreement on what is ‘good’*

The fourth element of culture is the way a society decides what it means to have ‘a good life’. Like living organs, societies experience growth and decline, health and decay, fitness and injury. Extending the analogy, we could say that culture is a way to measure the psychological and emotional health of society. The United Nations Development Programme regards ‘wellbeing’ and the ‘pursuit of happiness’ as fundamental to the sustainable health of a society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization regards ‘building intercultural understanding’ via the ‘protection of heritage and support for cultural diversity’ to be a priority for international peace and stability. These descriptors reflect what individuals and international societies believe is a healthy culture. As such, culture involves agreement on the kind of things that are good for society and can make it flourish. ‘Culture clash’ occurs when different societies prioritise different understandings of what those ‘good’ things are.

One of the leading frontiers of culture clash worldwide involves the campaign for gender equality in areas such as education, employment, reproductive and marital rights. The story of Malala Yousafzai from northwest Pakistan reminds us of the power of one individual to inspire an international response on the vital issue of education for girls. When Malala was 12, and inspired by her teacher father, she began to speak out for the right to education, something that was becoming increasingly restricted due to the influence of the Taliban in Pakistan. In 2012, although critically wounded, Malala survived an assassination attempt at the hands of the Taliban and, on her

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recovery, became a brave advocate for the many millions who were being denied education due to certain cultural perceptions about girls and their place in society. In 2014 she was co-recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and dedicated her prize money to the building of a secondary school for girls in Pakistan. Malala's story reminds us that culture is about the way individuals and societies define what the ideal 'good' is and the extent to which individual citizens like Malala, the global networks inspired by her story, and even those like the Taliban who oppose this vision are willing to campaign for what they consider to be cultural rights.

### Religion and culture: difference and similarity

We have explored elements of religion and culture and offered various brief examples from an individual, national and international perspective. While it has been important to consider each concept separately, highlighting the particular ways that religion and culture influence international relations, there are clear interlinkages between them. Theorists have long drawn such links and these are useful for our consideration here. For example, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz famously described religion as a 'cultural system' composed of myths, rituals, symbols and beliefs created by humans as a way of giving our individual and collective lives a sense of meaning (Woodhead 2011, 124). Consider the similarities between the elements of religion and culture described in this chapter such as the role of symbols and stories in both accounts, and the pursuit of life according to what either faith or culture determine to be the higher standards of living.

An important question to ask is whether 'culture' should be necessarily understood as the larger more significant category in international relations, always casting 'religion' as a subset within it. Such a view makes sense because no one religion encompasses an entire society in the world today, and no society lives entirely according to one set of sacred rules and practices. On the other hand, in some contexts religious authority and identity can be more significant than any other cultural element. For example, when American soldiers moved into the Iraqi city of Najaf in 2003 to negotiate security arrangements, it was not the town mayor or the police chief that had most influence. Rather, it was the reclusive religious leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, whose authority influenced not only the city but much of the fracturing nation itself. Taking another example, when Communist authorities confronted striking dock workers in Poland in the 1980s, it was not only unions that opposed them but also the Catholic Church, whose priests performed sacred rituals and stood in solidarity with strikers in open defiance of the government. In both these examples, the elements of religion are equally – if not more – prominent than the elements of culture. Perhaps the most useful approach, therefore, is to see the elements of religion and the elements of culture in constant interaction with one another.

We have explored just four elements for each category. What might some other elements be and what are the impacts of these elements on individual and international life? There are some excellent resources to assist us in exploring such questions. These include an introduction to religion in IR by Toft, Philpott and Shah (2011), an examination of religion in a globalised world by Haynes (2012), a large compendium of essential readings on religion and foreign affairs edited by Hoover and Johnston (2012), and E-International Relations' edited collection *Nations Under God* (Herrington, McKay and Haynes 2015). However, the simple outline we have provided so far will enable us to begin answering the 'what' and 'how' questions about religion and culture in global affairs and draw some connections between them.

### Can we all live together?

One of the most pressing questions related to our study is whether religious and cultural actors and agendas have more of a positive or negative effect on global affairs. As we have seen above, these elements relate to some of the deepest levels of human experience, both individually and internationally. Should policymakers try to release the powerful energy of religio-cultural identity for the sake of a better world, or should they try to 'keep a lid on it' for fear of unleashing forces that might damage our capacity to get along with others?

#### *The value of a 'both/and' approach*

The study of international relations shows that the answer may be to draw on both strategies, since religio-cultural

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identity inhabits a space somewhere between the problems of conflict and the possibilities of cooperation. This approach can be seen as an adaptation of Appleby's influential idea of the 'ambivalence of the sacred' (2000) in which the elements of religio-cultural politics we have explored above carry simultaneously the potential for both violence and peace. The usefulness of this approach is that it helps us to break free from the restrictions of an 'either/or' logic about religion and culture (i.e. *either* conflict *or* cooperation). Instead, we can focus on a 'both/and' analysis which allows individual and international examples of each (i.e. *both* conflict *and* cooperation) to inform us about the politics of religion and culture at the global level. The influential scholar Martin E. Marty (2003) would add that such an approach helps us to deepen our understanding of world politics as it really is.

Therefore, with a 'both/and' logic in mind, we consider comparative examples of religio-cultural identity in world politics that emphasise conflict and cooperation respectively. The number of alternative examples in IR is potentially unlimited – so as you read on, keep in mind other instances where the elements of religion and culture contribute to violence and peacemaking.

### *Religion and culture create a 'clash of civilisations'*

When Soviet Communism finally collapsed in 1991, US president George H. W. Bush heralded the beginning of a 'new world order'. In many ways this was an accurate description because the conflict between the Soviet Union and the West had shaped the dynamics of global affairs for half a century. But, what would this new order look like? One answer was offered by Samuel P. Huntington (1993), who suggested that world politics would no longer be shaped by a clash of ideologies (e.g. capitalism and communism) but rather by a 'clash of civilizations'. With this hypothesis, Huntington still assumed that global politics would be shaped by conflict as much as the Cold War before it had been. The significant shift in thinking was the prominence that religious and cultural identity would play in shaping the conflict. For Huntington, a civilisation was understood as 'a cultural entity ... defined both by common objective elements such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people' (1993, 23–24). Significantly, the descriptors Huntington gives to the major civilisations have a cultural or religious link: 'Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu and Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American and possibly African' (1993, 25).

Thus, the central tenet to Huntington's controversial idea is that those elements of culture and religion that we have studied in this chapter contribute to fundamental differences across the globe. This creates fault lines between individuals and peoples who will inevitably fall into serious conflict over these deep and abiding differences. Not surprisingly, Huntington's ideas have been both criticised and embraced. The phrase 'clash of civilisations' came to popular prominence in 2001 as a way to interpret the 9/11 attacks as a conflict between Islam and the West. Although it is worth noting that the administration of George W. Bush did not apply the notion in the way Huntington proposed, scholars were using the phrase well prior to 9/11 and today its applications vary considerably, from commentary on Turkish politics to describing the tension of multicultural policy in Western regional cities. Whatever the merits of these examples (and hundreds like them) they illustrate how Huntington's thesis has become a way for politicians, commentators and academics to frame conflicts in a changing global landscape. Religion and culture are central to this framing.

### *Religion and culture create a dialogue of civilisations*

At the end of the Cold War, rather than assuming the continuation of a conflict-driven world as Huntington did, some saw the new world order as an opportunity to redesign the way international affairs was conducted. What would such a politics look like? Some policymakers imagined a world where multiple actors – not just powerful states – could contribute to a collective process of stability and accountability. Religio-cultural voices were increasingly considered an important part of this conversation.

Accordingly, an alternative approach to that of Huntington came from a United Nations consultative group known as the World Public Forum, which began an initiative in 2002 called the Dialogue of Civilizations. Influenced by a 1997 proposal from Iranian president Mohammed Khatami, the objective of the Dialogue is to 'combine the efforts of the international community in protecting humanity's spiritual and cultural values ... bringing the spirit of cooperation and

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understanding into the daily lives of people from different cultures'. Thus, in stark contrast to the clash of civilisations assumption that religion and culture are causes of conflict, the Dialogue of Civilizations deploys the same broad elements as resources for building bridges between individuals and peoples in the development of sustainable peace and cooperation.

What is the value of such a change? The 'clash' emphasises religion and culture as an extension of politics based on power, and one of the abiding problems of world politics is that some states are (much) more powerful than others. The Dialogue of Civilizations potentially offers a more equalising approach, whereby religion and culture become an extension of politics based on shared interests. Noting that religio-cultural communities are often transnational rather than state-based, the Dialogue's emphasis on 'spiritual and cultural values' helps to create an open-ended space for international cooperation beyond the defensive power interests of states.

### *The importance of precise thinking*

Which framework makes more sense to you? Does the rise of religion and culture in international affairs encourage clash or a dialogue? Do religious and cultural elements of politics enable us to live together in cooperation or do they disconnect us in ways that lead to conflict? Applying the logic that we introduced at the start of this section, one answer is that elements of religion and culture contribute to *both* clash *and* dialogue, to *both* conflict *and* cooperation.

The benefit of this approach is twofold. First, it encourages us to look closely at specific elements of religion and culture – as we have done in this chapter – instead of forcing such complex phenomena into a singular assumption about conflict or cooperation. As Reza Aslan once commented, 'Islam is not a religion of peace and it is not a religion of war. It is just a religion' (PBS, 2009). This kind of ambivalent outlook allows us to consider how the precise elements of religion and culture are used in violent and peaceful ways.

Second, applying a 'both/and' logic requires us to consider specific examples of international relations – as we have attempted throughout the chapter – without stereotyping religious and cultural traditions by pinning them to singular events. When the shortcomings of religion were once brought to the attention of the Hindu mystic Ramakrishna, he remarked that 'Religion is like a cow. It kicks, but it also gives milk' (Tyndale 2006, xiv). For every cultural symbol of hate, we see as many cultural symbols of healing and peace. For every religious movement of violence, we see as many religious movements for reconciliation.

This 'both/and' understanding of religion and culture has become influential among policymakers working with individuals, local communities, and national, regional and international organisations, marking a significant shift in our understanding of world politics as a whole. Beyond the issue of peace versus violence, it has also helped us understand the need for particular consideration about the extent of religious and cultural influence on politics throughout the world. For example, on religion, Jonathan Fox (2008, 7) writes:

A fuller picture of the world's religious economy would show secularisation – the reduction of religion's influence in society – occurring in some parts of the religious economy, and sacralisation – the increase of religion's influence in society – occurring in other parts.

Cultural factors are similarly dynamic, both in influence and in the forms they take. As James Clifford wrote, "cultures" do not hold still for their portraits' (1986, 10), and as such the influence of culture on individual and global politics requires precise thinking.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we set out to draw a diagram of religion and culture in world affairs. The aim was to show that religious and cultural factors matter if we want to deepen our understanding of international relations. The method has been to define elements of each concept and consider the impact of these elements on aspects of our individual, national and international experience. Hopefully, you are convinced that understanding religious and cultural issues is necessary if you want to join some of the most important discussions about world politics today. There is little that concerns IR



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today that does not involve elements of religion or culture, or both. Equally, it is important to recognise as a final thought that we have only just begun to explore these issues and we need to go deeper in our consideration of the importance of religious and cultural actors and interests. Understanding them will help us better understand an ever more complex and divided world.

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