

Religion and Culture in International Relations

Written by John A. Rees

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/03/28/religion-and-culture-in-international-relations/>

JOHN A. REES, MAR 28 2022

This feature is part of the online resources to accompany the textbook *Foundations of International Relations*.

Religion and culture are complex phenomena that have, unfortunately, traditionally been ignored by the bulk of International Relations scholars. Underscored by ideas such as secularisation theory, it was long thought by many in the discipline that these were lower order domestic matters that would lose their importance over time. This thinking built on observing the vast majority of Western, especially European, states, which had experienced a centuries-long decline in religion since its heyday pre-1648 when the church (directly or indirectly) had dominated much of Europe via the Holy Roman Empire. When taken together with another prevailing orthodoxy – globalisation – which was said to be synthesising cultural differences and bringing common understandings and experiences to all of humankind, you can perhaps understand why International Relations placed its attentions elsewhere. This began to change with the influence of the critical theories in the 1980s, but it was real-world events such as the Iranian revolution in 1978–79, the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989–91 and especially the attacks on 11 September 2001 (9/11), that marked a turning point. In this sense 9/11 can be viewed not just factually as a memorable religion-inspired terrorist event, but also thematically as a structural attack on Western culture and institutions – thereby signalling the need for International Relations to update its thinking and widen its horizons.

Elements of religion	Overlapping themes	Elements of culture
1. God(s) and spiritual forces in the public sphere	Personal and collective encounter	1. The binding experiences of common life
2. Sacred rituals and stories shaping community life	Signs and practices of identity	2. Symbols and stories of collective identity
3. Forms of dominant power and resistance	Contesting ideas and interests	3. Agreement and divergence on what is 'good'

Religious and cultural factors must be included using the 'both/and' approach if we want to deepen our understanding of how the global system works. This is especially the case when considering the emergence of non-Western influences and positions that challenge the idea of the emergence of a globalised, or secular, world. In a real-world facing sense, understanding and including the impact of religio-cultural identity will help us better navigate and explain our ever more complex and seemingly divided world. It may also unlock insights and understandings that can serve to unite people, resolve disputes through more informed dialogue and lead to a more peaceful global system rather than to a 'clash of civilisations'.

Text adapted from Rees, John. A. 'Religion and Culture'. In, McGlinchey, Stephen. 2022. *Foundations of International Relations*. London: Bloomsbury.

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Below is a collection of multimedia and textual resources that help unpack, and explain, the importance of religion and culture and how they intersect.

Basic overviews: Religion

Basic overviews: Culture

Academic debates about religion and culture

Nations under God: The Geopolitics of Faith in the Twenty-First Century – free ebook

Popular Culture and World Politics – free e-book

The 'Clash of Civilizations' 25 Years On: A Multidisciplinary Appraisal – free ebook

About the author:

John A. Rees is Professor of Politics and International Relations at The University of Notre Dame Australia. His research interests are related to themes of religion and international development, religion and foreign policy and the IR discourse on post-secularism.