

Religion in International Relations and the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Written by Simon Polinder

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/09/30/religion-in-international-relations-and-the-russia-ukraine-conflict/>

SIMON POLINDER, SEP 30 2022

After the attacks on the Twin Towers in the United States on 11 September 2001, there was a widespread recognition that religion played a role in international politics. More recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has cast the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia into the light. Based on my previous research on Religion and International Relations, I will outline my findings and what we can learn from them to apply to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

The question of the role of religion was not asked in the field of international relations for a long time. Addressing why, former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright described it this way:

Since the terror attacks of 9/11, I have come to realize that it may have been I who was stuck in an earlier time. Like many other foreign policy professionals, I have had to adjust the lens through which I view the world, comprehending something that seemed to be a new reality but that had actually been evident for some time. The 1990s had been a decade of globalization and spectacular technological gains; the information revolution altered our lifestyle, transformed the workplace, and fostered the development of a whole new vocabulary. There was, however, another force at work. Almost everywhere, religious movements are thriving (Albright, 2006).

Besides the fact that something in the world was changing, scholars also became interested in the role of religion. I call this group of scholars 'religionists'. They began to speak of a 'resurgence of religion' and contributed to it themselves by drawing attention to it. These so-called religionists share the view that the field of international relations should take the role of religion in the world seriously. However, religion is often ignored, for example because it is assumed in science that religion will disappear, or because the field only looks at the actions of and the interaction between states. But religion has not disappeared, and examining its role involves looking not only at what is happening at the state level, but also at organizations and people who organize themselves across borders – such as churches and non-governmental organizations.

I decided to investigate whether the religionists are right by examining the theorists they criticize most. This concerns the classical realist Hans Morgenthau and the neo-realist Kenneth Waltz. In my work I first explain their theories, then check whether the accusations against them make sense. In the case of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz, many of the accusations turn out to be incorrect or only partially correct. Yes, it is true that they do not give religion a prominent place in their theory, but that is not because they believe that religion will disappear on its own or that you should only look at states. Moreover, they have interesting reasons for being reluctant to involve religion: a political-theological and a theoretical one.

The political theology of Morgenthau and Waltz is characterized by a particular view on the human person, history and ethics that goes back to Augustine. Morgenthau and Waltz were influenced by this through the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. That shaped their view on religion and politics. In their view, there must be room for the autonomy of the political domain. Politics cannot be reduced to science, economics, morality, ethics or religion, although they do play a role. Politics is about competing power interests. The political realists see and recognize the role of religion, but wonder whether religion as one of the many factors, next to economics, law, technology, is such an important

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factor that it should be included in a theory. They argue that formulating a theory also means selecting what to study or not to study. And a scientific theory is thereby limited.

Much has also been written about what a worldview is. I found a good description in a novel called *Gentleman in Moscow*:

It is a fact that every person ultimately has to choose a philosophy. (...) Whether through careful consideration spawned by books and spirited debate over coffee at two in the morning, or simply from a natural proclivity, we must all eventually adopt a fundamental framework, some reasonably coherent system of causes and effects that will help us make sense not simply of momentous events, but of all the little actions and interactions that constitute our daily lives – be they deliberate or spontaneous, inevitable or unforeseen (Towles, 2016).

The worldview level does not officially belong to a scientific theory, but precedes it. It is the level at which all people decide and make choices about what is ultimately their anchor, their ultimate commitment. All people – including scholars, politicians and policy makers – have, (consciously or unconsciously) a certain way in which they look at the world. This is reflected in the way they think and act. A worldview, including a religious one, is not the same as religion, although a religion presupposes a worldview. By including this level, I became aware of certain theological presuppositions in the thinking of Morgenthau and Waltz regarding ethics, human nature and history. In addition, it became clear to me that the religionists are not quite neutral when it comes to the role of religion. In their language and way of arguing, one can detect the influence of the worldview. For example, they seem enthusiastic about the return of religion on average. The political realists, on the other hand, seem allergic to any relation of religion to politics.

Just as I involved the worldview level of the religionists and political realists, I also did in my analysis of international politics. If we see international relations as a professional practice, the worldview of all participants plays a role. Politicians, diplomats, heads of state, policy makers, lobbyists (etc.) all have a worldview on the basis of which they act. These worldviews can also be religious in nature. In addition, there are the stakeholders or actors who work from a religious conviction. Religion thus becomes visible in two ways:

1. Among participants in the practice of international relations. State leaders, diplomats, policy makers, policy influencers and activists all ultimately contribute to how the practice develops, influenced by their worldview.
2. As an influencing factor in the practice of international relations, especially at the transnational level. This can be through religious organizations such as churches, mosques and synagogues, but also through religiously inspired organizations that stand up for refugees, development cooperation or religious freedom. However, their role should not be overstated, as they often depend on states to defend their interests and use power to do so.

International politics is characterized by the tension between power and justice. Religion influences the way in which that tension is handled. However, this influence is not decisive, but conditioning, facilitating or supportive. With an image from ordinary life religion can be seen as like the wind. We have no control over wind, but it is there and we have to relate to it. It is up to the participants of international relations how they deal with this wind, raise their sails, and determine the course.

Based on my analysis, I have come up with the following guidelines for professionals working in international relations:

1. Assume the ambivalence of religion. Just as the wind can push your boat the wrong way, so can religion. Not all religion is good.
2. Distinguish between religion and politics, but do not separate them. They are different domains: they are relatively autonomous and at the same time connected in many ways.
3. Develop religious literacy so that you can understand the other person and speak his or her religious or theological language if necessary.
4. Weigh the relevance of religion in every context and situation. Sometimes too much focus on the wind is not

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- wise. You can also adjust the sails.
5. Be aware of your own worldview. What wind moves you and how does that influence your professional work as a diplomat, politician, statesman or policy maker?
 6. Practice discernment to see clearly what is going on in all complexity and layers, so that you can act with wisdom.

From the knowledge gained about the role of religion in international relations, it is possible to draw a number of conclusions about the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

First, the resurgence of religion is visible in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The role of the Russian Orthodox Church and the words of Patriarch Kirill can be seen as part of the revival of religion as the religionists describe it. In response to the global spread of modernity, many religions have mobilized and manifested themselves more and more publicly. Contrary to the expectation that religion would disappear as a result of modernity, we see that religions mobilize and resist and sometimes offer an 'alternative home' for their adherents. They oppose the liberal views that modernity has forced upon them, such as same-sex marriage, equal rights for women and men, and the right to abortion.

Second, religion is ambivalent, it is Janus-faced. It can play a negative role in justifying war as Patriarch Kirill does, but it can also play a positive role. Consider, for example, the role that churches play in taking in refugees from Ukraine.

Third, address the role played by religious actors and involve them if possible. Religious actors have access to, for example, Patriarch Kirill in a way that politicians do not. This is partly due to the fact that these relations are often transnational and operate independently of states. At the same time, due to the separation of church and state, caution is required when it comes to involving religious actors. In 2010, when a group of experts in the United States discussed how religious actors could be involved in foreign policy, the committee became divided over whether this was at odds with the separation of church and state (Taskforce, 2010).

Fourth, instead of talking about religion, it may be better to talk about the role of different worldviews. This prevents speaking from a simple religious versus non-religious frame. As I mentioned above, the resistance of the Russian Orthodox Church also contains an aversion to certain modern cultural influences. It does not do the situation justice to call it all religion. Sometimes there are also cultural or sociological considerations involved. Moreover, the use of the term worldview does more justice to the fact that Europe and the United States do not have a neutral position. They also look and act from a certain worldview. Finally, when people talk about religion in the West, they often refer to a rather Protestant or liberal view of religion. In that case, religion is seen as a collection of private beliefs. In many parts of the world, including Russia, religion is seen as a way of life that cannot be separated from politics.

Fifth, it seems appropriate to say that Putin – under the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church – adheres to a quasi-religious worldview. It resembles a religious worldview in many ways (it also refers to transcendence), but ultimately the goal is immanent: the here and now. If the goal is to change society as a whole, it is also referred to as a political religion. That means that religion fulfills an ideological function in relation to Putin's political ambitions.

Sixth, and finally, do not overestimate the role of religion and do not get caught up in religious apocalyptic frames too easily that could lead to escalation. It is known that conflicts with a religious component are more persistent and last longer. Religion is a conditioning factor and influences the way Putin makes his decisions. However, the Russia-Ukraine war is not a religious conflict with a political component, but a political conflict with a religious component. That means that we should not make religion too big, or consider it as a cause for possible irrational and apocalyptic behavior by Putin. Putin is a statesman whose central responsibility is to serve the interests of his country. He has a different position in this than a terrorist who can sacrifice his own life for a higher ideal. Putin is the head of a state. This means that, for example, he cannot simply apply the ethics of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Likewise, a head of state is restricted from deciding to risk its existence on behalf of his country. Hans Morgenthau puts this nicely in his book *Politics Among Nations*:

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The individual may say for himself: 'fiat justitia , pereat mundus' (let justice be done, even if the world perish), but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care. Both individual and state must judge political action by universal moral principles, such as that of liberty. Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defense of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival (Morgenthau, 1986).

Since the 1960s, there has been a global resurgence of religion. This is partly caused by religions resisting the global spread of modernity and wanting to voice a dissenting voice. As a result, their public and political presentation becomes more visible and influential. This partly explains the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. It is important to do justice to this aspect of the conflict and, where necessary, to involve or address religious actors in resolving the conflict. At the same time, it is more appropriate to talk about the influence of a quasi-religious worldview with regard to the conflict and the role of Putin. This prevents the conflict from being seen as a religious conflict. That also means that fears that Putin will escalate to such an extent that the complete destruction of his own country becomes an option should not be fed. The war between Russia and Ukraine also challenges the West which opens up a series of questions worth considering: From which worldview do we approach the conflict? Are we aware of the values we propagate? To what extent do we stand for it and embody it in our actions on the world stage? Are we aware that we can appear hypocritical to others or that our worldview is seen as subversive to the way of life of others?

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*A version of article was first published in Dutch as 'Religie in de internationale betrekkingen: lessen voor het conflict tussen Rusland en Oekraïne' in *Sophie* 12 (no 3) 41–44.

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