

# The Religious Turn in IR: a Brief Assessment

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The time when it was commonplace to talk of absence of religion in IR curricula is now over. These laments about the neglect of religion marked only the start of 'the religious turn' in the study of international relations. But even at the end of the 1990s, the debates about the rise of religion still seemed to be just footnotes in the margins of the mainstream academic research. Only after the 2001 terrorist attacks did the mainstream academic circles, in the United States and elsewhere, come to the conclusion that ignoring religion as a major international force was no longer possible. This led to a gradual increase in the attention dedicated to religion but also – as the contributions to this special issue amply demonstrate – to the growth of plurality in terms of methodology, research focus and the willingness to compromise with the mainstream research. Even a brief examination of this prolific literature shows that religion is approached from extremely diverse perspectives that are at times complementary, but much more often mutually incompatible (cf. the literature overview attached to the piece written by Kubáľková for this special issue). Hence, it seems that we are at another critical juncture now since it is high time to reflect upon the ways in which the religion-IR nexus is studied in our discipline.

The aim of this introductory article is, therefore, twofold: First, I would like to briefly sketch the main types of religion-related inquiry that are now common in the field of IR and show how these types are linked. Second, I will point to some points of contention as well as to some promising directions of future research on religion in IR. This discussion will be directly followed by the introduction of the articles chosen for this special issue since they – as diverse in approach, method and topic as they are – nicely demonstrate the breadth and the future potential of the contemporary research on religion in IR.

## **STUDY OF THE PAST: THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF MODERNITY**

The first broad category of scholarly work that is now booming in IR is related to the 'discovery' of the religious roots of modernity. While this discovery has been commonly discussed in various social sciences for several decades (Haynes, 2005), it took quite some time before this was acknowledged by IR scholars as well. Yet after

the so-called third great debate in IR (Lapid, 1989), the Enlightenment-inspired conviction about the autonomy of the modern world including modern (positivist) science is finally no longer taken for granted, even in the study of IR. But there are numerous ways in which this change can be acknowledged. The easiest and least disquieting manner of admitting the indebtedness of IR to religion and/or theology is to point to the religious background or theological inspiration of *individual* IR scholars. For instance, there are studies exploring the Augustinian heritage in the work of American classical realists or adherents of the English school (for instance, George Kennan and Martin Wight). While this strategy may function with those thinkers whose inspiration is only indirect and does not influence their entire work, a more thorough revision of the traditional picture is needed when exploring those with whom religion constitutes the (so far overlooked) essence of their writing (e.g. Thomas Hobbes and Reinhold Niebuhr).

The focus on persons and their ties to religion is sometimes replaced by the analysis of conceptual ties between some IR theories and their religious antecedents – such as in various neomedieval approaches or in just war theories (Rengger, 2002). The most radical version of this sort of conceptual analysis is political theology rooted in the work of Carl Schmitt (Schmitt, 2005). It is no longer individual political thinkers or some particular concepts that give testimony to the relations of politics and religion, but the field of politics and political science is dependent on religion and theology in its entirety. Indeed, theology defines – in a rather deterministic manner – the limits of the possible in terms of the political institutions of the modern state system. Secularisation of theological themes is obviously not limited to the study of politics, but it also pertains to the general study of philosophy (as in the Hegel's triad of art, religion and philosophy, which, in his view, follow each other both conceptually and historically, or in Comte's law of three stages).

The revival of Schmittian studies in recent years has further evolved into two distinct research agendas: The first stresses the fundamental role religion and religious institutions have played in the establishment of the modern system of sovereign states, and it is more historical in nature (Lehmann and Van Der Veer, 1999). This approach limits the applicability of the traditional IR theories to just the modern period and in so doing it denies the ahistorical nature of such IR theories as realism, which claim to have discovered universal political laws. The second explores the often unconscious assimilation of theological terms by modern IR theory (Luoma-Aho in this issue, but also Luoma-Aho, 2009) and hence it goes even deeper by questioning the secular nature of the current international relations. Even though this approach has the potential to challenge the positivist study of (international) politics as it is conducted today, it has some limitations too: Its exclusive focus on the analysis of concepts and on their transfer from the religious

milieu and theology to politics and the social sciences often leads to a strongly deterministic picture of the modern polity that cannot but build on the conceptual base of medieval theology (cf. Fitch, 2007).

## **STUDY OF THE PRESENT: THE RISE OF RELIGION**

The genealogical approach of the scholars whom we have discussed above is certainly enriching for the study of international relations. Indeed it may even challenge some of the basic assumptions on which the edifice of the academic study of IR is constructed. Yet it cannot deny its historical nature and the focus on the *past*. This also means that religion is often (but not always) understood in an instrumental manner in the sense that it is analogical to a burial site of long extinct anthropoids whose excavation can be useful for our understanding of our own species, which still carries a strong family resemblance to its dead relatives.

The second broad category is not so much focussed on the *past*, but rather on the synchronic analysis of religion in international relations. To push the same parable a bit further, political scientists have suddenly realised that those considered dead are alive and thriving and that many of us in fact belong to this seemingly extinct species. In short, the second group analyses present manifestations of religion. Again, there are at least three types of scholarly work that can be discerned here. The first stream comes from the discussions in (Western) political philosophy about the role religion is attributed by classical liberalism. The rising self-awareness of new religious minorities combined with the growing political activism of old religious groups casts doubts over the traditional liberal distinctions between the private and the public, and between religion, culture, and politics (Elshtain, 2009).

Another stream is related to the worldwide resurgence of religion and the need to broaden our understanding of international politics by including the activities of increasingly religious states and religious non-state actors (Fox, 2001; Haynes, 2005). Notwithstanding the fact that for obvious reasons most of the attention is oriented towards the Muslim world, a similar rise of religion is clearly palpable in India, large parts of the Americas and elsewhere. The theoretical discussion about the best constitutional arrangement and the empirical study of the religious resurgence around the globe merge in the third approach, which revolves around the secularisation hypothesis (see, e.g., Hallward, 2008). Ever more contested on empirical grounds, the thesis cannot be easily pruned away since impugning its essential features (such as the linearity of progress or the universal nature of the Western model of political organisation) necessarily casts doubts over many cognate concepts (such as 'modernisation') which are widely used in various social sciences.

Temporal focus	Object of study	Examples
Religious past	Religious inspiration of IR scholars	English School, R. Niebuhr
	Religious roots of IR concepts	Just war, human rights, harmony of interests
	Religious roots of (international) politics and the modern state	Sovereignty, war
Present role of religion	Contestation over liberalism in political philosophy	Role of religion in the public-private sphere; its place in the international system
	Resurgence of religion as a political force	Political Islam, Christian Right, religious warfare
	Secularisation debate	Orientalist critique of Western science, de-secularisation

**Table 1:** Six types of religion-related inquiry in IR

**IS A POSITIVIST STUDY OF RELIGION POSSIBLE IN IR?**

The basic division line that spans across all six type of religion-related inquiry in political science and international relations (see Table 1) pertains to the stance of individual scholars towards the positivist ideal of science as the field of empirical testing of causal hypotheses. To put the same problem differently, we could ask whether it does justice to religion if we understand it in functionalist terms (as, for instance, the early Habermas did). Some would argue (see Kubáľková’s piece in this issue) that this is an attempt at a reduction of the sacred to the profane which leads to the replacement of the transcendental aspects of religion with the mundane concepts of IR such as transnational movements, international institutions, etc. At the same time, others (e.g. Fox in his famous article which announced the return of religion to IR /2001/) claim that what is gaining in importance in sociology of religion and other cognate fields is rational choice theory; i.e. the theory that can be considered the very incarnation of the positivist science.

In terms of the academic study and teaching of IR, the question is whether the so-far absent religious dimension can simply be added to IR curricula (cf. Hallward, 2008: 5) or whether we should rebuild the discipline anew, constructing it ‘from the first principles’ Kubáľková, 2000: 677). Even though the former approach is obviously more acceptable for the IR mainstream, serious long-term study of religion will probably lead to the creation of alternative, less reductionist accounts of the role of religion in IR. Other social sciences offer an additional argument for why a simple addition of religion to our ‘research basket’ would not do much credit to the catch-phrase about the ‘rise of religion’. These disciplines, even those where religion has been studied continuously for decades, such as sociology or cultural stud-

ies, and where we cannot reasonably talk about a return of religion, have also witnessed a return *to* religion. In other words, in these disciplines the religious turn does not connote merely the arrival of religion as a new object of study, but rather a need to redefine the basic self-understanding of these disciplines to accommodate a non-reductionist interpretation of religion. IR should learn from them and not fall into the trap of reproducing the pattern that is just being abandoned elsewhere.

Admittedly, this basic tension is difficult to solve. Indeed, some believe that there is 'no method of resolving the conflict between the transcendental and secular, on ontological or epistemological grounds' (Kubáľková, 2000: 685). Yet there are some directions that the future research on religion in IR could follow. First of all, what is needed is an opening up of the disciplinary borders of IR. In other fields (such as sociology, cultural anthropology, international law, theology, and history), the number of answers to the question of the possibility of a non-positivist study of religion and politics is high and growing. For instance, in theology a large corpus of works exists in the framework of the so-called 'new political theology' inspired by Johann Baptist Metz (1997) and built in direct opposition to the 'old political theology' of Carl Schmitt. Similarly, the French *nouvelle théologie* came up with a convincing account of the translation of medieval theological concepts into the language of modern philosophy (including political philosophy).

The plurality of positions vis-à-vis the religion-politics nexus is also reflected in the contributions to this issue of *Perspectives*. Nevertheless I believe that all of the articles that finally made it to the publication stage offer some promising direction for the future research on the role of religion in IR, or even present concrete proposals about how religion should be conceptualised in the new context. Vendulka Kubáľková, in this issue's first article, does exactly this: after a careful exploration of the limitations of the discipline of IR and the call for a more interdisciplinary approach, Kubáľková presents her 'international political theology' as an ambitious but nonetheless inspiring non-positivist proposal for the study of religion in IR (see also Kubáľková, 2000). Readers will also undoubtedly find useful the two appendices to her article that contain the most relevant bibliography of sources both from within and without the discipline. While Kubáľková is a strong proponent of an alternative account of IR to the one currently in vogue in the discipline, Jeffrey Haynes shows in his concise study that even if we use the traditional vocabulary, a convincing demonstration is possible of the growing impact of religious actors on IR and of their ability to shape particular foreign policies or the international order as such. By doing so, Haynes pertinently challenges the traditional differentiation between the 'dark Orient' and the 'enlightened West', a feature still subconsciously present in many studies of religion and politics.

The mutual dependence of international relations, domestic politics and religion is further explored in the two studies written by Mika Luoma-aho and Jan Hanska.

In his Schmittian analysis of the relations between the theological concept of *corpus mysticum* and the political imagery of the state, Luoma-Aho puts forward a fascinating account of why the state plays such a crucial role in international political thought. Jan Hanska also draws inspiration from the Judeo-Christian tradition and explores the concept of a prophet, showing how both the contents and the narrative structure of 'prophetic politics' can be (mis)used by politicians to manipulate the public and gain support for 'visionary' domestic and foreign policies.

The last two studies challenge the conventional wisdom regarding the relation between secularity and democracy. Petr Kratochvíl discusses the role public reason plays in the debates of religious actors about foreign policy and claims that what we are witnessing is a slow emergence of the Habermasian 'post-secular societies' accompanied by a modernisation of religious consciousness. Finally, Nataša Kubíková argues that the inclusion into international structures of religious radicals (such as Hamas) may lead to their moderation but she also discusses the ability of (authoritarian) religious actors to compete democratically, a phenomenon that is under-researched in the literature, but whose frequency is probably going to rise.

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