Lecture on
Religion and IR Theory

Dr Erin Wilson
Simon Polinder
Frank Ubach

Zittingszaal (Oude Boteringestraat 38)
No Entrance Fee --- 26th of November, 2013
Does IR Theory Need Religion?

Isn’t religion a private, personal matter?

Shouldn’t religion be kept out of politics and international affairs?

Aren’t IR scholars concerned about power and relationships between states? Is religion even relevant to this?

What do we even mean by religion anyway?
Religion is becoming more and more prominent in domestic and global politics in the 21st century.

Consequently IR theory needs to make space for analyzing and theorizing about religion.

But how should we do this? And what are we trying to achieve when we do?

**Lecture Overview**

- Common assumptions
- Origins
- Impacts
- Alternatives
- From Secular to Postsecular?
Common assumptions about religion and politics in IR theory

1. The relationship between religion and politics is governed by the public/private divide

2. Religion is primarily institutional, individual and irrational, causing violence and chaos and should therefore be restricted to the private realm

3. Religion is only relevant to understanding the politics of pre-modern societies

4. Religion will eventually disappear

Religion is treated as static, unchanging and monolithic. All religions are essentially the same and operate in the same way
Origins

Myths about religion and politics central to founding of IR

- The Westphalian presumption (Scott Thomas)

- The secularization thesis
The Westphalian Presumption

Peace of Westphalia marked the moment when religion was definitively separated from politics, because it had to be.

Religion the main cause of the Thirty Years’ War. By removing religious argument from public domain, Westphalia brought to an end the era when religion caused war.

Thomas – Westphalia myth operates on a primarily modern understanding of religion as individual beliefs, rather than communal way of life. Also ignores the many other power politics motives and factors that influenced the Thirty Years’ War. In other words, Thirty Years’ War was not about religious doctrine.
The Secularization Thesis

Different versions of this thesis argue different things (Casanova 1994)
- continual separation/distinction made between religious and secular socio-political realms
- Ongoing privatization of religious belief
- Eventual decline/disappearance of religion

As societies become increasingly modernized, they also become increasingly secularized.

Secular worldview represents the height of neutral, objective human reason, as opposed to the emotions and irrationality in traditional religious worldviews. With progress and development, eventually all societies will become secular

Both Westphalian presumption and secularization thesis represent influence from secularism as an ideology (Hurd)
Both the Westphalia presumption and the secularization thesis emerged in Western European context, which had previously been dominated by Christianity.

As a result, both reflect understandings of what religion is and what its relationship with politics is or should be relevant to that context.

Further, both are underpinned by a dualistic logic that separates society into distinct parts and then subordinates one part to the other:

Politics/religion
Mind/body
Reason/emotion
Progress/tradition
Male/Female
The Four Moves of Secularism

(1) Establishing the possibility and necessity of separating religion and politics;
   • Origins in theology (Martin Luther – doctrine of the two kingdoms)
   • Originally, argument for separation of religion and politics was made for the protection of religion – both Luther and later Locke argued that the religious realm should be free from coercion
   • Yet Thirty Years’ War and assumptions about religion’s violence and irrationality contributed to reversing this - seen as protection of politics from religious interference

(2) Subordinating religion to and excluding it from politics;
   • Religion and politics understood in primarily institutional terms (church and state)
   • State became main political authority, with church subordinated to it

(3) Enforcing religion’s exclusion through the public/private divide; and
   • Politics and society governed through public/private divide
   • Religion personal, individual, therefore belongs in private realm

(4) Promoting secularism and the exclusion of religion as the ideal or model for a progressive, ‘developed’, ‘civilized’ society.
   • Religion viewed as largely emotional, irrational, pre-modern, eventually disappear to be replaced by “objective, neutral” secular reasoning
Consequences

Religion understood through three binaries: institutional/ideational, individual/communal, irrational/rational. Its ideational, communal and rational elements have been subordinated to the others.

Religion understood as primarily institutional, individual and irrational

Relegated to the private realm, separated from politics

Considered largely irrelevant to analyses of politics and international relations

Let's argue about politics until we resort to name calling, so we can move on to religion and finally kill each other.
Post-World War One – End World War Two

1919 – Age of idealism, beginnings of academic field of IR

Dominant theory – liberal idealism, associated with Woodrow Wilson’s 14 points

Liberalism, as developed by Locke, Mill and Hume, amongst others, advocated a purely secular political ideology, yet one that was still consistent with “deep-seated Christian values” (Zacher and Matthew 1995)

Religion largely absent from literature, except studies focused on non-Western and colonial societies
Max Weber (1922) – Religion an attribute of mainly primitive people, a spent force that would eventually die out

Discussed as dogmatic and irrational, similar to fascist and communist political ideologies (Laski 1923)
1930s – liberal idealism gradually replaced by classical realism as dominant theory in IR

Some influence from Christianity here, esp Reinhold Niebuhr, views of human nature as fallen and sinful

However, little changed regarding actual analysis and assumptions about religion itself
Examples

Olds (1943)
Shintoism used by Japanese to explain manifestation of mysterious powers – “as any child-mind might do”
We should “not be too swift in our condemnation of the naïveté of such beliefs and too critical of their perpetuation into a day when science and truth have compelled other peoples to face reality”

Pares (1943)
Strong religious influence in Russian society
“not because Russians are ignorant or superstitious; it applies not only to the masses but also to the best Russian minds.”

E.H. Carr (1939, 1946)
Religion is “utopian” and “dogmatic”, realist theory “rational”, “logical” and providing a more “correct” view of politics, ethics and how they interact, particularly in the international system.

“The identification of the supreme reality with the supreme good, which Christianity achieves by a bold stroke of dogmatism, is achieved by the realist through the assumption that there is no good other than the acceptance and understanding of reality” (Carr 1946: 21).
Cold War IR Theory

Religion continues to be treated as irrational and dogmatic:

Hans Morgenthau *Politics Among Nations*

Religion hardly mentioned at all, other than to argue that religion and political ideology are essentially the same thing:

“Wars in the twentieth century revert to the religious type by becoming ideological in character.” (1985: 258)

Implicit assumption is that religion is fanatical, concerned primarily with individual beliefs

Morgenthau (1985: 240) writes: “The passions of the religious wars yielded to the rationalism and the sceptical moderation of the Enlightenment.”

Morgenthau (1985: 412) “the traditional religions have been made obsolete by the ability of humans to rely on themselves rather than on divine intervention”.

John Lewis Gaddis

the most surprising evidence of the continuing influence of ideology has come in the area of religion, where conflicts between Hindus and Moslems, Arabs and Israelis, Iranians and Iraqis, and even Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland provide little reason to think that ideas – even ideas once considered to have little relevance other than for historians – will not continue to have a major disruptive potential for international order.

- Religion = political ideology
- Religion outdated, premodern
- Religion mainly relevant in non-Western contexts (NI an aberration)

Other studies – David Apter and Donald E. Smith, emphasise increasing irrelevance of religion as societies become more developed and modernized

Exception – The English School

Martin Wight emphasised importance of role of culture and religion in development of state systems. Common religion and common moral code extremely important for development of international society of states. Yet earlier interest in religion by English School was also forgotten by later scholars
Post-Cold War

Realism undermined as dominant theory for failing to predict end Cold War

Role of non-material factors – ideas, identities, values – increasingly recognised as significant for understanding and analysing IR

Increasing interest in role of culture (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996)

With this came increasing interest in role of religion

Questioning of secularization thesis

Still a predominant assumption that religion relevant outside the West

Focus on religion and violence – continued assumption of religion’s violent and irrational nature

Yet other studies also emerged that stressed broader more nuanced understandings of religion, questioning of Westphalian assumption and secularization thesis.
Key authors

Cecelia Lynch
Scott Thomas
Scott Appleby
Mark Juergensmeyer
Daniel Philpott
Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson
September 11 2001

No IR theory predicted that an event like 9/11 was even possible – showed that clearly something was missing

Religion no longer considered irrelevant to study of international relations, but when and how it matters and how to study were and continue to be significantly contested

Two main approaches have developed –
1. Bring religion into existing IR theories
2. Develop Alternative approaches
Bringing Religion Into Existing Frameworks

Looks for ways to incorporate religion into existing theories without disrupting their core assumptions and parameters.

These approaches focus on the dominant, mainstream theories in IR – classical and neo-realism, liberalism and neo-liberalism.

Key scholars – Jonathan Fox, Nukhet Sandal, Jack Snyder, Cecelia Lynch, Jeffrey Haynes.
Developing Alternative Frameworks and Approaches

Scholars working with more reflectivist theories – postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism, social constructivism (to a lesser extent) – argue that bringing religion into existing theoretical frameworks in IR does not adequately address all limitations affecting the study of religion in IR.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd – The Politics of Secularism in International Relations

As a result of its historical development and the impact of the Westphalian presumption and secularization thesis, almost all mainstream IR theories are underpinned by implicit secularist assumptions regarding the nature of religion and its relationship with politics and society, particularly in relation to the West.
Emergence of new definitions of religion:

Religion recognised as being fluid and changing, heterogenous

Trends towards *interdisciplinarity*, incorporating insights from sociology and anthropology of religion to develop more nuanced approaches to understanding the role of religion in politics

Relational dialogism

Draws on postmodernism and feminism

Recognises the interrelationships between different elements within religion (institutional, ideational, individual, communal, rational, irrational, experiential) as well as the interrelationships amongst religion and various dimensions of society – politics, justice, human rights, equality, freedom. Religion’s role and place in politics and society is not fixed but constantly shifting and changing. Relational dialogism attempts to incorporate that fluidity and dynamism into a theoretical framework for approaching the study of religion and politics
What does this mean for how we understand religion?

-No longer considered fixed and homogenous

-Depends on where, when, whom, what and how you are researching

-When? Religions are not static and unchanging, but alter and adapt over time. Many within mainstream IR theory still treat religion as a static variable.

-Where? Religions are very different and have a different relationship with politics and public life depending on the context in which you are conducting your research. The traditional ways in which we understand the relationship between religion and politics as governed by the public/private divide has little resonance beyond Western contexts, where notions of distinct public and private spheres do not exist and where religion is an accepted part of communal life.

-Whom? Which broad religious tradition are you interested in? Which sub-tradition? Which sect or denomination within that sub-tradition? What are the cultural and historical specificities of the people group in which you are researching the religion (relates also to where).

-What? What is the issue that you are particularly interested in researching?

-How? How you define religion has implications for how you research it and vice versa.

-Is “religion” even a useful term for analysis any more? Or do we need to consider alternatives? (Sandal – Public theologies)
Postsecularism

Secularism is not neutral and universal, but has developed out of a particular cultural and historical context, influenced by specific assumptions. Ironically, many of these assumptions have their origins in Christian theology.

As a result, while Western countries, scholars and policymakers may see themselves as secular, they are often still viewed as Christian by those outside.

Postsecularism is an attempt to recognise and critically reflect on those embedded assumptions. “A form of radical theorising and critique prompted by the idea that values such as democracy, freedom, equality, inclusion, and justice may not necessarily be best pursued within an exclusively immanent secular framework. Quite the contrary, the secular may well be a potential site of isolation, domination, violence and exclusion.” (Mavelli and Petito 2012: 931)
Postsecularism

Recognises the power politics involved in designating something as “irrational” and “rational”, “common sense”

Tied to recent trends in the study of emotions and aesthetics in IR (Bleiker, Chan, Hutchison)

Contributes to questioning focus on the state as the central actor in dominant IR theory

What are the forms and sources of power operating in IR today?

Can the world be neatly classified in binary opposites – secular/religious, state/church, reason/emotion, public/private – or do we need to rethink these underlying assumptions?

Key scholars:
Luca Mavelli
Mariano Barbato
Elizabeth Shakman Hurd
Fabio Petito
Adrian Pabst
Implications and Future Directions

- Shift from either/or thinking to both-and – there are more than two options available and the options are not mutually exclusive – something can be both secular and religious at the same time (for example, human rights)

- Shift away from either/or language in other areas as well – not simply “state/non-state”, “Western/non-Western” – but open up language that recognises a greater range of nuances and possibilities

- Incorporate greater critical self-reflexivity

- Move away from discussions of whether religion should have a place in the public realm or not – it clearly does, has had for some time and there. The important questions now are how do we make sense of this role
Ultimately, it is not about whether secular or religious worldviews provide “better” frameworks for approaching fundamental socio-political questions about freedom, equality, democracy and justice. Both have tendencies to emancipation and inclusion alongside violence and exclusion.

The fundamental question concerns power, who has it, how and for what purposes are they using it, who is it benefitting and who is it excluding. Such concerns matter in both religious and secular models. This requires a fluid, context-specific understanding of the nature of power, as well as of religion, secularism and politics.
Want to find out more?

*Religion and Politics* bachelor course offered by Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in Semester Two – follow as an elective

*Theorizing Religion in the Public Domain* – master course offered by Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies in Semester Two

*Honours College Broadening Module “Religion in the Public Domain”* – Second Semester

Follow “The Religion Factor”, a blog run by CRCPD, via Wordpress, Facebook or Twitter @FactorReligion

“Like” CRCPD on Facebook or follow us on Twitter @crcpd_rug and come along to our other events

Check out the following resources:
Further readings


Sandal, Nukhet A. “The Clash of Public Theologies: Rethinking the concept of religion in global politics” *Alternatives*


