The Multiple Impacts of Religion on International Relations: Perceptions and Reality

By Jonathan Fox

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and those on the West that followed are the catalysts for a reassessment of the role of religion in international relations (IR) among Western scholars. Before these attacks, few Western IR scholars included religion in their paradigms and few articles in IR journals treated religion as a major influence, though there were certainly some notable exceptions to this. Why was this the case despite ample counterexamples including a number of well publicized religious conflicts including, but by no means limited to, the Iranian revolution, the subsequent proliferation of Islamic opposition movements, numerous ethno-religious conflicts such as those in Sri Lanka, Israel, the former Yugoslav republics, and Kashmir, and growth of international Muslim terror groups like Al-Qaeda?

I argue here that ignoring religion is a trend found in all of the Western social sciences and is perhaps at its strongest in IR scholarship. On many topics it is difficult to lump American and European social scientists into the same category but in this case the trend is common to

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both and is rooted in predictions by seminal European thinkers, among others, who linked modernity to the demise of religion as a significant social and political force.¹

Did these prophecies of religion’s doom come to fruition? No, rather than fading away, religion has evolved in order to survive and even thrive in today’s modern environment. Religion has multiple influences on IR including its ability to confer legitimacy, to influence the world-views of leaders and their constituents, the tendency of religious conflicts to spill over borders, and through transnational phenomena and issues which overlap with religion including human rights and terrorism. While the specifics of some of these influences have changed over time, the larger picture has remained static with religion having a continuous influence. Accordingly, the biggest recent shift in religion and IR has not been a shift in the facts on the ground but, rather, a shift in Western perceptions of those facts.

Religion and Modernity and the Social Sciences

For much of the 20th century, many Western social scientists predicted that religion would cease to be a relevant factor in society and politics. Many trace this body of theory, known alternatively as modernization and secularization theory, to thinkers including Marx, John Stuart Mill, Weber, Freud, Comte, and Durkheim.² This body of theory is by no means monolithic making it difficult to accurately assess its influence, but it is possible to set some bounds. On one extreme, many claim that “few forecasts have been uttered with more unshakable confidence than [the] belief that religion is in the midst of its final death throes”³ and that “the theory of secularization may be the only theory which was able to attain a truly paradigmatic status in the social sciences.”⁴

What was the reasoning behind these predictions? That phenomenon inherent in modernity would lead to religion’s inevitable decline as a social and political force. Science and reason were expected to replace religion’s roles in society. Morality, or more accurately, definitions of proper behavior would be set by a combination of the mental health sciences and secular laws and enforced through surveillance technology. Modern states would rely on secular rather than religious bases for legitimacy, usually some form of connection between government and the will of the people. The increased power of the modern state would be able to manufacture social order without resort to religion. Secular institutions

² See, for example, R.S. Appleby, The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation, New York, Rowman and Littlefield, 2000, p. 3.
would fill roles traditionally held by religion. Also science would usurp religion’s role in providing interpretations of the physical universe.  

A number of modern processes would reinforce this trend. Urbanization would undermine the traditional small communities where religion thrived. Universal education and literacy would remove religion’s monopoly on knowledge and allow individuals to question religious precepts and formulate their own interpretations of religious texts. Science would replace religion’s role in solving problems. It would also directly undermine aspects of traditional morality by giving people options that were not previously available. For example contraception has arguably undermined norms of chastity and modesty by eliminating some of the consequences of violating these values.

Are there no exceptions to this general trend? It is clear that there have always been elements of the social sciences and humanities which did not accept these assumptions. In some areas of scholarship, especially comparativists who focused on some world regions such as the Middle East the idea that religion’s influence was in decline did not gain much acceptance. Even many who accepted these predictions felt that modernity would induce religion’s decline or privatization, but not its disappearance. There are also some notable exceptions in both American and European scholarship which does focus on the West such as Robert Bellah’s work on numerous aspects of religion and society and Rene Girard’s work on the intrinsic connection between religion and societal violence. However, it is important to remember that they are exceptions and until recently these exceptions are rarely found in the IR literature. Also, by the 1980s and 1990s many political scientists and sociologists began to question this rejection of religion. Unfortunately, there was no analogous reawakening to religion in IR theory at that time. In fact, IR scholarship can be said to have more profoundly rejected religion than the other social sciences. Unlike political science and sociology which had theories to explain religion’s decline, IR scholarship had no such theory and the irrelevance of religion was simple taken for granted. Whenever IR scholarship did deal with religion, it was always subsumed into some other category. For example the debate in the 1990s over Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory was essentially over whether future conflict would be between several civilizations that are primarily defined by religion. Yet most of the participants in the debate managed to avoid directly discussing religion. The pervasiveness of this phenomenon is demonstrated by a survey of four major IR journals which shows that only 6 of 1,600 articles published between 1980 and 1999 included religion as a significant element.

Why is this blind spot for religion most prevalent in IR scholarship? The answer can be found in several aspects of this scholarship. The idea

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that religion is in decline is a particularly Western idea and IR is arguably the most Western of the social sciences. Why would this be the case in a discipline that is by definition international should include the abundant evidence from the non-West of religion's political potency? Because the core of Western IR theory as we know it today, especially American IR theory, evolved from national security theories which focused on the Cold War—a competition between two secular ideologies. In addition, the peace of Westphalia ended the era of international religious wars in the Christian West and the defeat of the Ottomans at the gates of Vienna in 1683 ended the Muslim threat to the West. Thus, centuries of Western historical experience reinforced the notion that religion was not relevant to the relations between states.

As a result, major IR theories, ideas, and trends include an anti-religious bias. This is not to say that they explicitly deny religion's importance, but rather that they do not include religion in the list of factors considered important. Realism focuses only on material power and leaves little room for other motivations for state behavior. Liberalism and Marxism also focus on rationalist and economic factors. Constructivism argues that all structure is man-made. While in theory, this can accommodate religion, few if any constructivists do so. Concepts of the nation-state and self-determination focus on a state’s ethnic character and its historic mission. If religion is included at all it is as one part among many of that ethnic heritage and history and not as a motivating force for behavior. Also, religion is difficult to quantify. Why is this a problem? The quantitative branch of IR scholarship is often accused of ignoring factors that are difficult to measure. This was certainly true of religion until the late 1990s.9

Thus, social scientists in general and IR scholars in particular were arguably blinded by their paradigms which left little room for religion. Consequently the lion's share of IR scholarship did not address religion until recently, particularly until the series of terror attacks on the West by Muslim extremists beginning with those of September 11, 2001.

Yet, just because religion was rarely noticed does not mean it was not there. For many Muslims, the religious war with the Christian West did not end in 1683. For Muslims, this year marked the beginning of centuries of defeat and humiliation at Christian hands. Russia’s conquering of Muslim Central Asia, European colonialism’s success in controlling large parts of Muslim South Asia and North Africa, and the conquering of the Muslim Balkans by Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia were all seen as part of this religious war. The continuing influence of Western Christian states in the Muslim world, including several recent military interventions like those in Iraq and Somalia, underscore this humiliation of Muslims at Christian hands. The Christian states viewed all of this as part of power politics and their colonial policies. That is, Western powers projected their secular nationalism on these conflicts and assumed that any counter attacks were motivated by nationalism rather than religion. Thus, Al-Qaeda sees its campaign against the West as part of a centuries old confrontation and the West was taken off guard by these attacks because its own dominant

paradigms blinded it to the possibility of a religiously motivated challenger.\textsuperscript{10}

Based on all of this it is arguable that the role of religion in IR has remained static and the perceived increased influence of religion in the international arena is at least in part a shift in Western perception of reality rather than a shift in the reality itself. Many like Francis Fukayama are coming to the conclusion that “it is, of course, possible to try to give economic or rational explanations for religious and cultural phenomena, and thus to try to fit them into some larger theory of social behavior based on rational choice... But ultimately, these accounts prove to be unsatisfying because they are too reductionist.”\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Modernity as a Cause of Religious Evolution}

Modernity has clearly influenced the political and social environment in which we live. All social institutions and phenomena, including religion, have had to find ways to survive in this new environment. While in the past, most Western social scientists predicted that the pressures of modernity would cause at the very least a decline in religion’s influence, many are now arguing that these same pressures are causing the opposite. That is, the forces described in the modernization and secularization literature exist, but rather than crumbling under their weight, religion is evolving to survive in the new modern environment, and in the process becoming stronger.

What are the impetuses of this evolution? First, modernity has eroded traditional values and in many parts of the world, traditional culture. To counter this many religious movements have developed methods to actively reinforce traditional values. This includes an increased emphasis on religious educational institutions.\textsuperscript{12} Second, for many, especially those in the Third World, modern political ideologies are seen to have failed at delivering their promises of prosperity and social justice. This has undermined their legitimacy and caused a return to religion as a basis for societal and political legitimacy.\textsuperscript{13} Third, religion, especially fundamentalist variants of religion, can provide both solace and an explanation for the failures of modernity and, therefore, particularly attracts many who feel alienated from the modern political, social, and economic system.\textsuperscript{14} Fourth, religious groups are using modern methods and technology in order to mobilize and organize politically. These activities include lobbying, use of the courts, links with political parties, mobilization, alliances with other groups, and using the media and internet to influence public opinion.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} M. Juergensmeyer, \textit{The New Cold War?}, Berkeley, University of California, 1993.
democracy has in many cases undermined state religious monopolies. This is important because many sociologists argue that a free religious market results in increased religiosity.\textsuperscript{16} Finally, modern state building in the third world has led to many ethnically exclusive governments and ethnic-based politics in many states.\textsuperscript{17} As many of these ethnic identities overlap with religious ones, this has increased the salience of religious identity.

Religious fundamentalism is one of the consequences of these trends. Fundamentalists try to create a separate religious community that consists only of believers. Within that community religious norms are enforced and taught to the next generation through the community’s education institutions. In essence, they try to create a safe zone where the evils they consider to be inherent in modernity cannot enter. It is important to emphasize that in most cases the evils of modernity are modern morals and ideas rather than technology, though there is often some opposition to certain aspects of technology which directly challenge religious precepts. For example, television and internet technology are not the issue, rather the immoral content that can enter the community through these mediums is the issue.

Fundamentalist ideologies are presented as returning to the ideas of the authentic religion of the past. However, in fact, fundamentalism is a very modern phenomenon. Modernity has both undermined the traditional religious community and created a new environment in which religion must exist. Consequently, fundamentalist interpretations of religion must innovate in order to create a set of religious rules that function in modern times. This includes a selective reading and interpretation of texts which emphasizes those aspects of a religious tradition which religious leaders believe will best preserve their community and are often unprecedented in their original traditions. Also, the breakdown of community and family-based transmission of religious traditions has caused a greater emphasis on educational institutions. In sum, instead of reinforcing the religious values of the past, fundamentalists are creating something that is, in fact, new and unique to modernity that is both original and derivative of traditional religion.

Some fundamentalist movements prefer to remain within their closed environment. However, most in some way seek to enforce their values on others. This can take the form of both domestic and international political activity. What are the tactics and agendas of such groups? They seek to eliminate the differentiation between the public and private spheres created by modernity because all aspects of life are within the purview of religion. Even the intimate zones of life like marriage, child rearing, and sex are within their purview. They reject science and secular regulations as the basis for morality and try to return religious norms to their former


prominence. They often use charity work with the poor and disadvantaged as a means to gain converts and goodwill for their agendas.18

While religious fundamentalism is a relatively new phenomenon, the fact that religions evolve to fit new social environments is not.19 Thus, the nature of religious ideologies evolves over time but the role those ideologies play in IR varies considerably less.

**Religion’s Multiple Influences on IR**

To argue that religion is the driving force behind IR is to overstate the case. However, is it really possible to deny that various aspects of religion influence the course of IR? I discuss below several such influences. Each individual type of religious influence taken on its own is significant and when combined they demonstrate a considerable religious influence on IR.

**Legitimacy**

Few would dispute that religion is a potential source of legitimacy. This legitimacy is in many ways a double-edged sword that can legitimate governments and their policies as well as opposition movements. Similarly, most societies “give religion a paradoxical role in human affairs—as the bearer of peace and the sword.”20 This is also true in IR. Religion can be a powerful tool of persuasion. It can be used by foreign policy makers to support their policies among a number of audiences including other politicians, their constituents, and both policy makers and citizens from other states. However, members of all of these audiences can use religion in the same way to oppose a policy or support an alternative policy.

It is important to note that this use of religious persuasion has at least three limits. First, it is a culturally-specific tool. Invoking Jesus, for example, is more likely to sway Christians than Muslims or Jews, much less Hindus or Buddhists. Second, not everyone is religious or swayed by religious arguments. In fact, some people are anti-religious and religious persuasion may make them more likely to oppose a policy. For example, many secularists in Israel resent the influence of religious parties on the government and are likely to oppose any policy that is perceived as religious in origin. Finally, religious persuasion is linked to the credentials of the one using it. Someone with poor religious credentials will have a harder time using religious persuasion than someone with good credentials.

There are several trends in the IR and social science literature

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20 Appleby, *op. cit.* [2], p. 27.
which support the argument that religious legitimacy can be potent in IR. First, many argue that norms are having an increasing influence on IR. One proof of this is that groups like indigenous peoples who have very little power in terms of traditional political and economic measures have nevertheless been successful at using international norms to attain their political goals. As religion is a source of norms, it also should have this type of influence. Second, the instrumentalist and constructionist literature posit that ethnicity and nationalism are potent forms of persuasion that can be used by politicians. The same reasoning can be applied to religion. Third, religion is a source of identity and many posit that identity is a potent factor in IR. Finally, the current international laws of war evolved from religious precepts that date back to St. Augustine’s *City of God*.

**Religious World-Views**

The argument that religion can influence people’s views is also not in dispute. This can influence IR in two ways. First, to the extent that religion influences the world-view of a policy maker, it also influences his decisions. This can lead to extreme and intractable policies because “religion deals with the constitution of being as such. Hence, one can not be pragmatic on concerns challenging this being.” Thus, religiously inspired views held by policy makers and the policies based on them can potentially inspire intractable policies which, in turn, can lead to international incidents including war. For example, Iran’s ruling clergy feels that its actions are divinely inspired and, therefore, cannot be wrong. This has arguably contributed to, among other things, their defiance of international pressure to halt their nuclear arms program.

It is not necessary that a policy maker’s world-view be completely religious for religion to have an impact. Most people, including religious people, have complex world-views based on a number of factors including, but not limited to, their upbringing, education, friends, family, cultural heritage, political ideologies, and personal history. Even if religion is one among many influences on a world-view, it is still an influence.

Second widely held religious beliefs among constituents can place constraints on policy makers' decisions. Even autocratic governments would be unwise to take an action that runs directly counter to a belief, moral, or value that is widely held by their constituents. For example, in the Arab-Israeli conflict, leaders from both sides need to weigh how their populations will react to any agreement. This is particularly true of agreements dealing with the disposition of holy sites like the city of Jerusalem.

In addition to religiously inspired attitudes toward specific issues, policy makers can also be constrained by a general religious influence on the cultural mediums in which they act. For instance several studies show

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23 See, for example, Huntington, op. cit. [7].
that Islam is associated with authoritarianism.\textsuperscript{25} There is also no shortage of studies showing that religious affiliation is associated with political attitudes.\textsuperscript{26}

**Local Religious Conflicts are International Issues**

While there are few overtly religious international wars there is no shortage of local conflicts with religious overtones.\textsuperscript{27} How do these conflicts impact in the international arena? First, since the end of the Cold War there has been an increased acceptance of humanitarian intervention in these conflicts. This intervention ranges from humanitarian aid and attempts at mediation to outright military intervention on behalf of an oppressed minority, as happened in Kosovo. Furthermore, studies show that such intervention is more likely in religious conflicts and in about four of five cases the intervener is intervening on behalf of a minority with which it shares a religious identity.\textsuperscript{28}

Second, local conflicts often cross international borders. They tend to produce refugees which can create problems in neighboring states. Also, groups in bordering states who share ethnic or religious affinities with those involved in a conflict often become involved in the conflict. Sometimes the conflict can spread to a bordering state. All of this happened in the 1990s in the Former Yugoslav republics.

A conflict in one part of the world can inspire similar conflicts elsewhere. Many believe that the Iranian revolution had exactly this influence on Muslim opposition movements around the world. If a religious revolution is successful, as happened in Iran and Afghanistan, those states often seek to spread the revolution and support violent opposition movements elsewhere. In the cases of Iran and the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan, this included support for numerous militant movements.

Third, the conflicting parties can use international forums in order to further their cause. For example Arab and Islamic states often use the United Nations (UN) and UN sponsored conferences as forums to demonize Israel.

Of course, all of these avenues for the spread of conflict across borders also apply to non-religious conflicts. However this does not take away from the fact that it happens with local religious conflicts and that because of this these conflicts influence IR. Also, since the late 1970s, religious conflicts have been becoming a greater proportion of all conflict. Based on an analysis of the State Failure dataset which provides a list of


\textsuperscript{27} For an enumeration of local religious conflicts see Fox, *op. cit.* [7].

\textsuperscript{28} Fox and Sandler, *op. cit.* [7], p. 63-70.
the most violent domestic conflicts between 1948 and 2003, religious conflicts rose from 25% of all local conflicts in 1976 to 60% in 2003.

Transnational Religious Phenomena and Issues

A number of phenomena and issues are becoming progressively global to the extent that they are not limited by state borders. Space limitations allow only a brief discussion of some of them but they are sufficient to illustrate the point that such phenomena and issues exist.

First, religious fundamentalism, which is discussed in more detail earlier in this essay, is a prime example. Its origins include a reaction against modernity, itself an international phenomenon. The agendas of fundamentalist groups are often international in that their ultimate goal is to spread the influence of their ideologies worldwide. This is especially true of today’s political Islam. Fundamentalist groups are often linked to international networks of like-minded groups which pursue their common goals.

Second, since the early 1980s most, but not all, terrorist attacks have been by religious terrorist groups. Many of these groups act internationally and include members from multiple states. Certainly some of the most well known of these attacks, like those of September 11, 2001 in the US and the March 11, 2004 attack in Madrid, have had considerable impact on the foreign policies of a number of states. The former of these attacks is directly linked to the invasion and overthrow of the governments in Afghanistan and Iraq by US-led international coalitions.

Third, the growing prominence of human rights on the international agenda is linked to religion. There is considerable tension between Western concepts of civil rights and women’s rights on one hand and Moslem concepts of the role of Islam in the state and the traditional role of women on the other.

Finally, proselytizing is becoming an international issue. Missionaries from many religions travel internationally seeking converts to their religions. Yet many states feel that this activity, at least by religions considered by the state to be undesirable for a variety of reasons, either undermines the state’s indigenous culture or is in some other way dangerous. In 2002 at least 77 countries, including several Western states, placed limits on proselytizing by minority religions.

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29 For more information on the State Failure dataset, see the project’s website at <globalpolicy.gmu.edu/pitf/>. The analysis of that data used here is provided by the author.
31 This is based on an analysis of the Religion and State dataset. For more details, see J. Fox, “World Separation of Religion and State into the Twenty First Century”, Comparative Political Studies, vol. 39, n° 5, 2006, p. 537-569.
Where Do We Go from Here?

There is a growing realization that having a blind spot where religion is concerned is one of the greatest failings of IR theory. It is also becoming clear that it is not possible to really understand world events without taking religion into account. Some like Samuel Huntington have tried to explain the growing evidence that religion remains relevant by arguing that "the late twentieth century has seen a global resurgence of religion."32 Does it really make sense that religion disappeared for decades then suddenly reappeared? Or is it more likely that religion never disappeared but it did evolve in order to survive in a new modern environment?

There is no reason that major IR theories can not also evolve in order to accommodate religion. For example, religious persuasion and legitimacy can be seen as alternative sources of power in realist paradigms of IR. The fact that religion can be a motivation as powerful as traditional realpolitik motivations is more problematic for neo-realism but a classical and neo-classical realism which allows for motivations other than material power would likely better reflect the complicated world we live in than a theory which only includes material concerns. Constructivists could treat religion as a man-made structure. Marx in dismissing religion as the opiate of the masses acknowledged its power. Even if it is a false consciousness, it could be treated as an influential one.

To be fair declaring that religion should be integrated into IR theory is far simpler than actually performing that integration. In today's complicated world "it is by no means clear what is in the realm of Caesar and what is in the realm of God."33 Yet this integration is essential in order to understand the events in today's complicated world.

32 Huntington, op. cit. [7], p. 64.