The Question of Religion and World Politics

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In this essay we introduce this special volume on the role of religion in world conflict. We develop a common definition of religion which focuses on five ways religion can influence society and politics: (1) as a basis for identity; (2) as a belief system that influences behavior; (3) through formal religious doctrines; (4) as a source of legitimacy; and (5) through its religious institutions. We discuss why the issue of religion has in the past received little attention from social scientists. Finally, we develop a set of common questions which the other authors in this volume address. These questions are designed to create a better understanding of the role religion plays in world conflict as well as how international relations theory can help us understand this role.

The purpose of this volume is to examine two central and related issues. First, how does religion in its various forms and manifestations influence world politics? Second, how will adding religion to the discourse on international relations modify our theoretical understanding of international relations? These questions are seemingly simple but, in reality, they are not for a number of reasons. First, until recently social science theory in general—and international relations theory in particular—has overlooked religion as an important social factor. Second, those students of the field who do address religion rarely work from a common conception of the term. Moreover, they often analyze religion in vastly different contexts and pay little attention as to how the findings associated with these particular contexts relate to others. Third, both leading approaches in the discipline of international relations—realism and institutionalism—have not developed any sensitivity to the infusion of religion into their terms of reference.

The authors in this volume necessarily focus on their own particular topics. In one degree or another, however, they also speak to a set of larger questions. The purpose of this introduction is to provide a synoptic view of those larger concerns. Clearly not all of these more specific questions are relevant to each of the studies in this volume, but all of the studies deal with issues that are relevant to at least some of these questions. These questions are discussed below.

This volume is based on papers presented at the conference “Religion and World Politics” held in May 2003 at Bar Ilan University, sponsored by the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and the Sara and Simha Lainer Chair in Democracy and Civility. Because of the particular interest of these sponsors in the Middle East, especially Israel and the fact that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most high-profile conflicts which includes religious elements, four of the contributions to this volume focus on this conflict. Two of the contributions focus on another high-profile conflict.

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the Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir. Two of the papers use cross-sectional quantitative methodology and focus on the more general issue of the impact of religion on world conflict. Finally, one of the contributions focuses on the impact of religious identity and belief on voting in the U.S. Congress over foreign policy toward Israel. However, we would like to emphasize that all of these contributions develop theoretical models and have practical findings that are applicable beyond the specific cases which are their focus. This essay is intended to highlight some of these findings.

We proceed in three stages. The first examines the general question of how the social sciences deal with religion in general. The second examines why religion was ignored by the social sciences for most of the twentieth century. The third addresses a set of more specific questions.

What is Religion and How Can It Be Understood within the Context of the Social Sciences?

Religion is a notoriously difficult term to define. In practice many use the form of definition that has in the past been applied to a notably unreligious topic: I may not be able to define it but I know it when I see it. That approach has no practical value. Only a more precise definition can allow a better understanding of which debates over the topic of religion and world politics are due to differences of opinion over how religion influences world politics, and which are due to different understandings of the multifaceted term "religion" itself.

Since religion can influence all manner of social phenomena, the definition of religion discussed here is not unique to international relations. However, its broader applicability is not a liability.

For practical purposes it is best to avoid theological definitions of religion which focus on the nature of deities. Rather our concern is with how religion can influence human behavior and society. As explaining human behavior and the nature of society is the central goal of social scientists, this approach has the advantage of focusing on the issues relevant in this context and avoiding contentious issues peripheral to the topic at hand.

While each of the authors focuses on different issues in different contexts, five social manifestations of religion can be identified, under which most of their understandings of religion can be placed. At the outset it is important to acknowledge that these five facets of religion often overlap and represent different aspects of a complex whole. Nevertheless, identifying them individually helps to better understand the many ways the concept of religion can be approached by social scientists.

First, religion can be among the bases for identity. The argument that identity issues influence politics is widely accepted. For instance, Samuel Huntington argues that identity-based civilizations will be the basis for world politics in the post-cold war era. Even most of those who dispute his theory acknowledge that identity is important. They instead argue that civilizations will not be the primary basis for identity. The question of identity has become prominent in international relations with the growing influence of constructivists even though it is rarely, if ever, linked up with religion per se. However, the role of religion in identity is not clear. Is it only one basis for identity among many others like language, shared history, place of residence, nationality, and ethnicity? Or is there something unique about the influence of religion on identity?
Second, religion includes a belief system which influences behavior. People’s beliefs influence their behavior and few would deny that religion is among the sources of the beliefs of many people. This can apply to leaders as well as the masses. Even if leaders do not themselves believe, they must often give weight to widely held beliefs and prejudices within the populations they govern. In international politics the impact of religiosity has appeared in the analysis of the foreign policy of leaders like Woodrow Wilson and John Foster Dulles. Also, if religious beliefs are involved, the possibility for compromise and accommodation is reduced.4

Third, religious doctrine or theology can often influence behavior. While this facet of religion often overlaps with the previous one, they are not the same thing. Most religious have within them complex and often contradictory doctrines and concepts.5 These vast bodies of doctrine can provide a resource for those who wish to justify their actions. They also can be where people seek guidance for the proper way to deal with a given situation. Clear aspects of doctrine can also restrict the options of policy makers. The work of Reinhold Niebuhr and his influence on Morgenhau is a primary example in the forgotten intellectual origins of realism.6

Fourth, religion is a source of legitimacy. In fact, it can be used to justify nearly any policy or action, even those that may otherwise be considered unjustifiable. For instance, it is used to provide the justification for Muslim suicide bombers who would otherwise be seen as violating religious laws against both murder and suicide. In the past it has also been used to justify both the continued reign of governments as well as their overthrow. Until the Peace of Versailles the divine right of kings to rule was the legitimizing principle of the international system. Despite the fact that religious legitimacy often supports state governments, it is important to remember that it is a source of legitimacy separate from, and often in competition with, the more secular bases for a state’s legitimacy.7

Finally, religion is generally associated with religious institutions. These institutions can influence politics in a number of ways. To the extent that they are accepted by a population, their moral authority and prominence give their opinion weight. They are authoritative arbiters of religious legitimacy. Religious institutions, like any other established institution, can provide the logistical basis for mass mobilization.8 On the global scene, religious institutions often act as transnational institutions and as such often interact with other international or transnational actors—and in some cases, such as the Catholic Church, can themselves be defined as international actors.

The identity approach to religion is the most common among the authors of this volume, perhaps because it is the simplest to apply. The qualitative studies in this volume (by Ellingsen, Oldmixon et al., and Peace) all use religious identity to identify which conflicts are religious. Peace, in addition to religious identity, also examines whether the presence of religious issues in a conflict influences its level of violence. Oldmixon et al. examine the impact of the religious and ethnic identities of members of the U. S. Congress, as well as that of their constituencies, on their votes with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ellingsen uses religious identity and religiosity to examine the extent to which religion is important in different civilizations and the impact of religion on armed conflict. Ghose and James similarly examine the impact of religious identity, as well as religious belief systems, on international interventions, using Pakistan’s 1995 intervention in Kashmir as a case study.

James and Ozdamar demonstrate that the Indo-Pakistan conflict over the region of Kashmir involves religious identity issues from the Indian perspective,
but from the Pakistani perspective it involves the motivation of defending Islam from India's secular influences. Pakistan also uses Islam to legitimize its actions in the international arena and to mobilize international support for its cause.

Auerbach examines how religious motivations contribute to forgiveness and reconciliation between parties with a history of mutual violence and antagonism. Frisch examines another aspect of religious ideology and doctrine—whether it is truly a motivation for the behavior of Yasser Arafat's PLO's movement or is simply a tool to legitimize the movement and to counter the influence of Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist movements. Kenkel similarly examines whether the religiosity of Israeli impacts on their attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Cohen reminds us that the international law of war is based on religious doctrine and examines how Jewish doctrine has evolved to develop a similar set of precepts that guide many Israeli soldiers who must deal with issues of morality and war on a daily basis. This moral code grants legitimacy to many actions taken by these soldiers and is taught and supported in Israel's national religious movement's institutions.

Why Did International Relations Theory Ignore Religion for Much of the Twentieth Century?

Other than Ellingsen, who focuses less on why religion was ignored than on why the study of religion and religion itself are experiencing a revival, the authors in this volume do not directly address this issue. Nevertheless, it is critically important because it colors all of their topics. All of the authors, to some extent, must grapple with the problem of being among the first to try to integrate religion into international relations and current social science theory. Accordingly, a brief discussion of the history of religion in the social sciences is in order. For reasons which are made clear by this discussion, in order to understand why international relations has ignored religion, it is necessary to first discuss some of the other social sciences.

To a great extent, the social sciences were founded upon the work of luminaries like Durkheim, Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, Voltaire and Weber, who believed that primordial forces like religion were giving way to more rational and scientific modes of thought which would provide the basis for a new society free of the superstitions and prejudices of the past. This trend is most apparent in sociology. Sociology was born in the context of tensions between religion and liberal culture in Europe. In this struggle against the old status quo which included religious authority, reason and science challenged religion's monopoly on the mind and consciousness. Because of this, the founding generations of sociologists were not disinterested analysts but were advocates for the science and reason which would crush what they saw as the ignorance and superstition caused by religion. Thus the reason most founding sociologists wrote about religion was not because they felt it was to be an important social force in the future but because its perceived death throes were a major issue of their era.

This denial of any real importance of religion by sociologists became formalized into what is now known as secularization theory. This body of theory argues that modern factors like economic development, urbanization, modern social institutions, pluralism, growing rates of literacy and education, and advancements in science and technology would lead to religion becoming an irrelevant force in the world. Modern political and social institutions usurped most of the traditional roles of religion in
society. Religious norms of behavior were replaced by technical and rational criteria designated by bureaucratic and scientific sources. Also, the focus of social institutions shifted from communities, a stronghold of religion, to the entire society. Because of this, society devoted less resources to religion. ¹⁰ There was little need to deal with religion as an important social factor. When sociologists did address religion, it was as a source of identity—or they focused on what they considered extreme and deviant phenomena.¹¹

The origins of the rejection of religion by political scientists is less obvious, but the result was the same. The dominant theory on religion in political science for much of the twentieth century was modernization theory. While this body of theory focused on ethnicity, it was also clearly meant to apply to religion.¹² Its arguments roughly paralleled the arguments of sociologists.

International relations theory, while similarly ignoring religion, is unique among the social sciences for two reasons. First, it has no theory explaining why religion is not important in the modern era. That this is so is simply assumed. If religion must be dealt with it is usually placed within some more secular category such as culture, civilizations, or terrorism.¹³ The debate over Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory is a case in point. Huntington predicted that conflict in the post-cold war era would be primarily between several “civilizations” which he defined to a large extent based on religion. However, other than in the definitions of his civilizations the term “religion” was rarely used. The detractors of this theory also tended to avoid the term “religion” wherever possible, preferring terms like “culture,” “state,” “nationalism,” and “ethnic group” when referring to the subcultural groupings that many of them felt would remain the basis for world conflict.¹⁴ Thus, while many religious factors were discussed, they were rarely discussed overtly.

Second, not even international relations theory (still the other social sciences) founded upon the belief that religion was receding from the world as an important factor, it can be argued that the modern context for the relations between states was founded upon intentionally secular principles. The modern concept of the territorial state, the basis for modern international relations, was articulated by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. This treaty was designed to end the Thirty Years’ War between Protestant and Catholic states. In doing so it developed a format for relations between states which intentionally did not include religion. Some like Phetott argue that the process of removing religion from international relations actually started with the Protestant Reformation and culminated with the Treaty of Westphalia. It is certainly true that this treaty put an end to any remaining overarching authority of the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire over states and recognized that each state had total sovereignty, a situation that reemains true today. It also ended intervention by states in the affairs of other states over matters of religion.¹⁵

These two factors combine to form a profound rejection of religion in international relations theory. International relations journals rarely directly address the topic of religion.¹⁶ Unlike the other social sciences, which are discussed below, it is unclear whether this is changing. The events of September 11, in which religiously motivated terrorists operating from a transnational network with the support (or at least acquiescence) of some state governments killed over three thousand people, should have served as a wake-up call for international relations theorists and state governments alike, yet it is not clear whether this has actually happened. Reactions have been tentative and ambivalent.
For example, the Bush administration approach is to treat the Al Qaeda terrorists as followers of an illegitimate and abhorrent branch of Islam which is not representative of the "true Islam." Issues of the legitimacy of this interpretation of Islam and the standing of an administration made up mostly of Protestant Christians to decide which interpretations of Islam are legitimate aside, this approach obfuscates the undeniable fact that the perpetrators of these acts were motivated and continue to be motivated by their religious beliefs. Furthermore, the members of Al Qaeda are likely not the only international actors who are motivated at least in part by religious beliefs. On the other side of the coin, the U. S. State Department has recently begun publishing a yearly report on religious human rights around the world. Thus, the U. S. government both admits and denies the importance of religion in international affairs.

The reaction of international relations scholars has been similar. A recent special edition of the international relations journal *Millennium*\(^7\) on religion and international relations (which was published before September 11) exemplifies this ambivalence. Most of the articles in the journal addressed either international relations or religion. Few, with some notable exceptions addressed both.

Sociologists are similarly ambivalent. A recent edition of the journal *Sociology of Religion*\(^8\) was devoted entirely to the debate over whether secularization theory is still valid. The debate centered around two issues. First, whether secularization means that people are becoming less religious or it means that religion is moving from the public sphere to the private one. Second, whether either of these are happening. That secularization theory is being seriously questioned at all is a revolutionary development in sociology, but it is clear that the old guard remains strong.

Political scientists began to recognize religion as an important factor around 1980, if one can put a date to it. Events and processes like the Iranian Revolution, Ronald Reagan's election victory with the support of the religious Right, and the worldwide rise of fundamentalism all contributed to this. Even so, until the 1993 events in Waco, Texas, only a few academics considered religious violence in the West anything other than an epiphenomenon.\(^9\) Also, while the recognition of religion as an important factor is growing, it has not yet reached the mainstream of political science.

Given all of this, scholars who wish to understand the role of religion in world politics must, to a great extent, start from scratch. They must either create new bases for their theories or adopt existing bodies of theory to the topic of religion and world politics. Recent events, including but not limited to those of September 11, have clearly shown that religion is, at the very least, an important intervening variable in international relations. Thus this effort to address the topic is a crucial one. This brings us to the next central question of this volume.

Some More Specific Questions on Religion, International Relations, and the Social Sciences

This section focuses on a set of more specific questions designed to elicit how well current international relations and social sciences theory deals with religion and what needs to be done so that these disciplines can better address the issue. We first articulate the questions and then examine how the individual authors in this volume deal with the issues raised by these questions.
The Question of Religion

To What Extent are International Relations and Social Science Theory Equipped to Deal with the Issue of Religion and What Aspects of These Bodies of Theory Can Be Applied or Modified in Order to Better Understand the Role of Religion in World Politics?

This question is particularly pertinent to the study of international relations. This is because unlike other social sciences, not only was the study of international relations in part founded on the belief that religion was becoming unimportant, the modern Westphalian state system itself (following a bloody religious war that lasted decades) was founded with the precise mention of keeping religion out of international politics. Nevertheless, existing theories can be applied to better understand the role of religion in world politics.

To What Extent are the Religious Phenomena Being Examined Transnational or Domestic in Origin? If They are Domestic in Origin, to What Extent Do They Have an Impact Beyond the Borders of the State in Which They Originated?

This question relates to the Westphalian origins of international relations. As discussed above, the Treaty of Westphalia tried to keep religion from influencing the relations between states by keeping issues of religion within the arena of domestic politics. This view is echoed in international relations theory. For example, while some realists might admit that religion influences domestic politics they argue that it clearly has no influence on foreign policies—which are based solely on material or international order concerns. Thus both the locality of religious phenomena and their ability to travel across borders are in question.

There are three possible answers to this question. First, a particular religious phenomenon is domestic in origin and has little influence beyond the domestic arena. Second, the religious phenomenon in question is domestic in origin but has an influence beyond the borders of the state in which it originated. Third, some religious phenomena may be transnational in their origin and impact. These types of issues include the overlapping phenomena of fundamentalism, political Islam, and religious terrorism.

At the same time we must remember that the doctrine of just war has religious origins. In the current international system this doctrine is not limited to the international system and crosses into the domestic sphere.

When Religion is Used to Justify Actions, to What Extent are the Motivations for These Actions Religious and to What Extent are They Nonreligious?

In other words, is religion a causal factor or is it a justification for actions motivated by nonreligious factors? This question is not a new one. The argument that religion serves as a tool for more basic social factors and motivations has deep roots in the social sciences. In fact, it is the essence of Marx's famous argument that religion is the opiate of the masses. This particular argument is an example of a larger school of thought found mostly among sociologists called functionalism. The various forms of this argument have religion as a tool for social control, the social cement that bonds society together, or a means for preventing social conflict. More importantly, this argument is beginning to spread to international relations theorists.
Clearly this does occur. However, it is argued here that while religion may be used to justify actions that are not religiously motivated, this does not mean that religious motivations never influence actions. In fact, to argue that this never occurs is a difficult argument to support and obvious examples of religiously motivated political actions are abundant. The attacks of September 11 are one among many such examples. Nevertheless, it is important to differentiate between religion in its capacity as a motivating factor and religion in its capacity as a legitimizing factor. For this reason, the list of ways religion can influence behavior presented earlier in this essay does exactly this.

Also, even if religion is used to justify actions motivated by other concerns, this does not mean religion has no impact. If a politician can "play the religion card," meaning using religion to justify an action or mobilize people around a cause that is not religious in origin, this means that religion can be said to be "in the deck." That is, if religion can be used as a legitimizing or mobilizing tool, this means it has some resonance among the masses who are the target of these attempts at legitimization and mobilization.

Does the Manifestation of Religion in Question Originate with the Elites or the Masses?

This question can likely be applied to most issues. That is, are foreign policies driven by the elites or the masses? It certainly applies to religion. Many theories of religion and politics focus on the relationship between religious and political elites. However, others argue that the inclusion of the masses into the political process has also allowed the religious among the masses to influence policy. Religion in comparison to nationalism is even more mass oriented. This question also has larger implications with regard to international relations theory because it raises the question of the extent to which foreign policy is driven by mass sentiment as opposed to elite preferences.

Some Answers

The authors in this volume deal with these issues in different ways. Azruch notes that the realist paradigm is unequipped to deal with conflict resolution that includes elements beyond material interests, including identity issues. She draws from the socio-psychological literature to explain how religion can be part of the processes of forgiveness and reconciliation. While it is clear that the motivation for this forgiveness and reconciliation is not purely religious, religion can play an important role.

Cohen discussed how jus ad bellum, when it is just to go to war, plays out in the context of Jewish law. The concept of applying religion to justify going to war is a transnational one as it exists in most theological traditions and is, in fact, one of the bases for modern international law of war. While the interpretation of Jewish law is primarily in the hands of elites, it is the soldiers on the ground who must apply its precepts. Also, while the motivations for many military actions by Israeli soldiers are driven by nonreligious concerns, many soldiers from the national religious movement rely on these moral precepts to guide their actions.

The quantitative studies in this volume have considerably similar approaches and results. Both of them modify general conflict theory to incorporate religion. Ellingsen shows that people are becoming more religious but some world
civilizations are more religious than others. She also shows that both religiosity and religious identity impact on armed conflict but other nonreligious factors remain important (and are likely more important) than the religious ingredient. Pearce shows that religious identity conflicts are common among territorial conflicts and make them more violent, but the presence of religious issues in such conflicts make them less violent. This implies that nonreligious issues can often be more important motivations for violence than religious issues. Thus both of these studies show that religion is an important element in world conflict, but it is clearly not the only element and is often secondary to other aspects of these conflicts.

Oldmixon et al. apply traditional methods of congressional voting analysis to the question of whether religion influences votes in the U.S. Congress on an important foreign policy issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This approach focuses both on the attitudes of elites (the representatives) and on the impact of the American voter. It also provides an excellent example of how international diasporas can influence domestic politics as well as how domestic and often subdomestic religious factors can influence foreign policy decisions.

James and Oxdamar also look at the links between the domestic and international, focusing on the foreign policies of India and Pakistan with regard to the conflict over Kashmir. From the Indian perspective, the conflict involves domestic factors including religious identity, nonreligious economic and political factors, and ethnic and cultural factors which overlap, but are not synonymous with, religion. India’s motivations also include elite-driven nation-building policies, and more recently Hindu nationalism. From the Pakistani perspective the conflict involves resisting India’s secular influence in the region, which conflicts with Pakistan’s Islamic ideology (including its desire to include Kashmiri Muslims in an Islamic homeland), as well as religious identity issues. Pakistan also uses religion to legitimize its actions in the international arena. Yet even for Pakistan, the conflict involves more secular issues like territorial integrity and economic issues. Also, the entire conflict has been influenced by nonreligious processes including cold war and post-cold war alliances, but the conflict began with the British partition of the two states based on religious identity. Thus domestic and systemic religious factors contribute to interstate conflict, but they are certainly not the only issues involved in the conflict.

Ghose and James build a model that can account for the impact of religious identity and religious belief systems on international intervention at the domestic, regional, and international levels of analysis and apply this model to Pakistan’s intervention in India in 1965. Their model also integrates the impact of nonreligious factors including institutional constraints, national leadership, and regional and international hierarchies and organizations. They find that while religion, along with many nonreligious factors, impacts on the regional and domestic aspects of the conflict, it did not impact on the international aspects.

Frisch and Rynhold both use traditional comparative analyses to examine the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Frisch focuses on the question of whether the religious symbolism used by Yasser Arafat and his Fatah movement is truly motivated by religion or whether it is a more cynical attempt to use religion to mobilize the masses and counter the influence of his political opponents, the Palestinian Islamic fundamentalist movements. He concludes that the latter is the case. Rynhold examines the impact of religion in Israeli attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He concludes that the ideologies and behavior of secular and religious Israelis are
impacted by their religiosity, among both the “hawks” and “doves.” While both of these analyses focus primarily on domestic issues, the impact of the conflict dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has considerable international implications.

Overall, the contributions to this volume show that with some ingenuity, social science and international relations theory can and must be adopted to address the impact of religion on world politics. Religion’s impact on world politics includes both domestic aspects which can cross borders and transnational issues which impact multiple states, if not the entire world. While religious motivations are often important, world politics is complicated and these religious motivations rarely exist in a vacuum. That is, religious motivations and causes of conflict and other political phenomena are generally mixed with other secular motivations and causes, with the religious aspects often being less important than the nonreligious ones. These motivations and causes are sometimes elite-driven but also often originate at the level of mass politics. Finally, all of the contributions to this volume provide further evidence that, despite predictions to the contrary, religion remains a vibrant and important element of world politics. Nevertheless, the task of theory building and rigorous research is still ahead of us. The answers we provide are limited and partial in terms of scope and profundity. We call upon students of international relations to continue to investigate the role of religion in world politics, a pattern we don’t see disappearing any time soon.

Notes


14. Huntington’s detractors also made a number of other arguments—that the world is uniting into a single society, that he got his facts wrong, and that he ignored some other


17. Millennium: Religions in International Relations [Special Issue], 29, no. 3 (2000).


21. For example, at a recent symposium on religion and international relations at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, OR, on April 14, 2003, Jonathan Gallagher made precisely this argument.
