Review - Christian Approaches to International Affairs

https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/01/review-christian-approaches-to-international-affairs/

TANYA SCHWARZ, APR 1 2015

Christian Approaches to International Affairs
By: Jodok Troy
London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

In recent decades, and especially since 9/11, the question of religion's role in conflicts around the world has been mulled over by a range of International Relations (IR) scholars (Huntington 1993; Juergensmeyer 2008; Hassner 2009; Nexon 2009; Hassner and Horowitz 2010). At the same time, the (re)introduction of religion as an object of study in IR has sparked debates about how to integrate religion into IR (Fox and Sandler 2004; Lynch 2009; Fitzgerald 2011; Hurd 2011; Snyder 2011; Sheikh 2012). In *Christian Approaches to International Affairs,* Jodok Troy tackles both of these issues by showing how current IR theory can not only accommodate the study of religion, but can also provide important insights into the ways in which religion can be used to mitigate conflict. In particular, Troy argues that an understanding of religion in Realism and the English School—from a decidedly "Christian" perspective—can help "to bring about less conflictual global politics" (17). He finds Realism to be useful because of its religious foundations and focus on religious ethics (Ch. 6), while the English School provides the critical analytical concepts of international society and world society (Ch. 5). Troy argues that "in religious cooperation in international politics only a *modus vivendi* can be achieved, not real and continuous consensual results" (125). According to Troy, this is a result of religious identities and values that are "absolute" and, thus, prone to conflict. Pluralism, Troy argues, provides the solution, because it "embraces the principle of common humanity while at the same time respecting the dignity of different cultures" (125). *Christian Approaches* provides a thorough and thoughtful engagement with IR theory and the role of religion within it. However, Troy's problematic and rigid conceptualization of religion weakens the reasoning behind his call for pluralism.

Troy's approach to religion as an object of study is, in many ways, refreshing. He offers up a conceptualization of religion that goes beyond functionalist definitions or those that focus solely on identity, practice, or doctrine. Instead, for Troy, religion "is about absolute being" (53). Here, Troy is trying to tackle a problem with which many scholars of politics and religion continue to grapple. If religion is different from other cultural, social, or political phenomena, what makes it so? For Troy, definitions that focus solely on symbols, institutions, ideology, or belief do not fully capture the essence of what religion is for those who live it and do not take into account the inherent spirituality that is part of human nature (62). Troy introduces the notion of *religion as being* in an attempt to highlight the transcendental aspect of religion as critical and foundational to one's inner life, while also acknowledging the very real effects religion has on world politics.

Yet, Troy's portrayal of religion is stunted by the particular Christian perspective that he explicitly relies on in his descriptions and analyses of religion in international affairs—resulting in a rigid conceptualization of religion that does not take into account a wide range of religious traditions and interpretations.

For instance, as mentioned above, Troy places a great deal of weight in the notion of pluralism as a solution to conflict. He argues that we cannot expect the resolution of conflict through a move towards universal values, because every religion has "a claim to absolute truth" (34) and an adherence to absolute values (57) that cannot be compromised. However, Cecelia Lynch has argued that this kind of exclusivist view of religion and religious identity "is historically incomplete and ignores significant and lively debates within religious thought itself" (2000, 744). She

says that "exclusivist thinking" is actually "extremely contested" in religious communities today (749). Some religious leaders and theologians, for instance, are advocating for a theologically pluralist approach, which "requires an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of truth" (751). This is the case even for some Christians, as Nancy Ammerman has shown in her work on "Golden Rule" Christians (Ammerman 1997, 206). Moreover, some religious leaders and scholars argue that religious traditions are not closed systems at all, but, are instead, syncretistic—influenced and shaped by the cultures and religious traditions with which they come into contact (Lynch 2000, 756). These alternative views conceptualize religion in much more flexible and contextual terms than Troy, undermining his assumptions about the absolute nature of religious traditions and the inevitability of conflict due to this characteristic.

Troy's somewhat narrow conceptualization of religion extends into the particular Christian perspective he introduces—specifically through the interpretations of biblical scripture he relies on to bolster his assertions. For instance, Troy contends that IR scholars must acknowledge the Christian "roots of cosmopolitanism" and cites Ephesians 2:18-20 to support the claim that modern-day cosmopolitanism has Christian roots: "Through Christ we have access to one spirit to the Father. You are no longer stranger and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God" (97). These verses, Troy suggests, introduce the idea that all human beings are members of the same community. However, this excerpt (and other similar sentiments found in scripture) can be interpreted differently than Troy suggests. In other translations of these verses, the "we" includes Jews and Gentiles, but not people of other non-Judeo-Christian faiths. Thus, the "stranger" and "foreigner" referenced may simply be referring to people of different geographic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, rather than different religious backgrounds. In other words, one could interpret this as a call to embrace all followers of the Judeo-Christian God, but not peoples from other religious traditions. The problem, of course, is not that Troy relies on a perspective of Christianity that is incorrect, rather it is that Troy is presenting a particular Christian perspective that does not acknowledge the varied ways that Christian scriptures, beliefs, and practices are lived and interpreted.

Additionally, making the claim that particular modern values, principles, or discourses originated in Christian scriptures or traditions presents at least two problems that Troy does not acknowledge. For one, as Siba Grovogui (2006) argues, these types of origination claims are not only wrong, but often implicitly privilege the West over other traditions and histories. So, even if principles of modern-day cosmopolitanism can be found in a particular interpretation of Christian scripture, we must concede that these same principles may have also developed in other cultures and traditions. It may seem as if I am belaboring a relatively small part of Troy's overall project, but his problematic use of Christian scripture is indicative of a broader problem—that of a lack of proper reflection on the diversity found in religious traditions.

Furthermore, Ruth Marshall (2014) underlines the problem inherent in treating Christianity as a religion at all. Marshall argues that we, as scholars, often operate *within* "a [discursive, historical cultural] space that is still Christian" (2014, S350) and treating Christianity as a religion—an object that can be compartmentalized and studied—may neglect the various ways in which Christian histories and cultural practices are already present within our analytical approaches and linguistic choices. In *Christian Approaches,* Troy highlights the fact that some IR scholars were influenced by Christian doctrines and practices; however, he does so in a way that portrays Christianity as a specific and bounded religious tradition and neglects the larger discursive space these scholars operated in. The same goes for Troy's own Christian perspective. Undoubtedly his perspective of global politics is influenced by his own Christian views: on "evil" and human nature (127); in the "freedom" that can be found only in monotheism, etc. Troy acknowledges (implicitly, if not explicitly) this influence. However, he does not note the Christian influences that are found in the broader historical and cultural traditions that Troy is a part of—both as a Westerner, and as a scholar.

Despite its faults, *Christian Approaches to International Affairs* is still an important intervention into debates focusing on how religion should be integrated into International Relations. As Troy convincingly argues, certain IR theories have always been able to accommodate the inclusion of religion as an object of study in global politics. Additionally, Troy's notion of *religion as being* is a promising idea for those of us who grapple with defining religion. Unfortunately, Troy's overall conceptualization of religion, and Christianity in particular, suffers from a narrow and rigid perspective that neglects a wide range of religious beliefs, practices, and discourses.

Review - Christian Approaches to International Affairs
Written by Tanya Schwarz

Bibliography

Ammerman, Nancy T. (1997) "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream." In *Lived Religion in America,* ed. David Hall. Princeton University Press.

Fitzgerald, Timothy. (2011) *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth.* New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Fox, Jonathan and Shmuel Sandler. (2004) *Bringing Religion into International Relations.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Grovogui, Siba. (2006) "Mind, Body, and Gut! Elements of a Postcolonial Human Rights Discourse." In *Decolonizing International Relations,* ed. Branwen Gruffydd Jones. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Hassner, Ron E. (2009) *War on Sacred Grounds.* New York: Cornell University Press.

Hassner, Ron E. and Michael C. Horowitz. (2010) Debating the Role of Religion in War. *International Security* 35(1): 201-208.

Huntington, Samuel P. (1993) The Clash of Civilizations? *Foreign Affairs* 72: 22-49.

Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman. (2011) A Suspension of (Dis)Belief: The Secular-Religious Binary and the Study of International Relations. In *Rethinking Secularism,* edited by Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen. New York: Oxford University Press.

Juergensmeyer, Mark. (2008) *Global Rebellion: Religious Challenges to the Secular State, from Christian Militias to al Qaeda.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Lynch, Cecelia. (2000) "Dogma, Praxis, and Religious Perspectives on Multiculturalism." *Millennium – Journal of International Studies* 29(3): 741-759.

Lynch, Cecelia. (2009) A Neo-Weberian Approach to Religion in International Politics. *International Theory* 1(3): 381-408.

Marshall, Ruth. (2014) "Christianity, Anthropology, Politics." *Current Anthropology* 55(S10): S344-S356.

Nexon, Daniel H. (2009) *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires, and International Change.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sheikh, Mona Kanwal. (2012) How Does Religion Matter? Pathways to Religion in International Relations. *Review of International Studies* 38(2): 365-392.

Snyder, Jack L., Ed. (2011) *Religion and International Relations Theory.* New York: Columbia University Press.

About the author:

Tanya Schwarz is a PhD candidate in political science at the University of California, Irvine. Her dissertation focuses on the meaning of prayer for transnational faith-based organizations.

Review - Christian Approaches to International Affairs
Written by Tanya Schwarz