

Christian Academics Seek an International Relations Revival

Written by Craig R. Myers

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CRAIG R. MYERS, APR 18 2025

Saint Augustine's "City of God" is a foundational document in International Relations, analyzing historical events—in this case the sack of Rome—through the lens of the Christian faith. This spring, Christian scholars gathered in Tennessee seeking a revival of this time-honored and influential worldview in IR writing, research, and teaching. The Christianity and International Relations Conference was held in March at Lee University in Cleveland. "It just became really apparent to me that there really isn't a Christian perspective within International Relations, the discipline as we teach it right now. So, the perspective exists, but ... I didn't learn it at graduate school," said participant Associate Prof. Peter Campbell of Baylor University. This article chronicles some of the proceedings of the conference.

Other participants included Profs. Michael McKoy (Wheaton College), Katherine Bryant (Westmont College), Ana Shippey (Lee University), Chan Shin (Gordon College), Sukwon Lee (New York University), Justin Clardie (Northwest Nazarene University), Susan Haynes (Lipscomb University), and Tim Taylor (Wheaton College). A session was devoted to reviewing a draft of "Christ and His Leviathans: A Christian Introduction to International Relations," by Prof. Robert Jousstra of Redeemer University in Ontario, Canada. Jousstra hopes the book, set to be published by end of year, will help fill the void of Christian IR scholarship. "Historically it does exist. It just hasn't been recovered or updated or put in a contemporary way," Jousstra said of Christian IR theory. "I was able to find lots of stuff that very explicitly drew on Christian foundations, of theological concepts in terms of the building of international order, of what we mean by justice, and what are the roles of states within that."

Jousstra said the topic began to dwindle in the 1970s, with some notable exceptions like Jim Skillen and Paul Marshall. Jousstra said his work is not intended to be a textbook, but a primer on how to view the world system in the context of the Christian faith. "How would a Christian approach the question of justice in international relations, and what might the Christian social and political tradition furnish us with, theologically and conceptually... to apply and interrelate the Good News of the Gospel to the work of international politics?" Jousstra said.

Christian IR theory sprang from Augustine, while its most influential modern practitioner is Reinhold Niebuhr. The related field of Classical Realism features a pantheon of philosophers of varying religious perspective, including Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau, and practitioners such as U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and George Kennan. Both views start with a view of human nature as corrupted. But Christian IR is distinct because it calls for morality over ideology in foreign policy. It holds that while states are driven by self-interest due to original sin, they are capable of good if they eschew utopianism in favor of proximate gains.

Christian IR theorists see this principle in the biblical story of the "Tower of Babel" in Gen. 11:1-9, in which the world comes together in unity, but their work displeases God:

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves" ... The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ... So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city."

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"Without a Christian foundation, individuals are sovereign of themselves, leading to self-worship," Lee said.

Christian IR is generally divided into: (1) Christian Realism that teaches because there is no law over nations before the Second Coming, there is only law between nations. So, it sees state capabilities as the priority in great power competition; and (2) Christian Liberalism which emphasizes the role of state preferences not just capabilities. It sees potential for cooperation and interdependence among states. A key principle is "Democratic Peace"—that democracies don't go to war with each other.

McKoy said another familiar name should be part of the Christian IR tradition—the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He said King's 1963 sermon "Antidotes for Fear" offers a twist on the IR concept of a security dilemma, which explains how a states' moves to protect itself—such as seeking to join an alliance—spark conflicts. King wrote:

We usually think that war comes from hate, but a close scrutiny of responses will reveal a different sequence of events—first fear, then hate, then war, then deeper hatred. If a nightmarish nuclear war engulfs our world—God forbid—it will not be because Russia and America first hated each other, but because they first feared each other.

McKoy said King questioned how states sought to deal with the fear:

Our method for dealing with this fear has been to arm ourselves to the nth degree. So the two contending camps of the world are engaged in a fever-packed arms race. ... 'Greater arms will cast out fear,' the nations seem to say. They have only produced greater fear. So, we are called back in these turbulent, panic-stricken days to that wise affirmation of the New Testament: 'Perfect love casts out fear.'

McKoy used the example of Civil Rights leaders who faced violence against themselves and their families, but didn't respond in kind. King opposed the militant tactics of groups like the Black Panthers. "IR theorists have treated the security dilemma as a failure of empathy, and therefore view empathy as the solution. King, grounded in a Christian anthropology, goes further arguing that sacrificial love is necessary to overcome the security dilemma," McKoy said.

Campbell said he incorporates Christian IR in the classroom by teaching classical realism before structural realism, which doesn't factor in human nature. "The Christian perspective on war, and probably politics generally, is best summed up by C.S. Lewis in the 'Weight of Glory' —that from the perspective of the materialist individual, human beings are a flash in the pan and institutions and states are those things that last," Campbell said. "But for the Christian, the state and institutions are but the thing of a moment, and individuals last forever."

The conference also focused on how Christian IR can guide research and teaching. Haynes presented her research on how faith-based groups were historically overlooked in international aid and development. That began to change after the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. "At the same time that security started focusing a lot on non-state actors and terrorism, the development literature started really acknowledging the role of faith-based actors in delivering aid," Haynes said. "There is an incredibly robust research agenda in this area, and it's completely omitted in all IR textbooks." "So, both reality as well as the present-day research just isn't brought down to our classroom."

More recently, organizations like the World Bank created offices for faith-based initiatives, Haynes said. "They did a huge report on poverty, and did a global survey and found that a lot of people in developing countries trust faith-based actors more than they trusted states, more than they trusted the international organizations," Haynes said.

Taylor presented research documenting the growing abortion rate based on Down Syndrome around the world, compounded by state censorship of opposing views. "The U.S. has the highest Down Syndrome non-termination rate of the developed world at 67% terminated. That's actually the best rate. Denmark has the highest rate at 98%. Denmark also has universal screening," Taylor said, adding that his research found Christian parents have a higher non-termination rate. Taylor advised caution when using disability as a measurement of the "flourishing" of states. "I think that our measures are descriptive, but become prescriptive over time," he said. "I guess my encouragement for all IR Scholars is to be very careful what measurements they're pushing." "It's good looking at income inequality. But

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a lot of times there's things I think are really important that go utterly unmeasured."

Lee said educators seeking a way to introduce Christian IR to their classes can focus on the faith's impact in "shaping liberal democratic traditions":

By weaving theological principles into conversations about political theory, international relations, and economics, we have a unique opportunity to challenge conventional secular narratives and reestablish God as the fundamental source of human dignity and freedom.

About the author:

Craig R. Myers was a reporter and editor for newspapers in Alabama and Florida for more than 25 years. A graduate of Troy University, he earned a master's in International Affairs in 2022 from Middle Tennessee State University, where he writes full time and teaches journalism classes part-time. Myers holds a degree in Russian language and over the past 20 years has regularly travelled to Moldova and Ukraine with Christian NGOs.