

Situating Religion in International Relations Theory

Written by Nukhet Sandal

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Scholars of international relations theory are gradually recognizing the importance of situating religion in the explanations of world events. Even some staunch Neorealists, who have long been criticized for ignoring non-material factors in their balance of power considerations, now acknowledge the role of religious actors. One glaring example of this turn has been Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer's work on the influence of the Israellobby.[1] In Neoliberalism, the situation is no different. Within this framework, we are now discussing how religion can be seen as a form of "soft power" or how religion can be an influential force in world markets, among others.

Being a student of international relations theory during my PhD years, I wrote a substantive paper looking at the different ways of integrating religion into international relations theory in 2007, under the guidance of my advisor Patrick James. We later published part of this work.[2] This article was the first survey of how we could actually trace the religion factor in mainstream international relations theory. We argued that religion actually was part of the mainstream approaches, including Classical Realism, Neorealism and Neoliberalism. Before we devised ad hoc theories to account for the importance of religion, we needed to see what we already had under our hands. Our job was easy with Classical Realism. Both Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr, among others, focus on human nature in their work, and they recognize the flexible nature of power. Niebuhr comes into the picture with his theologian credentials, so it is only to be expected that religion is a natural part of his description of human nature and world affairs.

Neorealism has been arguably the most resistant line of theory when it comes to accommodation of the identity dimension. However, many scholars had ignored what kind of potentials it had in itself, and how Neorealists actually can be sensitive to context. The development of the "balance of threat" theory by Stephen Walt is a good example of how perceptions come into picture in Neorealism. To illustrate, if Switzerland, Canada or Finland, for some reason, decided to acquire nuclear warheads, that would hardly constitute a real problem for the US. However, the same desire followed by Iran is not good news for many policymakers. Identities matter even in Neorealism, and religion is an important part of identity.

Neoliberalism is a relatively easy theoretical strand to deal with, as it recognizes the importance of transnational actors and issue linkages. In the end, Adam Smith linked conscience, economics and morality as early as 1759. Not only is it convenient to locate religion in Neoliberalism, but also the methodologies utilized by scholars under this framework can shed light on the mechanisms of religion in the public sphere. For example, the public choice literature or the market mechanisms investigated under Neoliberalism can also be employed to study religion in politics as skillfully done by Laurence Iannaccone among others.

As would be expected, not every religious issue can be investigated within a given theoretical approach. One can investigate religious states and their preferences through Neorealism, yet if we want to look at the marketing strategies of a fundamentalist organization, then Neoliberalism is the logical choice. In a forthcoming book I have co-authored with Jonathan Fox on religion and international relations theory, we also add the English School and Constructivism to our survey of Classical Realism, Neorealism and Neoliberalism to see what kind of opportunities these approaches offer.[3] Although we treat Constructivism as a theoretical strand in our book to be able to cover valuable work that has been carried out in that framework, one should also keep in mind that Constructivism is also a methodology that can be employed in all theoretical strands. One can be a Realist and a Constructivist at the same

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time.[4]

Constructivism, as an approach, allows us to question the meaning of religion and its manifestations in the public sphere. What kind of political discourses and narratives are created through shared understandings of religion? How do political and religious actors mutually constitute each other? When it comes to English School, religion appears again as an important component of justice and order debates. One of the key terms, “Just War Tradition” is embedded in a religious framework. In his most recent book, Daniel Philpott insightfully explores the religious (in addition to secular) understandings of restorative justice that is part of Just Peace. These contemporary debates on the role of religion are in the intersection of not one, but multiple theories of international relations, including the English School.[5]

The scholars of international relations are divided as to whether such integration is possible. In a recent book edited by Jack Snyder, prominent scholars of international relations discuss religion and international relations.[6] Whereas Snyder is optimistic that such accommodation is possible, some other authors debate the possibility of such an endeavor. The emergence of such works focusing on religion and international relations theory can only be good news, and these discussions are constructive. Agreeing with Snyder and other authors in the book who are optimistic, Fox and I not only argue that this accommodation is possible, but also we show numerous ways of situating religion in Neorealism, Classical Realism, Neoliberalism, Constructivism and the English School in our forthcoming book. These theories are not monoliths and they contain multiple possibilities within themselves. We believe that only after exploring these possibilities, we can meaningfully engage in a search for novel frameworks. This is only the beginning of an important discussion, and obviously, no book can cover all strands and all possibilities. However, these works constitute a call to all theorists in our discipline to inquire diverse ways to make sense of the real world.

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[1] Stephen M. Walt and John Mearsheimer The Israel Lobby and the U.S. Policy NY: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007.

[2] Nukhet Sandal and Patrick James, “Religion and International Relations Theory: Towards a Mutual Understanding,” European Journal of International Relations 17(1), 2011, 3-25

[3] Nukhet Sandal and Jonathan Fox, Religion in International Relations Theory: Concepts, Tools and Debates NY: Routledge, 2013.

[4] See Samuel J. Barkin, “Realist Constructivism” International Studies Review 5 (3), 2003, 325-342.

[5] Daniel Philpott, Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Reconciliation NY:OxfordUniversity Press, 2012.

[6] Jack Snyder (ed.) Religion and International Relations Theory NY: Columbia University Press, 2012.