Religion and International Relations: Critical Ways Forward?

https://www.e-ir.info/2014/03/24/religion-and-international-relations-critical-ways-forward/

ROBERT M. BOSCO, MAR 24 2014

In this brief article, I suggest some possible ways forward for scholars interested in the study of religion in International Relations (IR). Religion in IR needs fresh thinking. I argue that Critical perspectives can help spark it.

Religion, IR, and the Marginalization of Critical Perspectives

There is extensive literature on how the major IR theories such as (neo) realism and (neo) liberalism have marginalized the role of religion in IR. Some writers include 'Marxism' or 'Critical Theory' on the watchlist (see for example Thomas 2005, 28), overlooking, however, the persistent marginalization of Critical perspectives from IR's newfound interest in religion.

Under the designation 'critical,' one might include approaches that take their inspiration from Marx, the Frankfurt School, and Antonio Gramsci. Well-known IR practitioners include Robert Cox and Andrew Linklater. One also might include writings on IR from the critical end of Constructivism, Critical Security Studies, post-colonial approaches to IR, Critical Feminism, and studies of IR outside "the West." Thus far, scholars of religion in IR have not engaged with these and other strains of critical IR theory. Why not?

Scholars of religion and IR often assume that critical approaches—"Marxist" is often used as shorthand—do not take religion seriously as a variable in international politics. "Critical" must mean "Marxist," Marx thought religion was ideology, and so any tradition linked to him must also. The problem, it is claimed, is that all critical perspectives reduce religion to something *not religious*, usually something disappointingly this-worldly such as economic interest. Consider some examples from recent important works on religion and IR that demonstrate the trend:

The strongest skeptic would doubt the independent role claimed here for political theological ideas… this critic's doubt would lie either in a reductionist view that ideas are nothing more than the product of underlying economic, organizational, technological, or other material forces (Philpott 2012 [2001], 50).

The second set of limiting assumptions has to do with the impact of materialism in international relations… the general materialist assumption is that… what can be observed taking place is a reflection of material causes, and this means that ideas or ideology, including culture and religion, are epiphenomenal forces. They are the result of more basic material, economic, or technological forces in society (Thomas 2005, 62).

The second reason international relations theorists resist acknowledging the international order's religious bias is that although they treat religion as a source of mayhem, they somewhat paradoxically act as if it has little causal significance and thus can be safely ignored. Materialist theories such as hard-core realism and Marxism have little patience for religious claims on the grounds that they are epiphenomenal or superstructural; the international distribution of power and states, and the economic structure and classes, are all we need to know (Barnett 2011, 94).

On Marxism:

because of its axiomatic treatment of religion as an 'opiate' of the masses and as an impotent strand of the bourgeois superstructure, this tradition will prove of little help (Shah and Philpott 2011, 51).

As these examples suggest, a scholarly consensus seems to have emerged: critical approaches are not relevant to the study of religion in IR because they treat religion as 'merely ideology.' To have any explanatory value, surely 'religion' must refer to something more. The study of religion in IR is too special to be left, in the memorable words of one public official, to "a few deranged misfits on the edges of obscure universities, people who tuck their shirts into their underpants" (quoted in Peet 2009, 95). In other words, Critical Theorists.

Following phenomenologists like Feuerbach, Marx did indeed consider religion as ideology. For Marx, religion represents a projection of human beings' hopes, fears, and anxieties about material hardship onto fictive abstractions. Believing in those abstractions provides a salvific narrative to life that makes material hardship in the 'here-and-now' easier to put up with. Religion is a component of 'false consciousness,' which at its worst disempowers human beings by convincing them that their social and economic inequality is a natural, even divinely sanctioned condition that cannot be changed. Some IR perspectives hew closely to this line today. Critical Security Studies, for example, conceives of security as emancipation, including emancipation *from* religion. This too has its source in Marx, as when Marx writes in *On the Jewish Question*, "to be politically emancipated from religion is not to be finally and completely emancipated from religion" (Marx 1843 [1978], 40).

It is thus true that for Marx, religion is epiphenomenal. However, although the quotations above are not 'wrong,' and they appear in important and path-breaking works on religion and IR, they do fail to take the full measure of how critical approaches in IR might deal with religion.

Critical Ways Forward

Critical Theorists would be the first to admit that reducing religion to a cover for material interests does not tell us very much. This is especially true as capitalism has matured. In fact, figures associated with the Frankfurt School found ways to maintain the critique of capital while taking religion very seriously indeed. For example, could it be that capitalism is made possible by structures of thinking that are themselves religious, or more accurately, Judeo-Christian? If so, the 'deconstruction' of capitalism requires a deconstruction of the deeply embedded mental assumptions rooted in religion that enclose us (Nancy 2008). Consider in this context the writings of Walter Benjamin: "one can behold in capitalism a religion, that is to say, capitalism essentially serves to satisfy the same worries, anguish, and disquiet formerly answered by so-called religion" (Mendieta 2005, 259). According to Benjamin, capitalism rests on shame and guilt for its expansion. A sort of functionalism about religion is evident here, to be sure. But there is more: what are the conditions that make it possible for such an immanent theology to be transferred to others with *different* religious traditions? How does the theological *sub*structure of capital (thus religion is not *only* superstructure) interact with other religious forms? Thinking along Gramscian lines, could it be possible that our common-sense assumptions about material inequality and the status quo draw on patterns of thinking that are embedded in religious tradition, and if so, how might different (non-monotheistic?) traditions react to the expansion of capitalism into their own contexts? This is particularly pertinent as capitalism continues to spread around the world. The arrival of capitalism into other contexts could be explored through the lens of Gramsci's two categories of hegemonic analysis, the religion of the intellectuals and the religion of the people.

Practically, what might this mean? Simply that up-and-coming scholars of religion and international relations should examine the relationship between religion and the state, or religion and the capitalist world order, from a perspective *outside* of monotheism. There is very little in the IR tradition on Buddhism, Daosim, and Hinduism, for example. The study of religion in non-monotheistic contexts should be a central part of the project to de-center international relations from its Eurocentric—and Abrahamic—insulation.

There are other possibilities for critical engagement as well. We can investigate how discourses about and definitions of religion—the 'religion of the intellectuals'—finds its way into security discourses of states. This is the general approach I have taken, for example, to Western state discourses about religion and security in the wake of 9/11 (Bosco 2014). The causal arrow can work the other way, too. The state can also promote certain interpretations of

religion in civil society. Russell McCutcheon demonstrates for example how the rise of the academic study of religion as a humanistic discipline with a strong emphasis on toleration and citizenship is impossible to understand outside the context of the Cold War (McCutcheon 2004). States can also use religion to increase their legitimacy abroad in hopes that they will gain access to important economic opportunities. Competition among China and India has intensified in recent years over who is the true protector of Buddhism. This race to demonstrate Buddhist credentials is in large part driven by emerging economic opportunities in Burma/Myanmar.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the marginalization of critical perspectives from IR's newfound engagement with religion is unwarranted. It is simply untrue that critical perspectives dismiss religion as the 'opiate of the masses' or consider religion a crude reflection of material interests and therefore irrelevant to international politics. No one would reject these simplistic assumptions more strongly than critical theorists themselves.

Critical approaches hold great promise for the future study of religion and international relations. In fact, I predict that the subfield will very soon begin to move toward the sorts of questions raised above. Scholars of religion in IR, casting for new ways forward, would be well-served to explore critical avenues, both traditional and contemporary. There is no loss of explanatory power or disciplinary cache if the study of religion in IR moves closer toward critical perspectives on religion. It should also be observed that this confluence is more likely to happen—and in fact is beginning to happen—in European intellectual circles than in American ones. Understanding the reasons behind this difference of approaches to religion in global politics is itself a potential critical project.

References

Barnett, Michael. 2011. "Another Great Awakening? International Relations Theory and Religion" in *Religion and International Relations Theory,* Jack Snyder, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 91-114.

Benjamin, Walter. 2005. "Capitalism as Religion," in Eduardo Mendieta, ed., *The Frankfurt School on Religion.* New York: Routledge, 259-262.

Bosco, Robert M. 2014. *Securing the Sacred: Religion, National Security and the Western State.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Marx, Karl. 1978 [1843]. "On the Jewish Question" in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader.* New York: Norton, 26-52.

McCutcheon, Russell T. 2004. "Just Follow the Money: The Cold War, the Humanistic Study of Religion, and the Fallacy of Insufficient Cynicism." *Culture and Religion* 5 (1): 41-69.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2008. *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity.* New York: Fordham University Press.

Peet, Richard. 2008. *Unholy Trinity: The IMF, the World Bank, and the WTO.* London: Zed Books.

Philpott, Daniel. 2012 [2001]. "The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations" in *Religion and Foreign Affairs: Essential Readings.* Hoover, Dennis R. and Douglas M. Johnston, eds. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 33-51.

Sadowski, Yayha. 1993. "The New Orientalism and the Democracy Debate." *Middle East Report* N0. 183. July-August, 14-21.

Shah, Timothy Samuel and Daniel Philpott. 2011. "The Fall and Rise of Religion in International Relations: History and Theory" in *Religion and International Relations Theory,* Jack Snyder, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 24-59.

Thomas, Scott. 2005. *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations.* New York: Palgrave.

About the author:

Robert M. Bosco is Assistant Professor of International Studies at Centre College, U.S., where he teaches courses in Religion and International Politics, International Law, and International Relations Theory. His primary area of research is state intervention in religion. His first book on the topic,*Securing the Sacred: Religion, National Security, and the Western State,* has just been published by the University of Michigan Press. He may be contacted at Robert.bosco@centre.edu.