

Interview – John A. Rees

Written by E-International Relations

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This feature is part of a series of interviews with the contributing authors of *Foundations of International Relations*.

John A. Rees is a Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Notre Dame Australia. His research focuses on the intersection of religion, nationalism, and international policy, as well as theories and methods in the social scientific study of religion. Dr Rees is the 2022 Milward L. Simpson Visiting Fulbright Professor at the University of Wyoming. He is the author of 'Religion and Culture', in McGlinchey, S. *Foundations of International Relations* (2022: Bloomsbury).

You chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* deals with religion and culture – how did you first get involved in thinking about this area of focus?

My interest in religion and culture has many 'origins'. Perhaps the one most relevant to the textbook is that I worked for several years as an educator for an international development organization. The development space is shaped by engagements with cultural and religious practices and communities. I was confronted then, as now, with the need to grapple with these categories and the implications that different interpretations can have for our understanding of international relations.

In terms of your journey from one-time student to academic, how did you find your way into this profession, and can you give a brief summary of your career thus far?

My academic journey began in theology, then extended to ancient history before finally landing in the discipline of IR. I was attracted to IR because of its policy-orientation. I had a longstanding interest in the political theologies of different religious traditions, from Shia Islam, to Catholic liberation theologies, to Buddhist resistance movements, and Shinto practices for post-atomic peace. Because I had the beginnings of what we now call religious literacy, the post 9/11 international order became a place to explore questions of religion and politics in quite specific ways. My teaching, research, and public speaking – including a recent Fulbright Fellowship in the United States – has been shaped by these elements.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

That is a great question. My thinking has evolved through the input of many talented scholars. I would say I have shifted from being a scholar interested to 'prove' the importance of religious and cultural practices in world affairs, to one who now investigates how religious and cultural traditions adapt to the dynamic political worlds around them (for better and for worse). In terms of method, I describe my work as 'integrative' because I tend to learn from the edges of a discourse and apply these insights to the middle ground, both conceptually and in the policy domain. For example, I learn from those critical scholars who hold that 'religion' is only politics by another name, but translate this claim into more of a critical realist view that preserves the actuality and integrity of religious traditions.

On the conceptualisation of religion, I am grateful for the foundational work of Scott M. Thomas, Jocelyne Cesari, R.

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Scott Appleby, Jeffrey Haynes and many others. On engagements with religious tradition, post-colonialism, and questions of globalisation, I have learnt from scholars such as Robert Orsi, Atalia Omer, and Jose Casanova. On nationalism and ideology, the work of Anthony D. Smith, Michael Freeden, and Sinisa Malesevic are very influential. I have left so many names out! Needless to say, I am humbled by, and indebted to, the work of these and many others.

Do you think it is more important for academics (and students by extension) to dedicate most of their time to understanding the world, or instead actively to working to change it?

I suspect I am swimming against the tide to say that my teaching and research practice has always placed a priority on understanding before action. I am certainly not negating the imperative to act, but I am wary of action-impulses that can make us impatient about first learning multiple sides of an issue (and the sources behind them) prior to critique and/or support for various positions in the public realm. Literacy is central. I learnt this during my doctorate, which focussed on the World Bank's early engagements with religious actors and communities. When explaining my research context I quickly discovered that many people had very firm views about the World Bank even if they had an equally limited knowledge of its history, multi-organizational structure, and evolving programs. Religious tradition is another issue where deepening literacy is imperative.

I suspect many scholars (notably in the secular West) do not live in social worlds that are regularly shaped by religious ideas and communities. As a result, media-informed responses on religion can too often stifle tradition-informed learning in scholarly debate. If my scholarly views are merely the sum total of views from my favourite podcasts, news outlets and social media networks, then I have wasted the opportunity to cultivate and practice learning that leads to more grounded (and arguably, more sustainable) action.

Where do you see the most exciting research and debates happening in and around the discipline of International Relations?

The post/decolonial turn in the discipline is very significant. It remains to be seen whether different schools of thought emerge within it, or whether it becomes a more unified ideological movement. I favour the former over the latter, which would lead to a very rich tradition within IR.

I also think nationalism – long rejected by globalisers and critical school structuralists alike – will re-emerge as a field of focus in lieu of Covid and the tectonic shifts caused by the Russia-Ukraine war. There is an established literature going back 70 years that is worth reengaging in addition to the new forward-facing perspectives that will be written.

My longstanding interest in religious and cultural identities connects to post/decolonialism and nationalism, so I am very interested to see how both discourses evolve.

What is the most important advice you could give to students who are starting their journey with International Relations?

Always compare – singular ideologies are the end of thought. Respect how ideas began and then developed over time. Stay in conversation with multiple perspectives within a discourse. Be as committed to the (complicating) details of history as to the concepts that drive your interest. Cultivate slow reading. Maintain a wide and (politically) varied set of friends.

Those who read your chapter in *Foundations of International Relations* will take away many ideas and thoughts with them, but is there something specific you would like to leave in their minds?

Cultural and religious traditions are never static. Look for how they evolve and adapt over time in response to world events.