

Review of Religion in International Relations theory

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Abstract

While religion's presence in society is not disputed, its significance in international relations (ir) and the severity of its challenge to the largely 'secular' international relations discipline (IR) is still debatable. Also noteworthy is the way IR (theoretical) literature has defined and considered religion: caged in certain dimensions and constrained to specific roles. While Huntington started the debate on civilizational conflicts, several studies in the past few decades have contested the validity of not only 'warring' civilizations thesis but also how to incorporate religion in IR. There are fewer studies that discuss in-depth, various theoretical challenges that different groups of scholars have tried to tackle in IR, and the main gaps in those studies. This paper seeks to fill that gap by proposing a different review of the existing IR literature, i.e., in light of key trends in the IR's quest to incorporate religion into existing theories or newer frameworks. In that context, the paper argues that key works in the field can be classified according to where they place religion in (existing) IR. Three important developments in the IR scholarship as thus proposed: i) studies incorporating Religion in traditional IR theory, ii) Religious IR theories/ approaches and frameworks of analysis, and iii) finding secular in the post-secularizing IR. The paper examines the above trends in detail and critically analyzes each development, followed by a brief discussion on the methodological avenues for studying different religions under the same framework.

Keywords: Religion; Secular; International Relations theory; post-secular

Introduction

Religion has been considered an “overlooked dimension in the international relations theory or the discipline as a whole (IR) despite its salient presence in the observable international relations on ground (ir). As Haynes (2021) has argued, the inclusion or consideration of religion as a factor affecting foreign policy has closely followed the developments in the actual world. Theoretically, this highlights two main trends- one, exclusion of domestic politics, and thus religion in domestic politics in the IR/ir for decades, and two, also the western dominance over the discipline, which has been largely Eurocentric in part, due to the dominance of the west on ir. Several studies have highlighted events such as the “Islamic’ revolution in Iran, the 9/11 al Qaeda attacks in the US, or the larger US “war on terror” which has had widespread security and geopolitical consequences, particularly in the Islamic world. The common factor in these developments is that they were accounted for in the IR/ir since they greatly impacted the West. However, several other crucial historical events with heavy casualties of a certain religion such as the Kashmir conflict, the Sri Lankan war against Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or Southeast Asian secessionist conflicts have not been as impactful in highlighting the ‘resurgence’ of religion in IR/ir due to them being viewed as non-religious ideological, territorial, or political clashes, rather than being fueled by conflicting religious identities. This was despite the active continuous presence of religion in different geopolitical spheres in the global south or in its regional politics, at least, if not world politics at large. In terms of IR scholarship, while religion is gradually gaining (debatable degree of) acceptance as a dimension, there is less

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consensus on how something as vast as religion can be incorporated into the established 'secular' frameworks of IR.

One of the reasons is that the mainstream IR theories and approaches, assume the secular character of states, which completely sidesteps religion in the discussion on global politics, while also complicating the inclusion of states with religion as their key identity and foreign policy. Moreover, studies have discussed the role of religious legitimacy in governments (Fox, 2018, pp. 69–70), wherein mention of religion in the dataset of 172 constitutions in 2008 is examined to reveal that “even among secular states, calling upon God or religion to bless a social contract” is not unheard of while 24.3% mandate God/religion being alluded to in official oaths. This according to scholars (Fox, 2018; Sandal & Fox, 2013), makes a significant minority of constitutionally secular countries deriving legitimacy from religion or referring to the same in constitutions too. Then, religion’s overarching presence through non-states actors in domestic politics, and the relationship between their own goals compared to a state’s national interests, further obscures the IR/ir in being able to comprehensively view the mutual impacts of religion on global politics (Fox & Sandler, 2004b; Haynes, 2013, p. 25). Additionally, the Eurocentric IR, that sees a resurgence or return of religion in IR/ir, does not account that for other parts of the world- such as in the Middle East or in South Asia, religion never left the realm of politics and has been ever present in identities, policies, and nationalisms. Thus, it is first important to first examine the complex relationship between 'religion' and 'secular' as terms, and how they need to be clearly defined in order to be incorporated into analysis in IR/ir.

Religion, the secular and IR/ir

Religion, in politics, is still an extremely complex term to define, just as in other disciplines but what sets it apart in politics is the emphasis on how it affects human/state behavior instead of its larger function in explaining life beyond its observable form. Fox (2018, pp. 4–6) has examined several classical definitions of religion in political philosophy and highlighted that religion has been seen as a factor that unites communities, provides a way to comprehend the world, provides answers to existential queries for mankind, and sets forth what is sacred and divine (supernatural). He then provides his own definition combining all the above ideas and adding to them the roles religion plays in society (2018, p. 6):

Religion seeks to understand the origins and nature of reality using a set of answers that include the supernatural. Religion is also a social phenomenon and institution which influences the behavior of human beings both as individuals and in groups. These influences on behavior manifest though the influences of religious identity, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, religious beliefs, and the codification of these beliefs into authoritative dogma, among other avenues of influence.

These attempts provide a step forward in the discussion about religion in that they try to offer a broader definition of an abstract concept which is only visible in practices, and observable outcomes. Some of these definitions also set religion apart from other ideologies, by acknowledging the dimension of the 'supernatural' and 'spirituality' all of which can be related to religion but are not religion in themselves. However, what these definitions hide is the very nature of religion-which is intangible and flexible, i.e., constantly evolving and changing with the social and political structures around it (as the succeeding sections discuss).

While practical and observable ir can only generate debates about religion and its significance through observable outcomes, and nation states have been practicing foreign policy on mainly 'secular'



principles (Haynes, 2021), IR cannot overlook the religious history of secularism. Moreover, secularism is a result of centuries of gradual change in Western ir that has tried to separate the religion from interfering in material affairs of the state, culminating in Peace of Westphalia (1648). While the church was distanced from 'temporal' affairs of the world, 'secularism' was believed to have achieved the idea of freedom from religion, as well as resolution of religious-identity-based conflicts among different Christian denominations in Europe. It was the de facto characteristic of (Eurocentric or Western) IR/ir and went hand in hand with the idea of modernization wherein reason would prevail, and religion would retreat to private spaces. 'Secularism' moved beyond Europe through colonialism, but not without its challenges, one of which was the difference between the term in theory and in practice on lands with a very different system of beliefs. Colonialism was creating through the centuries of its evolution, a new power discourse, at times implying that European powers were far from exercising secular power in their colonies. In fact, religion at time, was allowed to be the dominant force during and after the end of colonial period- such as the partition of Bengal during the British empire and subsequent partition of British India into Muslim Pakistan and a secular Hindu-majority India.

It is not to suggest that secularism cannot thrive outside Europe. More nations claim to be secular in their constitutions in the world today, but what is crucial is to examine how they define secularism within their own socio-political contexts. Huntington (1996) has argued that regarding the separation of church (religion) and politics, there have been very different traditions surrounding spiritual and temporal authority. One instance of that is the presence of several churches after the establishment of the Church besides the state. Thus, the church-state conflict for power has not only defined the Western civilization, but also led to the distinct concept of 'freedom' in the West, in contrast to other civilizations.

God and Caesar, church and state, spiritual authority and temporal authority, have been a prevailing dualism in Western culture. Only in Hindu civilization were religion and politics also so distinctly separated. In Islam, God is Caesar; in China and Japan, Caesar is God; in Orthodoxy, God is Caesar's junior partner. (Huntington, 1996, p. 70)

Some religions could be argued to be inherently (theoretically) more tolerant than others in terms of acceptance of a different faith framework or belief in a different deity(s), what cannot be contested is that the modern 'secular', in fact, has emerged from 'religion' (and hence sometimes thought of as a binary of religion). While the states with religious constitutions (such as Saudi Arabia) are far outnumbered by states with a separate constitution based on 'secular' values, the stronghold of religion is usually in the masses, in domestic politics rather than being enshrined in constitutions explicitly. States, not only in the Middle East, but also in South Asia for instance, are increasingly realigning and reformulating their national interest goals with religious concerns. It is not uncommon to find religious definition of 'secular' which impacts not just the laws of the land but also the levels the ground for identity-related clashes that often spill over into transborder or regional politics.

The revival of conversation in IR about return of religion in ir has had many implications. One is the very challenge of defining religion, and how it impacts politics at a domestic, regional, and global level. This has been addressed by scholars in the recent times through scholarly enquiry and empirical studies on roles of religion, not just through religious state actors but also non-state actors who affect ir (Fox, 2018; Fox & Sandler, 2004b). Another challenge is defining secularism(s) and distinguishing between how it works to create an illusion of some form of 'equality' and 'fairness' while being perforated with discursive and normative power. IR scholarship has also begun discussion on how

secular has instrumentalized the return of religion, and how secularism has created the awareness of global transition to the post-secular. Habermas (2006) defines this awareness as a 'post-metaphysical thought' as a mode that combines knowledge of the 'finiteness of reason' as well as of a new opposite of 'secular' (which is not 'religious'):

The secular counterpart to religious modernization is an agnostic, but non-reductionist philosophical position. It refrains on the one hand from passing judgment on religious truths while insisting (in a non-hostile fashion) on drawing a strict line between faith and knowledge. It rejects, on the other, a scientifically limited conception of reason and the exclusion of religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason (Habermas, 2006, p. 16)

Overall, religions (and even secular) can inform state actors or non-state actors in their decision making and policy formulations, which in turn might have a (in)direct impact on how national interests, cooperation and conflict are defined and conducted. That makes religion an indispensable factor in foreign policy and IR/ir, wherever applicable.

This paper seeks to provide a review of the existing literature in light of key trends in the IR's quest to incorporate religion into existing theories or newer frameworks. In that context, the paper examines key works in the fields and proposes three important developments in the scholarship as follows:

1. Incorporating Religion in IR theory
2. Religious IR theories/approaches and frameworks of analysis
3. Post-secularizing IR as a discipline

The subsequent three sections will examine the above trends in detail and critically analyze each development, followed by a brief discussion on the methodological avenues for studying different religions under the same framework.

Incorporating Religion in existing IR

The IR scholarship especially since 2000s, i.e., after the 9/11 attacks, began recognizing the 'return' of religion or religion-backed forces exercising influence over security of other sovereign states. The increased visibility of religion has challenged the modernization and secularization theory, that both assumed the withdrawal of religion into private spheres, stripping it of any political or even social significance. In the context of why religion has resurfaced in IR/ir, this group of scholars has provided two core arguments:

- Secularism (understood as neutrality with relation to religion or lack of it) has been the dominant character of IR/ir since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, implying that religion receded into exile while secular European states emerged globally first through major revolutions (such as the French Revolution in 1789). Secularism was then made part of the colonies that subsequently became independent states after decolonization and continues to be so. One instance of this continuity is the Cold War which was power battle fought between the two powers (states) US and Soviet Union representing secular ideologies of liberal democracy and capitalism versus communism, respectively.
- The return of religion has not happened explicitly in the foreign policy of states. Rather, it is noticeable in the rise of religious (non-state) actors that have gained global attention or recognition for their role in ir, such as the Vatican (centralized Roman non-state actor), the



Organization of the Islamic Cooperation (formal cooperative mechanism headquartered in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia with 57 Muslim-majority member states), and the Al Qaeda (decentralized transnational network of extremists responsible for the 9/11 attacks). Thus, religion is only one of the several factors driving (conflictual) ir.

Overall, the scholars have identified varying roles of religion (in varying degrees) on ir and have incorporated different methodologies to study the impact of religion in IR/ir. This implies that some of the most significant works in this sub-field deserve to be examined individually to highlight their key arguments (and gaps within) before any generalization can be made about existing literature about religion and IR/ir.

Fox & Sandler (2004) have argued that the lack of avenues in Western IR to study religion in ir, one needs to move beyond the discipline to others for an interdisciplinary research because ir cannot be “understood without taking religion into account” (2004a, p. 7). While the study has provided a good basis for why religion in IR/ir needs to be examined and how IR has traditionally refrained from discussing religion in its major approaches- Realism, Liberalism and Constructivism, it states that foundation for inclusion of religion in IR/ir can be found “elsewhere within the body of knowledge of the social sciences” such as sociology (2004a, p. 33). The book examines at the length the role of religious legitimacy as a tool in domestic politics as well as employed by political actors in ir to conclude that though “religion can even justify what nothing else can”, it is a double-edged sword that can be used by non-policy makers as well, thus complicating and muddling the several sphered religion permeates (2004a, pp. 60–61). The main limitation of the study is thus that while it acknowledges the strengths and limitations of religion’s power of persuasion and presents a correlation (qualitatively and quantitatively) between religious/ethic conflicts and religion-backed intervention by other states in the conflicts, it cannot concretely suggest a religion-supported causation for such foreign intervention². In other words, while the study demonstrates that religious conflicts attract foreign intervention with higher probability, it does not prove or explain that the intervention was motivated by religion too. Hence, the study is useful foundation towards exploring religious dimension in ir but does not provide an answer to the question- what theoretical framework, or which methodological approach is likely to accommodate religion in IR/ir appropriately.

The question is partially addressed by Thomas (2005) who has centered his study on the debate of how modernity feels challenged by the ‘resurgence’ of religion, and the pathways it opens to understand global politics in a post-modern framework, which considers religion and spirituality as inherent to it. He answers in a firm negative to the question whether Western Enlightenment the way to reach/achieve universal values by arguing that religion’s ‘resurgence’ can be understood as the struggle in several parts of the world against the Western notion of modernity. For him what is missing in IR is debates over postmodernism and secularism in the study of culture and religion in IR/ir, which rationalist approaches of IR fail to incorporate or address due to their inherent assumptions (Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003; Thomas, 2005, pp. 245–247). The contribution of this study is that a postmodern enquiry into the notions, culture-specific contexts and discourses surrounding extremism, terrorism, fundamentalism-all that is frequently attributed to religion, unveils new perspectives and inherent biases in IR. It can be deduced, then, that ‘resurgence’ of religion is not actually an anomalous observation in ir, as traditional IR would state. Does that mean, religion

² The study does not clarify the exact difference between religion and non-religion when referring to the data on conflicts, and that has been pointed out as ‘problematic’ by other scholars discussing categories such as ‘supernatural’, ‘religious’, ‘natural or non-religious’, especially when discussing irrational violence and conflict (Fitzgerald, 2011, pp. 34–35).

can be considered a (historically constructed) uniform category that could encompass all religions alike? This study does not discuss the implications of making that generalization (in fact, at times it implicitly makes it).

In his chapter titled *Religion and International Conflict in Dark* (2000), Thomas (2000) had argued that global resurgence of religion does not greatly affect international institutions, but only international norms, stating that though most challenges to fundamentals of global society are posed by Islam (as transnational religion), these developments “are related to the unstable politics of the region rather than to anything that is specific to Islam” (2000a, pp. 19–20). The implicit conclusion here is in line with what the editor of the book (Dark, 2000a) concludes in his own chapter- religion is as much a factor in conflict as a possible way of reconciliation. The unanswered question is then - how can religion be instrumentalized for this peace process? Would all religions have similar (probably observable or calculable) effects in the reconciliation process? These chapters do not provide that answer, and neither is the question addressed in the author’s own book that critiques the very ‘secular’ assumptions of IR/ir. More particularly, it provides a critique of several approaches under constructivism and postmodernism for at times, falling into the trap of making secular assumptions like traditional IR does. Thomas (2005) concludes this book stating that “an approach to theory that seeks to understand the action of religious actors through a narrative of their identity and the meaning they give to their actions will not allow us to formulate theories with predictive capacity or produce the kind of general conclusions social scientific scholars seek in international relations” (2005, p. 248). He suggests that the questions should be “what narratives” instead of “what theories” to obtain explanation for different circumstances leading to different outcomes (2005, p. 249). But does IR not wish to know the wider implications of religion’s impacts on the international system (ir)? Would it not be ideal to move towards a theory/methodology to explain both- causation between circumstances and outcomes, as well as how (different) religions are impacting regional/global ir? Those questions have been left unanswered as well.

Some scholars have examined more unconventional theories of IR to study the (degree of) their appropriateness in the study of religion. Sandal & Fox (2013) have made a valuable contribution in that aspect by providing a comprehensive comparison of religion in IR/ir under the frameworks of five main theories: Classical Realism, Neorealism, Neoliberalism, English School, and Constructivism (2013, p. 6). Religion, instead of being considered as a vague term is tied into concrete roles that it (potentially) serves in ir: religious legitimacy, religious worldviews, religious states, non-state religious actors, transnational religious movements, transnational issues, religious identity (Ibid.). They also handle the methodological challenges by incorporating several methodologies, at times, drawing from wider political science discipline for this study. They make the most distinct argument (when compared to other authors):

...the issue of religion is not as distant from these theories as many assume. For example, core Classical Realists such as Morgenthau, Machiavelli, and Hobbes directly addressed religion in their writings... All of the theories are found to be able to account for all of the potential religious influences on international relations. However, as one would expect, each theory has its strengths and weaknesses in that each handles some issues better than others. (Sandal & Fox, 2013, pp. 6–7)

For example, they argue that “scholarly investigations that have human nature as either a causal variable or a background condition can accommodate religion” under the Classical Realist tradition (2013, p. 34), but they risk being closer to Christian Realist studies (discussed in the next section) but



assuming a certain “nature of man” that impacts power and interests, in line with the Christian faith. Same would be the case for other Judeo-Christian frameworks such as an Islamic view of “human nature”, which would likely be different from the other “natures” depending on the specific religion in a specific period in history. Moreover, positivist idea of rationality underpinning neorealism and neoliberalism in IR do not take into account social and historical contexts (Thomas, 2000b). These possible challenges have not been addressed in the book that the authors claim is a part of the larger discussion in the discipline, and not a final word:

Many of these theories have relative blind spots. There are aspects of religion where our ability to understand religion through their lenses is at best strained and only partially successful. ... [Classical Realism] has difficulty dealing with non-state religious actors. However, these blind spots are similar to the blind spots that these theories are known to have in a more general sense. (Sandal & Fox, 2013, pp. 180–181)

There are some important clarifications provided at the outset in the text, such as the authors’ limited experience with non-Western traditions and thus, their concentrated focus on the Abrahamic faiths in the book and their impacts in nations/contexts where they are more prominent (2013, p. 11). That serves as a major limitation of the study (i.e., generalizations on religion hinted at through analysis only of Abrahamic faiths). Nevertheless, the research is important in pointing at the possibilities of existing IR in treating religion when defined through the role it plays in ir. As one of the prominent scholars of religion and IR, Jonathan Fox has concluded in his own book, determining exactly how religion works as a factor in inter-state relations is still a work-in-progress (Fox, 2018).

While the content of religious ideologies may change over time, how they interact with IR remains more constant. This is true of most of religion’s influences on international relations. Religion is used to legitimize and de-legitimize actions and policies. It influences the beliefs and actions of policy makers and their constituents. Religious institutions and other non-state religious actors seek to influence various aspects of IR. These general patterns remain constant, but their specific manifestations can vary over time and place. More importantly the religious influences on IR are related to how religion influences domestic politics. In fact, I would argue that at their core, the influences are the same but they manifest differently in the domestic and international arenas. (Fox, 2018, p. 204)

Another important and widely cited scholar Jeffrey Haynes (2013) has argued that while religion needs to be incorporated into IR, it should not be considered the central factor in ir, and hence its significance is largely dependent on the context. The study, founded on the issue of religion and globalization, has considered certain religious actors and analyzed their overall stance towards democracy, economic development, human rights, conflict, and cooperation. The study argues that the traditional theories of Realism and Liberalism are not sufficient to capture the religious dimension of ir, and hence has employed an array of theories as well such as English School, Neo-Marxism, Constructivism and Critical Theory. The study concludes that all religions examined through religious actors were impacted by globalization, and the incurred impacts forced religions to adopt newer concerns and objectives. But the study does not make a distinction between different objectives adopted by different religions (or religious actors), in the backdrop of their fundamental differences. Moreover, while a clear line of argument is established to demonstrate how religious actors in European and Latin American nations “have had significant and still reverberating international effects” (2013, p. 556), their larger security implications have not been gauged or hypothesized. Lastly, while the basic assumption pursued during the book was that states (and thus formal ir) is largely

secular, there is no inference provided about whether the ‘international society’ continues to be secular, as assumed, or would lose its secularity in light of ‘clashing’ global entities in ir. The author himself concludes, it is unclear “to what extent religion as a political actor is concerned with spiritual issues alone, or where – and how and in what ways – other, more material, concerns also impact on what religious actors do politically, both domestically and transnationally (2013, p. 558).

This paves the way to examine the scholarship that has gained attention (mainly) after the Cold War, due to its emphasis on deficiency of IR to fully explain the impact of religion in ir (if at all they consider it a factor). What has emerged is a cluster of religion-based theories of IR that seek to explain global politics and the role of religion in (positively) impacting the same, at times, by reformulation of basic assumptions in mainstream IR theories.

Religious IR theories and frameworks of analysis

Religious theories of IR, or religion-based approaches towards re-interpreting IR/ir have tried to build on the flaws of the basic assumptions sustaining the mainstream IR theories such as Realism and Liberalism, while also trying to incorporate religious views into the IR frameworks. For instance, this group of scholars sees more potential in religion in explaining the ir, i.e., highlight the need to acknowledge three aspects: the finiteness of man’s knowledge and action, the limitations of secularism (which they argue can be fundamentalist too), and possible transcendence of states at the heart of IR by focusing instead on global/transcending identities. For them, inclusion of the religious insight in decoding and understanding the ir, “opens a new dimension and vision in politics which is hidden in the daily routine of secular politics” (Troy, 2012, p. 4). One of the desired objectives of the scholarship is to make the IR (especially Realism in majority of the works) compatible with the religious explanations of the ir (and sometimes, vice versa, by highlighting flaws in the secular IR).

Among such approaches, Christian Realism contests the basic assumptions of Realism as being an amoral theory, purely based on materially definable and calculable “interests” in an anarchic system of global politics, where states pursue their goals strategically to achieve the desired ends. Christian Realists, in turn, raise the issue of morality that is absent in Realist discussions, and defining utility, which alone cannot explain existence of conflicts or lack of peace worldwide³. They state a more positive outlook than the pessimistic assumptions and predictions in Realist analysis. Scholars such as Troy (2012) have analyzed the role of Christianity in peacebuilding activities, and assert that (Judeo-Christian) religion has immense potential for peace for being “at its best inclusive and peaceful”. They argue that the realist, then, must be a Christian. Scholars such as Niebuhr (1953, p. 29) have explained the existence of conflict in the Western world owing to “a civil war in the heart of western civilization, in which a fanatical equalitarian creed has been pitted against a libertarian one”, referring to Russian and American respectively. Collectively, Christian realist scholars assert that Christianity, broadly, can offer a more vivid explanation of human behavior which comprises both- belief in God and rationality derived from their faith. Employed in the analysis of foreign policy in the west, particularly the US, Christian Realism provides a more optimistic IR/ir based on the view that humans and the justice they seek is respectively reflective of the God that created them, and the morally guided peace in the world (again derived from how God would want the world to be). Thus (from an Augustinian view of Christian traditions), faith is taken as the factor influencing thoughts

³ In the context of Christian Realism, there has been an attempt to bridge the assumed utilitarian approach of states with a metaphysical desire at human level, which is both ethical and religious. Here metaphysical desire does not arise from a lack within or materially, but one that mediates between the alacrity of the human and the divine, i.e., God (Dalton, 2009; Troy, 2012).



and actions/decisions of people and communities, in turn emphasizing the inherent power of faith to apprise and improve (the U.S.) foreign policy (Chaplin & Joustra, 2010).

An actively discussed (but not mainstream) non-Western IR view is that of the Hindu theory of IR (in an article written by Sarkar (1919)), which draws not only from the Vedic texts but is largely associated with Kautilya's *mandala theory*⁴ (also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta) (Kautilya. & Kangle, 1969). Hindu philosophy of state presents a clearly defined concept of external sovereignty (which far predates Machiavelli and other political thinkers (Boesche, 2003; Sarkar, 1919). The Hindu IR, in that sense analyzes sovereignty as a concept which is completely only if present internally and externally, i.e., to be sovereign a state needs to be able to exercise authority (internal) unhindered by and independent of other states (external). Under the *mandala theory* (which views states as exercising spheres of influence, interests, ambitions etc.), the Hindu idea of "balance of power" is articulated by Kautilya, as he explains the underpinnings of his military strategy, warfare, and foreign policy. However, it must be noted that Kautilya's work is a collection of the vast Indian knowledge traditions, including undated texts such as Vedas, epics such as Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Hindu political thought by Manu, Kamandaka to name a few. Arthashastra presents a framework to study state and statecraft simultaneously wherein the end is to achieve systemic stability in the given system design. Power, order, state all take the concept of dharma (as duty) as their overarching reference point (Bisht, 2019, p. 169). For instance, in Arthashastra, In the case of Arthashastra, justice signifies fulfilling one's rightful duty as postulated in the dharma texts. In Kautilya's theory, material well-being defined in utilitarian terms, had to be reconceptualized in terms of spiritual and humanitarian interest. Methodologically, employing over two dozens of research methods (as defined in modern jargon), it would imply that "Kautilyan non-Western eclectic theory of IR seemed to systematically blend the familiar research methods of 'rationalism' and 'reflectivism'" (Shahi, 2019, p. 142).

Among some (macro) studies that hold religion central enough to displace other ways of imagining and explaining the complex IR/ir, Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' is widely discussed, though it must be emphasized that his work does not refer to religion or ethnicity, but is assumed so implicitly, due to centrality of civilizations in his work⁵. Though Western-centric in arguments, the thesis attempts to explain what the author considers the conflictive nature of post-Cold War world politics due to diverging civilizational values in Muslim nations and the West (Huntington, 1996, p. 217). Considering the civilizational fault lines as the plausible conflict hot spots in ir, Huntington (1996) highlights eight key world civilizations: Sinic, Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Africa in the East, and Western and Latin American in the West. He argued that the main distinctions among peoples are not "ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural" (Huntington, 1996, p. 21). While he keeps nation states as powerful actors, he maintains that "conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations." (Ibid.). At the same time, Huntington considers the inevitable clash between the West and other civilizations, as the gravest "threat to world peace, and an international order" (Huntington, 1996, p. 321). Some key arguments in this work are: incompatibility between Western values of democracy and individualistic human rights that would not be willingly adopted by other civilizations; post-Cold War period of sustained, values-based,

⁴ The oldest Kautilya's Arthashastra in existence was found in 1905 as a last of its kind palm-leaf document and is the world's oldest treatise on political philosophy. Arthashastra, a treatise in Sanskrit was composed around 300BC by Kautilya, the prime minister of the Mauryan Empire, and comprehensively explains ancient India's governance, military strategy, economics, politics, justice and law, as well as the duties of rulers, ministers and others in a society (Kautilya. & Kangle, 1969).

⁵ Some scholars such as (Fox & Sandler, 2004a) have argued that if religion is assumed to be what Huntington refers to as civilization, that would imply that religion only gained centrality in the post-Cold War conflicts, which is not true either. Instead, the authors argue that religion has always been important but 'overlooked' factor in IR/ir.

conflicts in core civilizational states such as China (Sinic); cooperation between Muslim world and China against the West, driven by “enemy of my enemy is my friend” logic etc. (Huntington, 1996, p. 94).

There are divergent views about Huntington’s arguments, including Iran’s former President Seyed Mohammad Khatami, who rejected ‘clash of civilizations’ in favor of ‘dialogue of civilizations’ highlighting peace, dialogue and compromise being the desired outcomes (Khatami, n.d.). In terms of methodological criticism, one group of scholars has argued that Huntington’s ‘West versus the rest’ framework provides an unintended evidence of the low consideration given to religion in IR within theories such as those of modernization or secularization. In that sense ‘West versus the rest’ describes the “twentieth-century divisions within the social sciences over whether religion is important. This is because the argument that religion is not important is a particularly Western argument” (Fox & Sandler, 2004a, p. 16). For another group of scholars, while the U.S. foreign policy (and increasingly Western intervention) has been identified as a civilizational ‘clash’ with the Muslim world since 9/11 in IR/ir, there several flaws in Huntington’s thesis about civilizations. For instance, in his book *From Huntington to Trump*, Haynes (2019) has questioned the interchangeable use of ‘paradigm’ and ‘framework’ by Huntington, that seem to be impressionistically constructed “employing both empirical and anecdotal information and ideas which might not necessarily stand up to the scrutiny of enquiry meeting social scientific criteria. But it had its own value” (Haynes, 2019, p. 13). He also argued that unlike Huntington’s thesis, civilizations are not autonomous entities, do not have well-defined borders, and do not have mutually exclusive sets of unique values (p. 18). However, Huntington’s work has encouraged (critical) interest in religion in IR/ir.

A later research that agrees with Huntington’s emphasis on civilizations is *Religion and Politics in the International System Today* by E. Hanson, though states that the former’s work does not clearly establish the impact religion and politics have on each other (Hanson, 2006, p. 59). Hanson also offers a post-Cold War model functioning on “the interaction between the contemporary globalization of the political, economic, military, and communication (political plus EMC) systems and the significant role of religion in influencing global politics (Hanson, 2006, p. 1). He emphasizes that elimination of the nature and power of religion can cause serious errors in foreign policy/global politics. An implication of this study could be that religion is not only part of the conflict but also resolution, though the focus of Hanson’s work is more on establishing how religion and politics interact to counter the increasing power of EMC. His conclusion also implies an inherent Christian (Western) view such as when he concluded that meditative and experiential Indic religions seem to be religions seem to be “converging structurally with the religions of the book” through “concrete systems of social ethics and ecclesiastical organization” (Hanson, 2006, p. 304). Either the underlying position is of dominance of Judeo-Christian faiths in global politics and even in non-Judeo-Christian spheres (although Latin American states too have conversely influenced Christianity), or an Oriental view of Indic religions⁶ (such as by evoking Church-state relationship between Indian political parties and state) and religions of public life like Confucianism (wherein he claims people are getting distanced from its spiritualness).

Kubálková’s International Political Theology (IPT) offers a more rule-based constructivist framework to place religion at the same level as other IR scholarship. Stating the resurgence of

⁶ For instance, Hanson states that “In his *Essentials of Hinduism* (1922) Hedgewar [*sic*] based Indian nationhood on the cultural heritage of Aryan Hinduism” (Hanson, 2006, p. 109). There are two errors in this statement on (mis)understood but vastly quoted work *Essentials of Hinduism*: one, it was authored by V.D. Savarkar and two, while Savarkar (1922) does mention the amalgamation of Aryan and non-Aryan (people/races) within the larger geographical mass *Bharata*, he does not differentiate between Aryan Hinduism and non-Aryan Hinduism.



religion in IR, she examines how IR can explain this phenomenon and its impacts on global politics. She proposed IPT as a way to move beyond the largely material emphasis of IR by bringing in religion, the same way as IPE (International Political Economy) was a response to overlooked economic factors in IR (Kubáľková, 2003, p. 79). She asserts that since the constructivist framework allows flexible definition of what is rationality (and also the examination of the role of blind acceptance against rational self-conscious thought), fulfillment can be achieved in several forms. Thus, it creates space wherein IPT (that departs from strict positivism and materialism) can be studied while incorporating several religions. Kubáľková also provides a detailed explanation of the roots of postmodern thought in religious affiliations, beside a discussion on the ontological foundations and differences between the religious and the secular (Kubáľková, 2003, p. 87). However, the claim that most religions “agree that it is impossible to describe the transcendent reality of God in normal conceptual language thought” (2003, p. 88), where she assumes a common rule in all religions that distinguish between the human and the God, is a huge generalization. Similarly, Fitzgerald (2011, p. 23) has critiqued Kubáľková’s ‘wild generalizations’ about what “all religions, western and eastern” share, and also the “Christian theological positions in their approach to ‘religion’” (Fitzgerald, 2011, p. 157)- all of which affect the IPT framework. Additionally, since constructivist approaches have a limitation in considering societal interests and power, IPT also conceptualizes religion as a rule-based system, thus suffering restraint when considering the metaphysical, and consequently, the dimension of religion in politics (Troy, 2012, pp. 84–85).

The Secular in the post-secularizing IR/ir

Habermas has highlighted three phenomenon whose convergence signals the global ‘resurgence of religion’, namely, increased missionary activities (related to propagation of religion and its political implications), ‘fundamentalist’ (hardline) radicalization (and the eventual impacts of spheres such as politics, security, economy, society etc.), and the use of distinctive religion-based and religion-backed violence as a political tool (Habermas, 2006, 2008). He then points out the existence and difference in two forms of secularisms- positive and negative, arguing that

“...modernity no longer implies the march toward secularism. In a democracy, the secular mentality must be open to the religious influence of believing citizens a positive secularism that debates, respects and includes, not a secularism that rejects.” (Habermas, 2008, p. 17).

For IR, the visible conflicts in IR that flare up in connection with religious issues give us reason to doubt whether the relevance of religion has waned. On the other hand, ‘secular’ itself remains obscure as a term and as a practice when seen together with religion freedom. One reason is that in practice, the strict separation of ‘church/mosque’ and the state is “neither constitutionally declared in many secular states nor a practical issue”, whereas religious freedom that is often declared and ensured constitutionally, “is neither necessary nor sufficient” condition for a state to be secular (Kuru, 2007, p. 569 footnote 2).

Kuru (2007) contrasted the secularism in practice in France, Turkey and the US and argued that the reason why American policies are accepting of public display of religion whereas France and Turkey are not, is their different ideological struggles, which affect their respective state policies toward religion. He classifies this struggle in secular states as passive secularism and assertive secularism. The passive secularism allows a state to be inclusive of public visibility of religion because of a “passive” role of state in pushing religion into private sphere. On the other hand, assertive secularism incites states to play a more active role in ‘social engineering’ wherein it must be ensured that religion has

no place in public spaces. The author implies the pragmatic nature of the former, while a more “comprehensive doctrine” pursued by the latter.

Among the scholars that have challenged the (assumed) fixed secularist divide between religion and (state) politics in IR, Elizabeth S. Hurd (2008) has argued that examination of these divides are socially and historically constructed. She has elaborated on two key “philosophical and historical” legacies of secularism, i.e., Laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism in Europe and America to first argue how they have impacted ir through case studies of the US-Iran, and the European Union-Turkey conflictual relations. In doing so she has highlighted the deficiencies in main IR to incorporate religion by assuming a secular nature of ir under theoretical assumptions in realism, liberalism, and constructivism (Hurd, 2012, pp. 38–39). While she also emphasizes the role of religion in ir through the domestic politics like other scholars discussed above, the main implication of this study is pointing at (and in turn questioning) the political authority of Laicism and Judeo-Christian secularism in ir. In doing so the question she has successfully answered through her case studies is why IR scholars have “struggled to respond to the power of religion” in ir, particularly in the context of political Islam and the West (Hurd, 2008, pp. 117–120). She has also urged IR scholars to “revisit the secularist epistemological and ontological foundations of the discipline” (2008, p. 154).

Secularisms are not fixed and final achievements of European inspired modernity but patterns of political rule with their own contested histories and global political implications. Failure to acknowledge this has led to a selective blindness in the study of world politics, as the blanket usage of these categories masks the politics surrounding claims to secularism, secularization, secular democracy, secular human rights, and related constructs. (Hurd, 2012, p. 47)

One more key theoretical/methodological question remains unanswered, or rather, undiscussed-what theoretical approach in IR (if at all), then, gets closer to overcoming the shortcomings of the “secularist epistemological and ontological foundations of the discipline”? Or is it to be assumed, much like the works discussed in the previous section on ‘religious approaches to IR’ that IR is not appropriate to incorporate religious dimension in IR/ir? Besides, in terms of empirical study, the case studies of India and Japan in Hurd (2008) only find mentions while the careful examination of the West versus political Islam provides detailed evidence of Hurd’s arguments, in turn not allowing the author to place her work among studies on secularism in Asia. Lastly, the study provides an academic attempt at “critical deconstruction” but does not adequately address persistent obscurities such as “reinscribing problematic categories that she had set out to critically examine, such as historicized terms ‘religion’, ‘secular’, ‘politics’ etc. (Fitzgerald, 2011, pp. 25–26).

Roy (2010) argues that the close link between secularism and resurgence of religion is not the latter retaliating against the former, but latter being a product of the former (2010, p. 2). The process of secularization thus becomes not victorious over religion in IR but should be held accountable for distorting and uprooting religion from its philosophical and traditional bases. It is concerning for him, the emergence of ‘people’ in modern societies have tendency to stick with different charismatic forms of faith, even when such faiths are different from their shared cultural religions. Globalization has thus given rise to fundamentalism as a distinct religious form, by first imposing ‘deculturization’, and then presenting it as an evidence of its ‘universality’(2010, p. 5)⁷. Fitzgerald (2011) critiques IR for ‘blind spots’ in arguments concerning (discursive) distinction of the religion-secular binary. While

⁷ Roy (2010) has stressed on the role of mass conversions in religions as well as reconversions in modern times to explain the new group of people with distorted faith that is not rooted in one’s cultural contexts- a product of fundamentalist globalization.



argues for the need to creatively connect the changes in meaning of ‘religion’ which saw the parallel invention of ‘non-religious domain of natural reason’ within the ideologies and theories of politics, state and society. Additionally, the meaning of ‘religion’ itself has been undergoing transformation implying that scholarship would likely be “constrained by and within the categories and discourses that configure dominant myths” (Fitzgerald, 2011, pp. 243–244). While he does discuss theoretical avenues more conducive to studying religion, as explained above, he concludes that “I cannot offer any positive strategy in the form of an alternative paradigm” (Ibid.).

Religion had been considered a threat to the advancements of liberal secularism, but Thomas (2000b, p. 820) has argued that by considering religions as backward and barbaric, we risk misinterpreting them across geographies and cultures mainly because “the meaning of religion in early modern Europe, and how we understand religion in international relations today” is different. It has also been recognized that to truly accommodate religion’s return and cultural pluralism, a social understanding needs to be generated which not only acknowledges religion’s legitimacy within communities but also its role in development and cultivation of these communities and states- together termed post-Westphalian (or post-secular) international order (Thomas, 2000b). As Barbato (2013) has stated:

If we do God in International Relations, we need to know how to do God, and how we do God should not only sit well with a fraction of people from a specific faith but cater for all kinds of believers as well as for agnostics and the religious unmusical among International Relations scholars. (2013, p. 16)

Fitzgerald (2011) has offered a deep critical examination from the viewpoint of religious studies, of several important works on religion in IR/ir. His argument also reverberates the fear expressed by (and a challenge identified by) many IR scholars that are working on post-secularizing the discipline- religion’s return in IR will reignite or worsen the conventional religious-secular divide, which itself is a power discourse to enforce own worldviews on either side. For instance, (secular) Christianity was imposed on the world by the West to move it away from several diverse religions, which was preceded by invention of Christendom to purify Europe of pagan beliefs. For Fitzgerald, it implies that there is no common ‘religion’ that can incorporate all religions while also providing a levelled field for all religions to be juxtaposed against secularism. For Barbato (2013), the research should be conducted keeping in mind the vast diversities of all cultures and religions, underpinned at times, by the Foucauldian power-knowledge dimension that the author pursues in her study on pilgrimages and religious semantics in the post-secular IR/ir, i.e., “introduce the religious concept of pilgrimage into international political theory that I would like to see developing in a postsecular direction” (Barbato, 2013, p. 18). This study states one of the most crucial starting points in post-secular study:

There is no clearcut definition of religion that covers them all and distinguishes them from nonreligious cultural activities. Each time the language game of religion is played, its borders are contested. The language game of religion is indeed very often a political power game. (Barbato, 2013, p. 20)

Creating space for alternatives in the religious resurgence in the ‘post-secular’

The resurgence of religion in IR/ir debates has begun to be addressed in literature that has actively challenged the established theoretical frameworks that define, categorize and predict international relations among states (Fox & Sandler, 2004; Shah, Stepan & Toft, 2021). There are several debates the study of IR literature provides regarding (in)ability of the Westphalian constructs (i.e., the sovereignty of state in deciding and tolerating religions domestically), an agreeable and

comprehensive definition of religion, that encompasses all commonly held ideas, community beliefs as well as long-standing traditions, and the obscurity of using a context-specific term ‘secular’ as widely understood and universal. Transformation of religion (including invention of religion) as a community concept to that which exists in a personal sphere has been argued an imperative to the development of Westphalian idea of state and the subsequent foundation of liberalism as known today, however, mere mapping of this transition does not explain the ways in which religion informs IR/ir in the third world, or non-Western societies (Petito & Hatzopoulos, 2003). Secondly, mainstream Western secularism that has found its way in foreign policy in the West, has not been embraced with the same vigor in the South, where religion is a factor in domestic politics, global diplomacy, and rule of law. Thirdly, the dominance of the Eurocentric IR provides an exclusive intellectual framework, from which non-Western IR is largely left out of the debate, creating a gap that needs to be filled, not by imposition of secularism as the norm of in global politics, but by acknowledgement of diversity and existence of alternative or non-Western religio-political thought. This also points to a fourth discrepancy in literature, where to address this gap in religion in IR/ir, there is an emergence of new literature that focuses exclusively on secularism and other religious IR/ir, but those ideas have not been agreeably subsumed into the existing frameworks and theories, ending up running parallel to the mainstream IR.

IR scholarship has been proposing several new ideas to overcome these gaps in literature. One is study of religion as ‘soft power’ that enables the examination of abstract religion in an equally abstract but comprehensible dimension of ‘non-coercive’ power exercised both by states as well as non-state actors in global politics (Haynes, 2021). A more comprehensive study would provide a comparative analysis of secular soft power as well as religious soft power, as alternative (not necessarily opposing) forces in IR/ir. This could be done through testing realist-constructivist analytical framework that examines socio-political and cultural-specific constructions of the terms: religion/secular, before considering them, as factors in domestic and international conflicts. A similar analysis for examining the role of ‘soft power’ in promoting cooperation could be supported by the liberalist-constructivist thesis, that looks at religion and secular as instruments for conflict resolution.

Additionally, when evolution of religion is studied as an expression of power and influence, there might be more variables to be considered beside the traditional religion-secular binary, such as non-secular but non-religious. There might be researcher’s judgement at work in placing these factors as independent variables or otherwise, because as argued above, religion is part of the larger process in society and gets affected by ir, while striving to impacting it. Hence, the discernable relation between religion/secular and ir becomes a two-way cause-effect relationship, or as Haynes (2013, p. 45) has argued, dialectical and interactive: where each shapes and influences the other.

However, further studies into the nature of religion and IR/ir might not only improve IR but also challenge it, at times proving it insufficient to handle constantly changing factors such as religion. Acknowledging such theoretical and methodological limitations might provide a pathway to including other theories from outside the discipline, into IR (some authors discussed in the paper, have attempted the same). Eventually, the aim should be to have space for religion/secular in IR/ir as it emerges significant and enhances explanatory power of (new and existing) IR theories, rather than let it retreat once more in IR for its abstract vastness and the challenge it flings at the discipline while ‘resurging’ again unobtrusively.



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