

Value Politics: The politics of international religion

Until recently, scholars of international relations paid very limited attention to the question of religion, while scholars of religion tended to overlook the political dimension of religions.¹ International Relations (IR) and Political Science more generally, approached its objects of study through a framework of the modern and the rational, and explicitly refrained from engaging with religion. Similarly in the History of Religion, the object of study was framed by a Protestant idea of faith, and religion was strictly distinguished from the political. Indeed, in both fields the secular was seen both as a normative necessity of the modern state, and the relevance of religion was expected to decline as modern society developed. Religion was considered best kept private and not allowed to interfere with public politics and certainly not politics of international concern.

Yet in the last decades the strong presence of religious references in global conflicts has triggered a wave of international scholarship on religion throughout different theoretical camps.² Moreover, efforts to involve religious leaders in international peace-building missions, global health initiatives, or democracy development has raised a demand for more "religious knowledge" among large international organizations such as the UN with state representatives calling for consulting experts with "religious competence".³

Current scholarship is divided on whether or not there is in fact an increased influence of religion in international relations. Some refer to the "return" or "resurgence" of religion,⁴ while others admit to the scholarly blindness that made it invisible.⁵ To this we might add that religion has neither reemerged nor disappeared from the realm of international politics but had structured and been structured by it long before IR emerged as a discipline. In imperial Britain and Spain, for example, religious scripture was used to authorize – but also challenge – racial hierarchies in the treatment of

¹ Haynes 1998; Stensvold 2004.

² Kubalkova 2000; Bruce 2003; Kratochwil 2005; Bosco 2009; Hallward 2008; Petito/Hatzopoulos 2005; Snyder 2011; Katznelson/Jones 2010; Bob 2012.

³ Hurd 2015.

⁴ Appleby 2000; Johnston 1994.

⁵ Haynes 1998; 2012.

colonial subjects.⁶ On the other hand, current developments in international affairs structure the way in which scholars and practitioners think about religion and what is perceived to be religious.⁷ A recent example is the right to religious freedom: While the right aims at protecting individual's right to religion, it does not include all kinds of religion, since in order to gain the right one must be recognizably religious in the eyes of those who extend the protection. The "International Religious Freedom Act" (1998) is a foreign policy instrument of the United States set to protect the religious freedom of religious individuals and groups outside of US American territory. According to this act "religious groups" are discrete faith communities with identifiable leaders and bounded orthodoxies.⁸ In order to gain protection under this institution one needs to be recognizably religious or one must become so. This US foreign policy instrument thus carries the power to shape the meaning and scope of religion in international affairs and is an example of how international relations constitute religion.

Value Politics is an interdisciplinary research project focusing on the way in which religion features in day to day international politics. The project looks at ways in which religion *emerges* on the international stage – as a particular set of values, as a specific identity to protect or as a claim to political independence or sovereignty – *how the scope and meaning of religion changes and travels* – through controversies such as the defamation of religion; religious freedom or gender equality or as a quest for international recognition of states such as South Sudan; Pakistan or Israel – and look closer at *what consequences these forms of religion have* – which arguments are thereby regarded as politically relevant or legitimated, which hierarchies are authorized, which alliances are formed. In short: which politics do these forms of religion enable?

The question of the impact of religion in international politics speaks to the larger issue of what kind of politics become possible through particular forms and meanings of religion. What does references to "religion" legitimate? And what becomes politically "taboo" for religious reasons? Also, which kind of language, rules and

⁶ Todorov 1999.

⁷ Sullivan; Hurd; Mahmood; Danchin 2015.

⁸ Hurd 2015.

form of representation are needed in order for someone or something to be recognized as belonging to the category of religion? By tracing the emergence, changes and impact of religion in international politics, *Value Politics* explores the ramifications of prevailing epistemological frameworks in international political fora and investigates their underlying ontological assumptions.

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