

# The 'Return' of Religion and the Conflicted Condition of World Order\*

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*The question of the return of religion to the study of world politics and international relations is considered in terms of the neglect of religion since the Peace of Westphalia. This neglect has largely occurred because of the primacy given to changes and events in the West, particularly since the formal separation of church and state and its imposition on or emulation by Eastern societies. The recent concern with globalization has provided the opportunity to undertake historical discussion in new perspectives which overcome the Western 'normality' of the absence of religion from Realpolitik. Moreover, it is argued that much of the neglect of religion in work on world affairs has largely been the product of the inaccurate perception of ongoing secularization. The overall discussion is framed by some objections to the limiting consequences of disciplinarity.*

**Keywords:** religion, globalization, disciplinarity, Realpolitik, international relations.

## Introduction

While this paper is primarily concerned with the conditions that are giving rise to the conspicuousness of religion in contemporary international politics, it should be said at the outset that the recent controversy surrounding the alleged evils of religion – notably in the UK and the USA – is less than marginal to this focus. This is because much of the polemical 'shouting' that has issued from the anti-religious, or anti-God, camps has undoubtedly been much influenced by the overlapping presence of religion in intranational, transnational, and international politics. At the same time the militancy of, for example, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens has certainly contributed significantly to the presence of religion in the minds of contemporary politicians, journalists and academics (Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007). Another big controversy has also played a part in subduing the significance of religion in international affairs – namely, the significance of religion in the American policy toward Israel. It has become very clear in recent years that this is a subject which many avoid, for fear of arousing ethnic passion that can effectively damage academic careers, at least in the UK and the USA.

However, there is currently a strong move within sociology, philosophy and related disciplines away from atheistic secularism. This shift against the latter, as well as proliferating critiques of the idea of rampant secularization, is of great consequence for the general comprehension of global trends and circumstances (Robertson 2007; McLennan 2006; Robertson and Chirico 1985).

What follows is divided into two sections. The first deals with what can be called the 'disciplinary' world, while the second may be called the 'real' world. There are most cer-

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\* This article was first published in *Journal of Globalization Studies*, Vol. 2, Num. 1, May 2011, pp. 32–40.

tainly oversimplifications involved in this delineation, not least because what was once a matter of disciplinarity then becomes central to reality. Put another way, while disciplinarity is a constructed, 'artificial' way of comprehending reality, at the same time reality is partly constituted by disciplinarity. The complexity of this problem cannot be pursued here – not merely for reasons of space, but also because it has been, and will continue to be, an intractable one in all of the sciences, both natural and human. Many philosophers have sought over the centuries, in different civilizational contexts, to solve this epistemological and/or ontological problem and many have claimed to have resolved it. In full recognition of various contributions of the latter kind, in this paper the author will simply take the problem for granted and deal with it in a very simple way.

### **The Problem of Disciplinarity**

At least since the late 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries interpretation and/or analysis of the world have, for the greater part, been undertaken from increasingly specialized and compartmentalized perspective. A vast amount has been written about the origins, the histories and the genealogies of various disciplines, as well as variations in such from society to society, region to region, and civilization to civilization. Nonetheless, it should be stipulated here that the present focus is primarily a Western one and that it involves no systematic attempt to be specific about the civilizational structuring of particular academic disciplines; nor of their trajectories or configurations within different societies. What has to be firmly stated is that each discipline in the western academy, as well as in the primary and secondary sectors of school systems, has rested upon rhetorical constructions and academic contingencies. Thus the idea that disciplines reflect the natural condition of life is without any foundation. One has to make this point strongly, precisely because it seems that many academics and intellectuals – and not least their bureaucratic administrators – do believe that disciplines reflect or grasp reality, although some of these may also grant that so-called reality is partly constituted by disciplinarity.

In spite of these considerations it should be said that throughout the last century and a half or so various individuals and schools of thought have attempted to overcome or lay out the preconditions and sustaining infrastructures of the disciplines on a universalistic basis. For example, Comte made an extended attempt to connect systematically all disciplines, Marx also approached the same issue (but, of course, from a very different perspective), as did John Stuart Mill. The same might be said of Freud and certainly this is true of the rise of General Systems Theory in the 1930s and also of the work of Talcott Parsons during the mid-twentieth century. Foucault explored rather thoroughly the basis and forms of disciplinarity in the broadest possible sense – which led in his work to the casting of academic discipline as similar to discipline in the penal sense.

Increasingly, during the past twenty years or so, there has been much disciplinary mutation, particularly around the theme of globalization. Much of the study of the latter, in spite of its enormous fashionability, has unfortunately been centred upon the idea of interdisciplinarity. This has been very counterproductive and has served more the bureaucratic interests of academic administrators and power-seekers within academic professions than it has the enhancement of substantive intellectual progress. Specifically, interdisciplinarity has consolidated, rather than overcome, disciplinary and professional distinctiveness. For example, interdisciplinary collaboration often involves the practitioners of two or more disciplines getting together and seeing what each can contribute to a particular topic from their own disciplinary standpoint. What, on the other hand, ideally ought to occur is a direct concern with the substantive issue as opposed to a rehearsal of the identity of particular disciplines. Many enterprises of a so-called interdisciplinary nature have entailed little

more than each disciplinary representative pronouncing what her or his discipline could/should contribute to the topic in question. Thus, we should turn in the direction of what preferably should be called either cross-disciplinarity or trans-disciplinarity (although cogent claims could and have been made on behalf of 'counter-disciplinarity' and 'post-disciplinarity').

In the case in hand – namely the study of international relations, or world politics, in connection with the study of religion – such reflections on the limitations of disciplinary approaches have contributed mightily to the relative absence of attention to the interpenetration of religion and IR in historical terms. This means that rather than trying to account for the great significance of religion in world politics at the present time – as if religion had suddenly erupted onto the world-political scene – we would be much better advised to try and account for why the relationship between religion and IR has been grossly neglected for many years. Indeed, International Relations as a discipline or sub-discipline was professionally established without any reference to the significance of religion. While economics has often been called the dull science, that label might well be equally applied to IR, at least until fairly recently.

From the standpoint of those who have been mainly concerned with religion, the obsession with the secularization thesis has served both to insulate the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion from other disciplinary perspectives and subdue its influence in the wider society. Indeed, for many decades, sociologists of religion have, not unironically, expressed much regret that their sub-discipline is marginal to the wider discipline of sociology and have complained in so doing that the findings of the sociology of religion are not taken seriously by political elites and the more intellectual elements in the mass media. Thus, since the 1960s individual practitioners of the sociology of religion have only recently been invited to contribute to discussions of political events, circumstances and trends. For much of this period students of religion have been mainly involved in public discussion in relation to controversies surrounding religious sects (sometimes called 'cults'). However, with the advent of religions of violence sociologists have been called upon increasingly to participate in public debate and give advice to governments, particularly since 9/11. Similar, but greater, neglect of religion can be said of the study of world politics, although there *has* been an increasing concern with the relation between religion and societal politics during the same period. Thus the neglect of religion has been most evident in the study of international relations.

Another significant factor in the neglect of the involvement of religion in international relations is the way in which assumptions have been formed concerning distances between particular disciplines or subdisciplines. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century it was possible for historians and sociologists to say that it was strange to connect the study of religion to the study of economics. Within a few years, however, the relationship between religion and the development of capitalism had assumed the status of the obvious. Much of this was a consequence of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* which was first published in 1904/1905 (Weber 1930). In the particular case at hand, many practitioners on the IR side would have asked, only a few years ago, what religion could have to do with their own domain of analysis? Now, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century very few would be so daring – perhaps, one might say foolish – as to ask this same question. Undoubtedly this has a great deal to do with the present so-called war on terror (a term which is, in fact, fast retreating) and, more specifically, with the problematic thesis as to the clash of civilizations (which is also in retreat). To be more precise, it is the centrality of jihadist, or caliphate, Islam and its opponents – not to speak of its targets – that has been so crucial in the attention to the subject of

the present paper. The surprise among the relevant disciplines as to the apparent eruption of Islam onto the world scene as symbolised and expressed by the events of 9/11 now seems rather difficult to comprehend (Lincoln 2006). Even most of those who have been studying religion and regretting its marginality within and without the academy seem to have been amazed by 9/11. This can, in significant part, be attributed to the insulation of IR from the study of religion and vice versa. On the other hand, it should be said that the study of the politics/religion connection had been expanding in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This expanding interest almost certainly had much to do with the increasing conspicuousness of religion within and without nation-states since the late 1970s. At that time such events as the coming to power in Nicaragua of the Sandinistas, the complex connection between those opposed to the latter, Iran and the US Republican government (the so-called Iran–Contra affair); the injection of theocratic ideas into the global arena in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979; and the rise of the Solidarity movement – heavily backed by the Catholic Church – in Poland raised, so to speak religion, above the parapet for systematic attention. The spread and intensification of tensions between ‘church’ and state constituted the end of a long era that had begun following the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 which had marked the termination of religious wars within the West. Prior to the Westphalian settlement, the sacred and the profane were seen to have co-existed – although often problematically. Westphalia marked the end of such co-existence, in such a way as to largely separate religion from politics.

The consummation of that trend was the Declaration of Independence in the nascent American Republic in 1776, with its commitment to the constitutional separation of church and state. This rapidly produced globe-wide implications, even more important than in the USA itself (Armitage 2007). Moreover, it was not a coincidence that it was in this same period that Jeremy Bentham pronounced, in 1789, the need for a specialised focus on international relations. Few scholars have recognized the significance of this conjunction. However, this was a Western phenomenon which was, nonetheless, imposed upon, or emulated by, a number of Asian societies during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The variety of political orientations to attempts to disentangle religion and politics – or church and state – cannot be explored here. Suffice it to say that in East Asia one finds that whereas in China the demise of religion was taken to be a prerequisite of a modern society, in Japan there was a serious attempt to emulate the American separation of ‘church’ from state. In Japan State Shinto was established in the Meiji period by denying that it constituted a religion in the Western sense of the word. In contrast, the Chinese political elite and leading intellectuals took the lead from such Western philosophers as Bertrand Russell and insisted that there was no significant place for religion in a modern society (Robertson 1992: esp. 115–128, 146–163; also Gong 1984).

The areas of the world which most strongly resisted both of these trends were, overwhelmingly, Islamic. In view of this it is not surprising that the ‘return’ of religion to the international arena should have come in the form of a conflict between Islam and much of the rest of the world, particularly those parts of the latter that were seen to be particularly responsible either for the separation of religion and politics and church and state, or the imposition of state organized atheism, as in Communist regimes.

The considerable interest in the theme of globalization has undoubtedly drawn attention to the significance of religion in world politics and international relations. In arguing this I am emphasizing strongly the *multidimensionality* of globalization. Rather than conceiving of the latter in the form of neoliberalism, thus giving it a distinctively economic gloss, I regard it as having political, social, and cultural dimensions. This type of broad con-

ception of globalization has constituted the basis of an ever-expanding interest in global, or world, history. This revival in the study of world history is significantly different from the kind of West-skewed interest in the latter that thrived at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The new global history – at least as it is practised in the West – is not anywhere near so Eurocentric. In fact has not infrequently been anti-Eurocentric. This means that in many societies and world regions different, often competing, paradigms and images of global history are being presented and promoted. Many, if not most, of these involve situating a particular society or region at the centre of world history. Clearly, this has a great deal to do with the present globe-wide concern with national identities.

In the frame of globalization this has come about for two main reasons. On the one hand, globalization involves the increasing connectivity of the global whole – sometimes expressed as a compression of the entire world, producing a circumstance in which each society, region or civilization is under constraint to identify and proclaim its own uniqueness. On the other hand, globalization also involves increasing global consciousness – better, self-consciousness, in the sense that, with periodic interruptions, the world as it increasingly has become ‘one place’. This frequently neglected feature of globalization enhances, problematically, the sense of humanity being one. Needless to say, in recent times, the actuality of pandemics, epidemics, climate change – as well as the rise of religions concerned with ‘the end-time’ – has greatly consolidated this heavily contested oneness. In fact, much of the contemporary globe-wide concern with religious and civilizational conflict is centred upon the issue of religio-cultural hegemony.

In the wake of the rise of a new form of global history there has also arisen a fast-growing interest in the subject of imperialism and its great relevance to the theme of globalization. A good example of this is John Darwin's book, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire*. Darwin argues that ‘Tamerlane was the last of the series of “world-conquerors” in the tradition of Attila and Genghis Khan, who strove to bring the whole of Eurasia – the “world island” – under the rule of a single vast empire’ (Darwin 2007; cf. Bayly 2002). After 1405 there soon began the exploration of the sea routes that became what Darwin calls ‘the nerves and arteries of great maritime empires’ (Darwin 2006: x; Fernandez-Armesto 2006). The European expansion after Tamerlane led to ‘the rise of the West’, but when the European empire dissolved – in the period lasting from the beginning of World War Two until the mid-twentieth century – the story of world history began to be retold, particularly with the rise of the so-called Third World. As Darwin says, this retelling cannot be written without a fully global view of the past. He cogently quotes Teggart, who in his *Rome and China* argued that ‘the study of the past can become effective only when it is fully realized that all peoples have histories, that these histories run concurrently and in the same world and that the act of comparing them is the beginning of knowledge’ (Darwin 2007: xi; Teggart 1939; Robertson 1998). This suggestion of the need to coordinate inter-unit relations with comparative analysis is, perhaps, the most important step forward that we must make in the study of international relations. This has been the main methodological consequence of the widespread concern with globalization. Much has recently been written about the need for new approaches to the latter, but virtually none of this has dealt with this analytic desideratum, or with the substantive relevance of religion and culture. Undoubtedly the ‘terror wars’ that were, in a sense, ‘scripted’ by Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, have brought religion – via radically politicized Islam – into a central, but highly problematic position, in world affairs. But little has been seen of the necessary analytic readjustments (Huntington 1996). On the IR side, this has much to do with the so-called positivism of the discipline, which has largely eschewed any concern with such matters, particularly in the USA. Nye's concept of *soft power* is a rather meagre acknowledgement of these kinds of consideration (Nye 2004).

Even though IR has continued since its inception in the early 1920s to display continuing controversies about *Realpolitik* it has nonetheless been overwhelmingly centred upon 'realistic' motifs. Many would, perhaps, contest this strong argument, but it is here claimed that – at least until recently – that has been the case. The rising attention to *international society*, *global civil society*, and *global society* by what Buzan calls 'the English School' contrasts with the emphasis on *Realpolitik*. Buzan seeks to establish a view of world society as 'a concept to capture the non-state side of the international system' or, to put it more elaborately, to 'create a synthesis between the structural elements of the Bull/Vincent side of English school theory about international and world society, and Wendt's... social theory of international politics'. In so doing Buzan speaks disparagingly about 'the analytical vacuousness of "the 'G' word"' (Buzan 2004: 3; see also Wendt 1999). (Wendt, of course, refers to the concept of globalization.) However, despite some praiseworthy attempts to bring back the social into IR, Buzan dangerously simplifies the concept of globalization. This is so, largely because he treats the latter concept in primarily political terms.

The unidimensional tendencies of many contributions to globalization theory have severely limited its analytical and empirical purchase, even though Buzan himself displays considerable interest in some sociological conceptions of world society outside conventional IR. For example, he attends, appropriately, to the work of the so-called Stanford school (led by John Meyer) which has promoted an important extra-IR view of the world as a whole. In the process, on the other hand, he has entirely neglected the major contributions of the Stanford school to the study of religion. Undoubtedly, there is a failure in the meeting of minds in so far as he rightly accuses members of the Stanford school of being either unaware or unwilling to consider the work of such people as Martin Wight and Hedley Bull in the English school of IR. Buzan rightly emphasizes that one – if not the – central concerns of the work of the Stanford sociological school is that of global culture. However, he overlooks the fact that a close relation of the Stanford school has been what used to be called the Pittsburgh school, whose major figures included Roland Robertson, Frank Lechner, Peter Beyer and Victor Roudometof. In the works of such sociologists religion has been absolutely central. Another lacuna in Buzan's approach is the neglect of the fact that some representatives of the sociological approach to globalization deny that that process is greatly concerned with what has conventionally been called micro-sociological aspects of what Robertson has conceptualized as the *global field* (Robertson 1992: 25–31). In articulating his ideas about the latter, Robertson has typologically divided the world into four major elements: individual states (national or otherwise), the system of states (or nation-states), humanity; and, not least, individual selves. The principal reason for including the latter within the frame of globalization is that it is completely impossible – when one seriously thinks about it – to exclude individuals from the world! Nonetheless, the idea that globalization is primarily a macro topic continues, in spite of anthropologists and sociologists insisting that globalization occurs interpersonally, that personal interaction can have very large consequences and that globalization occurs on the street, in the supermarket, in marital and other relationships, among but a few examples.

A great deal has recently been written in the millennial genre. This can be seen in both utopian and dystopian forms. For the most part, the present *global millennial concern* is more of the latter than the former kind, certainly in the Western portion of the world. It is in terms of this standpoint that it is particularly necessary to consider the relationship between religion and IR (Robertson 2007).

The millennial and apocalyptic view of the 'terror wars', is at the centre of what may be called the *religiocultural turn* in world politics, specifically the relationship between

radically politicized Islam and the 'modern West'. Indeed, the degree to which this global conflict between the two major actors on either side – namely al-Qaeda and the Bush regime in the USA – has assumed heavily religious terms cannot responsibly be questioned. However, there are those who still cling implausibly to the contention that this conflict is 'really' about oil, water and other material factors. The insistence on reducing all phenomena to a single factor is, however – it should be noted – a distinctively Western disposition. The failure to recognize that all human phenomena and interaction are – to put it in 'Western' terms – multidimensional, or multifactorial has been, throughout the course of Occidental history, an egregious limitation. Looked at from another angle, we should not now be misled by the fact that communist regimes, for example, have claimed that they have considered international relations and world politics in 'atheistic' terms. Needless to say, virtually all communist or neo-communist regimes have claimed to be committed to either the complete elimination of religion or its totalitarian control. But, from a sufficiently sophisticated perspective, one can surely see that such ideological commitments have been framed historically by ancient religious traditions. In the most obvious case of Marxist Communism the religious or theological context of such is well documented. In any case, within forms of orthodox Marxism this embeddedness has been clearly acknowledged – for example, by Engels in his writing about European peasant utopianism as a forerunner of working class militancy and in Marx's contention that theology provides the basic categories for theoretical struggles (Burleigh 2006a, 2006b).

At the same time, it has not been sufficiently recognized that the major opponent of Communism also has had a very strong millennial culture (Gray 1998: 157; 2007; Harrington 1986; Reynolds 2002: 243–260). Or, at least, the millennial thrust of American culture – at least since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – has rarely been analysed and represented from an international affairs standpoint. In this specific sense, IR, as well as the sociology of religion, have both 'developed' as forms of false consciousness. It should be reiterated that the obsession with the secularization thesis among a (declining) majority of sociologists of religion has been as responsible for the neglect of politics / IR as has the neglect of religion from the latter side.

### Conclusion

The main concern in this article has been with the way in which religion has appeared in recent years to be a crucial theme in world politics and international relations, not least because religion appears to be at the centre of some of the world's most formidable global conflicts. It has been argued that the new global history that has developed in the context of the disputed concern with globalization provides us with an opportunity to comprehend how, on the one hand, religion has been greatly overlooked in the interrogation of world politics and how, on the other hand, the study of religion – particularly in its sociological form – has similarly neglected international relations because of its continuous and misplaced concern with secularization. In sum, on both sides of the equation there has been much mutual neglect. This has been largely attributed to the structure of academic disciplines, particularly in the Western world.

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