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Review Essay

Religion Research in International Relations: A Taxonomy

JOHN A. REES

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Austin Dacey, *The Future of Blasphemy: Speaking of the Sacred in an Age of Human Rights* (London and New York: Continuum International, 2012), 196 pp., US\$59.00, ISBN: 9781441107374 (hbk)

Miwa Hirono, *Civilizing Missions: International Religious Agencies in China* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 262 pp., US\$100.00, ISBN: 9780230608979 (hbk)

Patrick James (ed.), *Religion, Identity, and Global Governance: Ideas, Evidence, and Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 342 pp., US\$65.00, ISBN: 9781442640665 (hbk)

Erin K. Wilson, *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 191 pp., US\$85.00, ISBN: 9780230290372 (hbk)

The status of religion research in international relations (IR) and cognate fields has moved from that of a ‘special issue’ topic to a regular theme under consideration within more established discourses. The shift can be seen at the foundational levels of teaching and research: new introductions to IR have begun including conceptual chapters on religion (Hurd 2012; Mandaville 2009), specialised research is being produced via journals such as *Politics, Religion and Ideology* and *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, and the growing number of handbooks and essential readings compendia dealing with the multiple variants of religion in world politics (e.g. Clarke 2013; Hoover and Johnston 2012; Madeley 2003; Smidt, Kellstedt and Guth 2009). Whilst the debates surrounding 9/11 have been influential here – the average yearly output of books on religion and IR has increased sixfold since 2002 (Hassner 2011, 38) – the shifting status of religion research is paradoxically (and to the relief of many) partly because the literature narrowly linking religion to terrorism is now less prominent. Of equal importance to the influence of 9/11 is the steady expansion of the corpus of religion research in IR over four decades dealing with postcolonialism, statecraft, comparative politics, development, transnationalism, gender, environmentalism and security (see Rees 2012, 1–20). Seminal works of recent years addressing the

legitimacy of religion as a core IR subject (e.g. Fox and Sandler 2006; Thomas 2005) thus belong within a scholarly tradition predating 9/11 as well as the surge of research that followed.

While an awareness of religion and its importance in world affairs is more embedded in the consciousness of IR researchers than ever before, among IR networks contemporary research interest in religion varies substantially. For instance, and by way of comparison with gender studies, at the 2012 British International Studies Association Conference the number of panels focussed on religion outnumbered those dealing with gender by three to one. In marked contrast, gender-related panels at the 2012 Oceanic Conference on International Studies biannual meeting outnumbered religion panels by at least five to one. However, at both events considerations of gender and religion were also implicit in discussions on the classical tradition, secularism, security, development, IR theory, foreign policy, regional studies and cultural diplomacy. As such, religion research (following gender and environmental research before it) is significant as much for its breadth as for its depth, defying domination by one particular 'school' and requiring nuanced case-by-case scholarship that can determine when and in what ways religious agency shapes political events and assumptions (see Berger 1999, 17–18).

It is therefore important to differentiate between types of religion research available to IR scholars and policy-makers. If the discipline is beginning to readily engage with the variegations of religion, then our perception of research about religion can no longer remain homogenous. With this imperative in mind, in the following suite of reviews I shall differentiate between four suggested types of religion research in IR (i.e. policy, cultural, global and postsecular research) and briefly identify three additional types (i.e. disciplinary, data, and primary source research) of importance in the field (see Table 1).

Austin Dacey's *The Future of Blasphemy: Speaking of the Sacred in an Age of Human Rights* (2012) is an example of *policy research*, here defined as an analysis of the procedural response to issues of religion in the international system. Policy research focuses on the representations of religion within the priorities of agenda-setting actors (e.g. the UN, World Bank) and structures (e.g. international law) of world politics. Dacey's important book addresses the central tension between freedom of speech and cultural rights as each relates to the legal and moral issue of blasphemy. The reaction to the amateur film *Innocence of Muslims*, which sparked an international crisis in 2012, illustrates the timely nature of such a contribution. The problem, as Dacey sees it, is the criminalisation of blasphemy via the universal rights regime designed to protect cultural and religious identity from

Table 1. A Taxonomy of Religion Research in International Relations

Research Type	Focus	Examples
Policy	International Norms	Dacey (2012), Gutman (2001)
Cultural	Contextual Influence	Chaplin (2010), Hirono (2008), Nasr (2007)
Global	World Theme & Examples	Hoover and Johnston (2012), James (2011)
Postsecular	Constitutive Agency	Hurd (2008), Wilson (2011)
Disciplinary	IR Theory	Snyder (2011)
Data	Quantitative Evidence	Fox (2008), Norris and Inglehart (2011)
Primary Source	Political Hermeneutics	Juergensmeyer and Kitts (2011)

discrimination, arguing that such protections have often been employed to reinforce hegemonic cultural interests and deny individual liberty. Dacey attempts to shift the blasphemy debate away from a 'secular vs sacred' binary toward discussions about competing expressions of the sacred (many 'blasphemers' are themselves devout) and the moral importance of conscience (a freedom held equally by secular and religious citizens). *The Future of Blasphemy* thus suggests that the legitimate concerns raised by offending religious sensibility are best dealt with ethically rather than at the level of law, and argues for the decriminalisation of blasphemy at the international level because 'there are many important questions of sacredness that simply cannot be grappled with from inside the cramped space of the liberal discourse of respect for persons and individual rights' (p. 12). *The Future of Blasphemy* thus offers a kind of postsecular theory of civility that is tested against an impressive list of historical and contemporary examples (and, refreshingly, resists an over-focus on Islam). The level of conceptual argument echoes Gutman's *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* (2001). Countering perceptions that policy-oriented work lacks rigour, both books model the theoretical depth, instrumental reasoning and commitment to critical dialogue required to develop enduring strategies toward religion in the international sphere.

Civilizing Missions: International Religious Agencies in China by Miwa Hirono (2008) is a salient example of *cultural research*, here defined as an analysis of a single context to determine the influence of religion upon its social and political formation. Cultural researchers focus on religion as a way of bringing new understandings about the societies and regions of which they write (e.g. Chaplin 2010; Nasr 2007). In this way, Hirono offers a highly specialised study that addresses and recasts common perceptions of 'missionary' activity, evangelism and political development in China through the lenses of history, linguistics, actor analysis (principally development NGOs and the Chinese state), and the cognate disciplines of anthropology and sociology. It is an ambitious work that ably delivers on the promise to 'study international relations from an Asian perspective that reflect[s] the sum of all its rich historical traditions' (p. xi). What this important research discovers is that religious actors are highly adaptive, that cultural minorities are robust and not mere passive agents to external religious influence, and that the dynamics of evangelism and conversion are of as much interest to atheist political elites as they are to religious missionary organisations. Three aspects of the research highlight the value of these insights. Firstly, Hirono's linguistic expertise (pp. 24ff.) effectively challenges the notion that 'civilised' is a purely Western concept, but can also be found in common Chinese usage. Secondly, against perceptions of a 'civilising mission' as the unique perspective of Christian imperial outsiders, the author constructs a dual framework to highlight also the 'civilising' policy of the Chinese state, notably upon ethnic minorities (including religious practices) from the seventeenth century through to the Communist period. Thirdly, comparative case studies of contemporary Christian mission in China provide evidence for the continuation of complex 'civilising' interactions, diversity of approaches toward evangelism and culture, and the importance of dialogical approaches toward these sensitive issues going forward. As such *Civilizing Missions* contributes significantly to religion research in IR by highlighting the complex cultural and political dynamics at play on issues understood hitherto to be a simple matter of imperialism from the outside. *Civilizing Missions* is an important book for China specialists as well as theorists and practitioners of development, and thus an exemplar of cultural research in religion.

Religion, Identity, and Global Governance: Ideas, Evidence, and Practice (2011) edited by Patrick James is an example of *global research*, here defined as a collection of religion-specific analyses ordered by a single theme drawn from the international system or international society as a whole. This type of research emerged a decade ago via works such as *Religion and the Global Order* (Esposito and Watson 2000) and subsequent offerings on globalisation (Dunning 2003), diplomacy (Johnston 2003) and security (Seiple and Hoover 2004). For James and his co-contributors, 'global governance' becomes the concept binding an otherwise disparate array of subjects that range, for example, from the religious challenge to IR theory (Stack) to religious humanitarianism (Lynch), from religious extremism in Sri Lanka (Midlarsky) to the political theology of Pope John Paul II (Heft), from diplomacy and religious pluralism in Canada (Potter) to the ongoing security challenges in Iraq (Akbaba and Taydas). Of present interest is whether *Religion, Identity, and Global Governance* holds together as a singular volume and not merely as a collection of essays. Whilst 'global governance' could have been more clearly defined throughout, continuity is indeed achieved by 'pursuing answers to several sets of interrelated questions' (p. 3). For example: 'How can it be known whether religion is "real" versus a cover for some other factor such as ethnicity or group power? ... What is the balance between religion as a cause of violence versus a possible source for achievement of a more peaceful world?' (pp. 313, 316). No one volume can comprehensively answer such questions, but *Religion, Identity, and Global Governance* makes an admirable attempt within a three-fold structure of *ideas* (theoretical issues of importance), *evidence* (data-base analyses and case studies) and *practice* (actions and interests of religious actors). In addition the compendium is focussed on Abrahamic-Ibrahmic religious traditions representing 3.6 billion people globally (p. 15). As a discipline, IR is (dare one say) adept at extracting useful insights from very broad global topics via controlled analytical frameworks and comparative paradigms. Like the global research that has gone before it, *Religion, Identity, and Global Governance* models a similar approach toward religion and as such will be immediately accessible to IR scholars.

Erin K. Wilson's *After Secularism: Rethinking Religion in Global Politics* (2012) is a fine example of *postsecular research*, here defined as a reframing of international politics via a primary emphasis on the agency of religion. As Wilson's title indicates, postsecular research critiques narrowly secularist interpretations of world politics and reframes the international realm to be what Marty (2003) called a 'religio-secular world'. This approach, in turn, helps to develop a more precise and workable notion of secularism (e.g. Hurd 2008), thus marking an important corrective to earlier polemical debates in sociology between secularists and religionists. Wilson models the more holistic and dynamic alternative approach via six elements of religion that are constantly shifting and interacting in global politics: institutional, ideational, individual, communal, irrational and rational. Postsecular research often recasts the role of religion in international politics via interpretive frameworks drawn from outside the discipline. Perhaps the pre-eminent example of this is Thomas' use of the social theory of Alasdair MacIntyre to powerfully argue that the constitution of religion in world politics is social and communitarian, not propositional and individualist (Thomas 2005). No less impressive is the way Wilson reads the interplay of the six elements of religion. Employing a framework of relational dialogism (pp. 91ff.), he shows 'the ways in which religion has become embedded within the cultural norms, values and assumptions [of] the Western

social imaginary and which form the backdrop to daily political events, actions, statements and decisions, in both domestic and global politics' (p. 183). Perhaps the signature achievement of *After Secularism* is that these theoretical insights are operationalised via a reading of US domestic politics and foreign policy to show the full constitutive effect of religion at play in the formation of the American polity. This is no small achievement, and the clarity and insight offered in a brilliant chapter on religion and US politics (pp. 147–79) is a must-read for scholars, policy-makers and students alike. Of equal importance, Wilson's model is clearly transferable and promises high impact in IR by aiding and equipping researchers to understand the constitutive agencies of religion in multiple political contexts.

In the reviews above I have drawn distinctions between four suggested types of religion research in IR: policy (Dacey), cultural (Hirono), global (James) and postsecular (Wilson). This is an indicative rather than a comprehensive list, designed to illustrate the principle of differentiated research by briefly engaging with each representative work. As indicated in Table 1, there are at least three additional research types that can be identified, though no substantive comment about each is offered here. *Data research* can be defined as the analysis of religious agency in world politics via comparative surveys and other tools of quantitative method. Examples include Norris and Inglehart's insights into religion and secularisation drawn from the World Values Survey (2011), the *World Survey of Religion and the State* by IR theorist Jonathan Fox (2008), and an analysis of results from the Gallup survey of Muslims worldwide by Esposito and Mogahed (2008). *Disciplinary research* is here defined as the study of religion within the traditional contours of IR theory. The defining work in this area remains *Religion and International Relations Theory*, now in its second edition (Snyder 2011). *Primary source research* allows IR scholars to access original writings from religion and philosophy guided by varying degrees of commentary. Some are collections ordered by a theme relevant to political ethics, such as with *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence* (Juergensmeyer and Kitts 2011), while others offer more normative arguments drawn from singular traditions, such as with Cohen and Westbrook's edited work on the ancient text of Isaiah and its relevance in contemporary world affairs (2008). The seven types of religion research in IR are represented in Table 1.

Finally, it is worth making explicit a point that can also be readily assumed: the above research types are not mutually exclusive and the potential for overlap is defined only by the number of possible combinations that Table 1 allows. That said, as shown above by a review of four high-quality contributions, the demarcation between types is important to acknowledge if IR is to fully profit from the quality of religion research now on offer.

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