

2007

Religion and politics in review

John Rees

University of Notre Dame Australia, john.rees@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_article



This book review in a scholarly journal was originally published as:

Rees, J. (2007). Religion and politics in review. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* [London School of Economics and Politics], 35 (3), 813-817.

<http://doi.org/10.1177/03058298070350030722>

This Book review in a scholarly journal is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_article/74. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



Millennium - Journal of International Studies

<http://mil.sagepub.com/>

Book Review: RELIGION AND POLITICS Eric O. Hanson, *Religion and Politics in the International System Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 345 pp., \$26.99 pbk., \$70.00 hbk.); Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, 300 pp., \$26.95 pbk., \$79.95 hbk.)

John A. Rees

Millennium - Journal of International Studies 2007 35: 813

DOI: 10.1177/03058298070350030722

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://mil.sagepub.com/content/35/3/813.citation>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



Millennium Publishing House, LSE

Additional services and information for *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://mil.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://mil.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Sep 1, 2007

[What is This?](#)

(and in this sense neoliberal) policies for socially progressive agendas. This project may be less altogether hopeless than the contributors suggest. One also wonders how much currency egalitarian-utopian or social-liberal critiques carry today: to what extent have neoliberals been successful in shaping the terms of their own evaluation in the public sphere, thereby further solidifying their hegemony?

A second problem is the apparent lack of well-developed practicable alternatives to the neoliberal status quo. Gender mainstreaming may not be 'unequivocally progressive in nature' but as long as there is an apparent lack of systematic alternatives, such programs may enable neoliberalism to occupy the normative high ground and thereby further entrench its hegemony. (p. 194) Against this, the book can be read as a kind of manifesto against compromise with the system and as a call to develop systematic alternatives. It would aid in this endeavour if the publisher issues a less-expensive soft cover edition of 'Neoliberal Hegemony: A Global Critique' so as to facilitate a broader understanding of global neoliberal hegemony, and help opponents of the global neoliberal status quo find out what they're up against.

DANIEL KINDERMAN

*Daniel Kinderman is a PhD Candidate at Cornell University
and a Visiting Scholar at the Social Science Research Center
(Wissenschaftszentrum) Berlin.*

RELIGION AND POLITICS

Eric O. Hanson, *Religion and Politics in the International System Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, 345 pp., \$26.99 pbk., \$70.00 hbk.);

Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations: The Struggle for the Soul of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, 300 pp., \$26.95 pbk., \$79.95 hbk.).

'Methods', wrote Nietzsche, 'are the essential, as well as being the most difficult'. This is especially so when analysing new concepts, ones that are yet to be settled in the nomenclature of any discipline. In International Relations (IR) one such concept is 'religion', and contrasting studies by Eric Hanson and Scott Thomas should provoke important discussions on method in the ever-expanding number of IR debates on the subject.

In *Religion and Politics in the International System Today* Hanson attempts to construct a 'new paradigm' in the study of international politics via the 'central methodological choice, to take religion seriously from the viewpoint of religious practitioners'. (p. 17, 8) In so doing, *Religion and Politics* attempts 'an alternative to the compartmentalised, secular Western' approaches of the past. (p.12) The study is situated within the 'technologically-driven' structures of a globalised world, where Hanson argues for the influence of religious actors in 'political, economic, military, and communication' systems. (p. 4, pp. 17-69) This four-dimension paradigm ('politics + EMC') is then employed in the analysis of five geopolitical regions: 'the West', 'East Asia', Middle East and North Africa, 'South and Central Asia' and 'Latin America'. (p. 123ff., 164ff., 128ff., 198ff., 260ff.)

The resulting study is valuable for a number of reasons. Firstly, the portrayal of 'religion' (and indeed of 'globalisation') is usefully polysemic, differentiated in terms of 'religions of the book', 'religions of meditative experience' and 'religions of public life'. (pp. 86-88, pp. 92-119) These categories will help IR analysts distil variations in religio-political form and avoid overly generic readings. Secondly, Hanson's geopolitical method respects the interaction between tradition and context in the formation of religio-politics. Parallels to Samuel Huntington's well-known civilisational thesis will be drawn, however *Religion and Politics* offers an intra-regional rather than inter-regional comparison of religious conflict and peace making. (pp. 56-58) Hanson also understands religious conflict to be within traditions, not just between them, making it more representative of really existing religion in the global political sphere. Thirdly, the prescriptions offered in the final chapter on 'religion and politics in the next millennium' balance the issues of the vitality and danger of religion in the international system today, and are rooted in a concern for policy by states, international organisations, and transnational religious communities. (pp. 295-323) Within these contours, *Religion and Politics* will contribute to the improving standard of IR debate on 'religion'.

Yet significant methodological issues are raised by Hanson's approach. In IR terms, *Religion and Politics* occurs solely within what Ole Waever once called the neo-neo synthesis. Hanson echoes it well as the combination of 'conventional liberal and conservative approaches to international affairs by advocating religious pluralism integrated into all four global systems'. (p. 12) The limitation of such an approach is that the values of 'religious practitioners' – especially the world's poor, who are overwhelmingly religious in outlook – are marginalised by the values of mainstream globalisation. *Religion and Politics* assumes a relatively benign character to politics+EMC systems that arguably serve many religious people very badly. The more fundamental question of how the agency of 'religion' might *resist* and *reconstitute* such systems remains unexplored.

Secondly, and not unrelated to the first criticism, *Religion and Politics* reflects US foreign policy assumptions, past and present, which *a priori* turn some analytical frontiers into non-starters. For instance, the politico-religious structure in Iran is given short shrift, and is too predictably read through North American security discourse as the mere result of a power vacuum rather than a serious post-colonial, post-secular, development. (pp. 215-221, 217) The choice of 'Maoist Marxism' as the primary example of a 'religion of public life' is too much of a Cold War hangover. (pp.72-73, 117-119) Indeed, a more salient and contemporary example might have been US nationalism with its religious impulse toward manifest destiny. Hanson's study of US interventions in Central America is banal and descriptive, lacking any incisive analysis of the brutalisation of Nicaragua, Guatemala, El- Salvador, and the liberation theology movements of resistance that flourished in such places. (pp. 267-270) Finally, the Middle East cannot be summed as 'Jewish and Islamic Politics' without also including the iconic status of Israel and the demonic status of Mohammed in the eschatology of US Christian fundamentalists, and the effect this has had upon recent US foreign policy in the region. (p. 228ff.)

Thirdly, Hanson draws on only one of Michel Meslin's 'five conceptions of religion' for his own working definition, adapted as 'a person's willingness to die for his belief'. (p. 73) Such a definition equates religion with martyrdom and elides into IR securitisation assumptions about religion as disruption, as something to be contained rather than partnered. Meslin's other conceptions, notably religion as 'altruistic service of other people', would serve to broaden the argument considerably. The 'Nine Global Religious-Political Rules' that end the book promote a broader view, but ultimately read as a mere manifesto for civic-liberalism. (p. 73, pp. 320-323) From the perspective of grass-roots religious practitioners, where politics is often done in defiance, ignorance or disregard for the axioms of secular internationalism (and the civic-liberal assumptions they carry), there may be little that is new or representative in such prescriptions.

Despite these constraints, *Religion and Politics* incisively describes the ways religion is integrated into the international system *as it is understood* within the neo-neo frame of IR, and *as it operates* within many international policy and diplomatic networks. This is no small achievement. Whilst Hanson's argument does not constitute a new paradigm, several new methodological trails have certainly been cut into hitherto uncharted IR terrain.

In *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* Thomas attempts to employ 'religion' to deconstruct conventional approaches and imagine new possibilities in IR thinking. Thomas releases the agency of religion into IR discourse via Alasdair MacIntyre's fourfold conceptual scheme of 'virtues, practices, tradition and narrative'. (p. 85-93) The resulting study redefines 'religion' as a

subject and in so doing recasts perceptions of the impact of religion upon the international sphere.

Thomas argues that what is needed in interpreting the challenges of religion in world politics 'is not only more facts...but better concepts, theories and assumptions'. (pp. 11-12) Thomas brings religion into the heart of IR discourse, arguing that its virtual non-existence as an IR concept is due to the secularity of the discipline. These arguments are not unique, but are effectively distilled by Thomas *as IR arguments* (see Chapters 1-4), not simply de-secularisation rationales lifted unamended from other disciplines. Thomas situates his views within 'the wider effort to bring ideas, values... ideational factors back into the study of international relations'. (p. 69) It belongs to the constructivist project, but more interestingly to the English School, which 'took seriously the impact of religious doctrines, cultures and civilisations'. (pp. 94-95, 17) The reader is thus challenged to rethink the supposed newness of religion in IR, and instead find it in the earliest discourses of the field. The extensive references that Thomas provides on religion and IR are reason enough for any researcher to read *Global Resurgence*. (pp. 251-291)

According to Thomas, IR inherited religion as an invention of liberal modernity, summed as 'a body of beliefs', an individualist definition of religion as 'privately held doctrines'. Thomas regards this as a distortion of religion as it really exists, which is more as 'a body of believers', a social definition. (pp. 22-26) Thus, 'it will not be sufficient...to simply add religion... into our existing concepts or theories'. (p. 79) The way forward is instead found in MacIntyre's narrative theory of social action, which holds religion to be 'a type of social tradition' that 'cannot be separated from specific social and cultural context'. (pp. 85-96, 88) There is a timely benefit to this approach: to speak of religion as 'a source of positive social capital' opens the serious analysis of religion in IR to realms beyond securitisation, which tends to collapse religion into fundamentalism. (p. 238) The community-based, virtue-ethics approach to religion is thus applied to many substantive issues in IR, including security, but also international co-operation, diplomacy, democracy and civil society, and international development. (p. 121ff., 149ff., 173ff., 197ff., 219ff) These overview chapters will provide new learning for most readers, such as the extent of engagement with religious organisations by the World Bank and other international organisations, reframing our conception of religion as a basic, not exotic, element in international affairs. (pp. 222-230)

Yet for all this reframing, the arguments in *Global Resurgence* are perhaps too moderate. For instance, Islamic democracy is under-explored even though it is surely one of the litmus tests for implementing communitarian politics today. Alternatively understood, such criticisms are next steps in response to the methods laid forth in this very important and potentially seminal book. Thomas writes as a political theologian as much as an IR scholar, and with a depth that does justice to both disciplines.

Global Resurgence stands as the most rigorous work on religion in IR to date, and should be a primary source for any IR researcher concerned with the conceptions of religion in the field.

JOHN A. REES

John Rees is Lecturer in Politics at the University of Notre Dame Australia (Sydney), and a PhD candidate in the School of Politics and International Relations at the University of New South Wales, Australia.
