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Cesari, Jocelyne

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Teaching Religion and International Politics: Beyond Theology and Belief

JOCELYNE CESARI

University of Birmingham and Georgetown University

Although most IR scholars would now agree that religion matters, they still struggle with *how* religion matters. In the words of a distinguished scholar I heard speaking at an International Studies Association convention a few years ago, after all “there is no theory of religion.” The disarray expressed in such a non-informed claim is revelatory of the interdisciplinary conundrum that lies at the core of the teaching and research on religion and politics. I know firsthand the challenges that occupying this interdisciplinary space generate: I teach students of politics in the United States and students of religion in the United Kingdom. My teaching addresses questions of religion and political violence, and religion, civility, and tolerance at both the national and international levels. My focus is on Islam but I always bring comparisons to other religious traditions depending on the topic. This multidisciplinary and multicultural experience has led me to develop a two-fold approach: on the one hand, I try to channel the body of knowledge from religious studies into IR analysis, and, on the other hand, I seek to show the political relevance of investigating religion beyond belief and identity.

The first point is the most unnerving for students of politics who suffer from what I call the “Huntington syndrome.” It does not mean that they believe in the clash of civilization (most do not) but that they rely on their personal understanding/experience of religion to introduce it in their studies. I always offer the “clash of civilizations” thesis (Huntington 1993) as an example to make students understand why Huntington was half right and half wrong. Half right because he raised the importance of belief, identities, and values in international conflicts. Half wrong because his essentialized understanding of civilizations was merely on his part an educated guess, since he did not utilize the vast knowledge accumulated by anthropologists, sociologists, and historians on what a civilization is or how it evolves. This knowledge would have helped Huntington avoid the common sense mistake of defining each civilization by fixed traits (for an attempt to shift way from this essentialized approach, see Katzenstein 2010).

This is the flaw that I see repeated again and again in my students’ thinking: the assumption that they do not need any exposure to scholarship on religion to make sense of it in their studies. Their assumption is reinforced by their perception of this scholarship as theology only, hence not compatible with social sciences. Interestingly, Elias’ work on civilization 1939: *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*.

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Comment [NLJD2]: This needs an in-text citation and an entry on the reference list.

Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen. Erster Band. Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes and *Zweiter Band. Wandlungen der Gesellschaft. Entwurf einer Theorie der Zivilisation*. Basel: Verlag Haus zum Falken. (Published in English as *The Civilizing Process, Vol.I. The History of Manners*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1969, and *The Civilizing Process, Vol.II. State Formation and Civilization*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

has been largely ignored by scholars of international politics interested in rehabilitating civilization in international relations (with the notable exception of Linklater 2017). According to Elias, and in stark contrast with Huntington, civilization is not defined by a set of fixed cultural features. It is instead, the outcome of unplanned processes of concentration of power and changes in human psyche, behaviors, and emotions that happen in any cultural context. (Elias, 1969)

That is why I make it a point in my courses to use anthropological, sociological, and historical work on religion to demonstrate how it can serve IR investigations. For instance, I utilize theories that have demonstrated the complexity of secularization beyond the decline of religion to pay attention to permanent social differentiation between religious and secular ideas and institutions (Casanova 1994; Dobbelaere 2002; Taylor 2007). My intention is hence to stress the mutual interactions between “secular” and “religious,” rather than evaluating the rapport between the two as a zero sum game (Cesari 2018a).

At a more fundamental and problematic level, my students’ attitude betrays a solipsist approach to religion where they are confident that their individual intellect suffices to properly address religion, independently of what religion means in different cultural and historical contexts. This is especially relevant for students of politics or religion in the American academic context. Consequently, students access religion through what is obvious and easy to them: texts. In other words, they use declarations and rulings of religious actors as the way to explain their political actions. In their defense, such a perspective does not come from laziness but from numerous subfields of the discipline. For example, terrorism and security studies (Bruce Hoffman, 1993), Bruce Hoffman, *Holy Terror: The Implications of Terrorism Motivated by a Religious Imperative*, Rand Corporation, 1993). Martha Crenshaw, 2010), Martha Crenshaw, *Explaining Terrorism: Causes, Processes and Consequences*, Routledge, 2010)

fall in this trap when they examine religiously based political violence through religious texts, declarations or speeches, without considering the contexts in which these discourses or texts are performed or received, hence turning religious ideas into the main, if not the primary, cause of terrorist activities worldwide.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there is a tendency in the existing scholarship to bypass the role of religion and to take it as the proxy variable for other causes. For example, in social movement theory, the politicization of Islam is attributed to the combination of strong ideology with several “opportunity structures” (Shapiro, Smith, and Masoud 2004; Wiktorowicz 2006; Jamal 2007). The most significant structures are the political failures of secular national projects (Kepel 2004; Hafez 2010), the deepening of economic crises, and the demographic bulge (Lawrence 1989; Kepel 2004; Zubaida 2009).

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The same limitation characterizes the rational choice approach that emphasizes competition between religious and political actors to explain the role of religion in politics, rendering religious ideas, norms, beliefs, and practices dependent on interests. (Rodney Stark & William Sim Bainbridge, 1985, Anthony Gill, 2007) (Rodney Stark and William Sim Bainbridge. *The Future of Religion, Secularization, Revival and Cult formation*, University of California Press, 1985, Anthony Gill, 2007) (Anthony Gill. *The Political Origin of Religious Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, 2007) While there is some truth to this interest-based approach, it does not address that interests also derive from cultural settings and *longue durée* processes of socialization; interests do not emerge solely and primarily from individual preferences. In this respect, I challenge my students by making them aware that: “explanations that reduce power struggles between states to attributes of human nature are guilty of the psychological reductionism that explains social relationships in terms of libidinal drives ‘without history’” (Linklater and Mennell 2010, 401). In other words, the interest-centered approach is problematic when it assumes that interests emanate from the individual as a discrete unit, operating independently from his or her social environment.

One can argue that the work of constructivists on religion and international relations seems like the antidote to the aforementioned pitfalls, especially scholarship that focuses on relations/interactions between different categories of actors and structures (Jackson 2006; Hurd 2008). No doubt that this kind of research efficiently helps students deconstruct major concepts that they often take for granted (e.g. secularism, the West). Those students however express some frustration when we discuss such work, because it does not allow them to go beyond ideas and identities, which is only one aspect of the politicization of religion. Another problem of the constructivist approach is that it can devolve into primordialist assumptions about reality. For example, constructivists have rightly demonstrated that concepts like secularism or religious freedom carry meanings that originate in the European and/or American history. (Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 2008), (Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations*, Princeton University Press, 2008) (Patrick Taddheus Jackson, 2006), (Patrick Taaddehus Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy: German Reconstruction and the Invention of the West*, University of Michigan Press, 2006).

Yet, this is only part of the story. Such concepts were not simply imposed on other populations outside the West. In fact, history shows that they were actively endorsed by local elites. Deconstructing these concepts without analyzing their new meanings when embedded in other cultures, has the consequence of reifying them and seeing cultures outside the West as solely rejectionists, which in itself does not reflect their religious and political reality. Additionally, while constructivists deconstruct political concepts or ideas, they do not automatically do the same when it comes to religious ones, which seem to remain unchanged from one historical period to the other. For this reason, I show to students that the opposite is also true, i.e. that Western concepts of political community, power, and sovereignty have redefined religious ideas and doctrines. For example, we read materials on the changes in religious thinking within the Catholic Church brought by the end of the war of religions and the rise of the Westphalian system (e.g. Cavanaugh 2009).

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To facilitate students' understanding of such transformations, we discuss cases in which the political influence of religion cannot be limited to beliefs. For example, in my work on political Islam, I have demonstrated that religious belonging is more relevant than belief by showing how the adoption/adaptation of the Western category of religion by the postcolonial nation-state has introduced unprecedented collusion between Islamic belonging and political belonging (Cesari 2014; 2018b). The distinction between believing, belonging, and behaving has been made by sociologists to understand modern forms of religiosity (Davie and Hervieu-Léger 1996). These three dimensions refer respectively to beliefs, religious practices, and collective identity, and have long been defined as, collectively, part-and-parcel of a person's religiosity. Nonetheless, multiple sociological surveys show the increasing disjunction of these three dimensions, and apprehend this disjunction as modern forms of religiosity. Thus, a person can believe without automatically behaving and belonging, can belong without believing or behaving, or can behave without believing or belonging. Instead of exploring these three dimensions of religion at the individual level, I challenge my students to make use of them to highlight which one affects political identifications, behaviors, or ideas, and vice versa.

To do so, I combine the input of religious studies with analysis of political institutions and social rules, to overcome the modern/traditional and secular/religious dichotomies. In discussing the doctrinal changes in religious thinking and how they are intertwined with the building of political identities and institutions, my purpose is to demonstrate how religious concepts of community, law, and tradition are continuously interacting with political ones. It is important that my students understand how social and political effects of religious practices and beliefs do not operate solely through individual beliefs but through a larger social context at the level of an entire community or population. For example, Smith (2017) has shown how regional differences in the United States increase or decrease people's religiousness, independently of the religion they practice (see also Smith, Sikkink, and Bailey 1998). The context then, through downward causation from the social to the personal level exerts influences on the people living in it, independently of the religious characteristics of the people.

Generally, to make my students of politics, especially in the United States, aware of a more complex understanding of reality is an uphill battle because they are trained to work with the opposite, i.e. a parsimonious approach to reality, with the assumption that simplification allows generalization. Specifically, research in political science operates on breaking down any phenomenon at a certain moment in time into specific dimensions to identify variables and causality between them. My goal is not to dismiss the variable-centered analysis altogether, since it has its virtue to compare data; it is instead to provide my students with the contextualized knowledge essential to operationalize variables and interpret

results within an historical framework of analysis (for such a collaboration see Cesari and Fox 2016). For example, in my work on religious nationalism in Israel and Turkey, I have investigated the continuous interaction of state and religious institutions, ideas, and actors to make sense of the current tensions between religious and political belongings and practices (Cesari 2018a). In other words, how can we identify local meanings of how to belong, behave, and believe religiously and politically, and show that these locally meaningful definitions and processes can be mapped onto existing survey data to provide better explanations? In this respect, the rich scholarship of religious studies is a resource we can tap.

In sum, teaching religion and politics requires being conversant not only with the theories of international relations or political science in general, but also with the scholarship of religious studies. In this respect, eclecticism in the classroom is key to utilize different theories depending on the issue at hand. Most of all, it entails being ready to question some of our most engrained conceptions (secular versus religious, politics versus religious) in order to make sense of the ways religion operates in contradictory ways and diverse contexts.