

The Failed Assumptions of Some Social Scientists on the Role of Religion in International Relations

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Abstract

After decades of overwhelming domination of certain conventional actors in international relations religion is now a contending actor in international politics. In fact, religion is increasingly becoming essential element in domestic affairs of the state level as well as in the international affairs of contemporary global politics. This research therefore, is an attempt to display the failed assumptions of Western social scientists on the role of religion in international relations.

Keywords: Role of Religion, Failed Assumptions, International Relations, contemporary global politics, Some Social Scientists

1. Introduction: Prelude to Religion and International Relations

The role of religion is to allocate values, through spirituality, promote good life in this world and in the next world, and interpret values through the divine or documented scriptures. Unless it is ignored or rejected religion pursues normative, ethical, ideal and pragmatic approaches. Religion also emphasizes universality, borderlessness and most of times cooperation. Likewise, international relations is a system that attempts, to allocate and define international values through the state interest, political power and moral legitimacy. Nonetheless, the core texts that international relations scholars and students read in the late 1990s such as Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations* and Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics* in fact provide nothing momentous to understand the function of religion in politics. Instead they both wave their readers off of religion and do not mention it all. Power and how it was distributed among states was the key to explain international relations. (Monica Duffy Toft, 2010) All else was in the service of that power. When religious ideas entered the fray, they were viewed as instrumental means employed by statesman to gain power or to eliminate political enemy. (Monica Duffy Toft, 2010)

That position of the 1990s is shifting and current scholars of international relations such as Monica Duffy Toft, (Monica Duffy Toft, 2010) are of the opinion that religion has resurged in political influence across the globe, helped by the very forces that were supposed to bury it: democracy, globalization, and technology. (Monica Duffy, 2011) Another factor is that, despite the claims of some Western scholars that religion is exclusively irrational and violent; its political influence is fostering democracy, reconciliation, and peace. In fact Hamas came to power through democratic means. There are three schools of thought in international relations, namely; the idealist, the behavioralists and the realists schools of thought. Take the idealist school, for instance, which is normative in approach and focuses issues from ethical perspectives. This school also promotes the notion that human action should be based on knowledge, reason and compassion. The idealist thought, like religious thoughts are humanitarian, legalist and moralist. The ideals of this school are similar to that of religious leaders as it promotes good governance, justice and coexistence among societies.

In general theorists of international relations hypothesize the role of religion in four approaches. The first is to work within the classical paradigms, exploring the ways in which religion has sometimes decisively shaped the states system, defined its constitutive units, and animated their interests and outlooks. (Alexander Wendt, 1999) The second approach, most nearly represented by Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, holds that religion has become so central that it should supplant existing paradigms and become the main prism for thinking about international politics. (Alexander Wendt, 1999) In this paper I will concentrate on this approach. The third approach argues that the role of religion in international relations has risen in recent decades as a form of populist politics in the developing world following the discrediting of secular political ideologies; an approach that some scholars term it as "relational-institutional" theory that draws on both realism and constructivism in thinking about the competitive interplay of discursive frames and transnational networks in an anarchical setting. (Daniel H. Nexon, 2009) The fourth and final approach evades definitive commitments to look at more focused hypotheses in which religion is a causal variable. But religion is no longer a causal variable rather a consistent actor of international affairs.

In many parts of the world, religion is becoming a mobilizing political force for people; it also works as an instrument for social, economic and political change; as religious based ideologies and movements seek political power through diverse methods. On the definition of religion, it has been argued by number of scholars that Western social scientists have immense problems to define religion, for the obvious reason that, majority of them have so long regarded religion as an alien component in the arena of international studies. Hence, they have failed to comprehend the essence of what constitutes religion. (Brian S. Turner, 1991) Here I am not going after the philosophical and sociological dimensions of religion in search of definition and in fact that is not the scope of this paper, instead my role is to investigate the role of religion in international relations. It is universally acceptable that religion acts as a human *weltanschauung*, gives perspective to the individual and shapes one's culture, as it controls how one see the world. Similarly people's norms, attitude and behavior are generally derived from their religious norms. In fact, ethnicity nationalism and tribe take back seat when the nerves of religion are on. This is obvious in the current state of affairs in international relations which is mostly on religious lines. What happens in Bosnia will shape the public opinion of Sudan and Afghanistan and no stronger bond of brotherhood in human history than that of religion.

Similarly, nothing gives man unified identity, regardless of their race, other than religion. Indeed, world conflicts spread more on religious lines in many parts of the world. Religion affects the state policies, foreign affairs and decision-making process in many nations in the world today. In the Muslim world for instance, religion is seen as the basis of legitimacy for state policies, its international dealings and its relation with other states. Similarly, in the historical development of international relations and early political systems including the Chou Dynasty (1122 B.C.-221 B.C.), the Greek City-State (800 B.C.-322 B.C.), and the Muslim Caliphates and Dynasties (610-1924); religion was always a major component. Religion was also, and still remains, an essential element in issues that govern international relations such as security, humanitarianism, intervention, human rights, terrorism, war and peace and political movement. So, if religion is the beliefs, attitudes, emotions and behaviors that constitute man's relationship with the power and principles of the universe; international relations is the strategies or the studies of power, state attitude, promotion of equilibrium, preservation of peace and prevention of war. My contention is therefore, religion had, and will still play a crucial role in international relations. In effect, one could argue that the future of international system seems to be emanating from religious influences.

2. Religious Attitude in Global Stage

This section, as part of our quest to ascertain the role of religion in international relations, investigates religious attitudes in global stage. In today's world, religion and spirituality are taking different directions globally across countries and regions. Authorities on the subject are often of the opinion that the significance for the future of religion and its social impact appear strikingly different when seen from the global rather than a country by country or regional standpoint. This is very much true that religion today may not be well understand in isolation instead it should be seen in a worldwide context or in a scale of global society. The point here is religious problems faced by Europe, or South America may have originated from North Africa, for instance, or any other place in the world, and that is exactly the meeting point of religion and international relations.

As a matter of fact religion in our present times is associated with globalization. Major religions in the world depict international outlook, they see themselves international, global and influential actor in international society. Indeed the Qur'an advocates Islam as a universal religion; a message which communicates the meaning that Islam is for mankind at large and humanity in its entirety, regardless of time and place. Similar views are held by other universal religions including Christianity. Another aspect of religion is that it is an institution that existed from the emergence of the first man and it seeks to advance and expand without borders. On balance, it is a physical expansion of the geographical domain of the universe. In the history of the universe and mankind, the power of religion had influenced political actors and players as well as economic factors of the world. Mahjabeen Khaled in an article entitled *Globalization and Religion* presented in a Conference on Globalization, Conflict & the Experience of Localities, narrates the views quoted below:

...globalization evolved since Alexander the Great in 325 B.C., when Chandragupta Maurya becomes a Buddhist and combines the expansive powers of a world religion, trade economy, and imperial armies for the first time. Alexander the Great sues for peace with Chandragupta in 325 B.C. at Gerosia, marking the eastward link among overland routes between the Mediterranean, Persia, India ad central Asia. Following this, in the first century, the expansion of Buddhism in Asia makes its first appearance in China and consolidates cultural links across the Eurasian Steppe into India, thus, establishing the foundations of the Silk Route. From the period of 650-850 A.D" (Mahjabeen Khaled, 2007)

Religion also influences civilizations and changes the natural discourse of destiny. Islam has successfully done that to the Arabic peninsular and still incessant to influence nations across the world. Religion therefore has been a carrier of globalizing tendencies in the world.

“...There was a vast expansion of Islam from the Western Mediterranean to India; thus, this not only saw to the adoption of the religion of Islam, but all the cultural, social, and educational aspects brought about by the Islamic Civilization. An example of this would be the Ottoman Empire in 1300 AD, which spanned from Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East; this created the great imperial arch of integration that spawned a huge expansion of trade with Europe” (Mahjabeen Khaled, 2007)

Likewise, the history of Christianity can be understood in parts as early effort to create global network of believers. Today most popular religions are global in nature and they create new boundaries, breaking ancient frontiers of nations, culture and language. Indeed religion changes the ethnic origin of societies. Egyptians and some other Muslim nations are referred today as Arabs but we know in reality like other arabized societies Egyptians obtained their Arabic identity through the process of Islamization. David Lehmann argues that religion as the globalizing force seems to change the location of the boundaries in two ways. The first one, which he calls it cosmopolitan, brings old practices to new groups in new settings, the other variant, the global, extends and intensifies transnational links among groups similar in their practices, and creates networks and sometimes even tightly-knit communities of people straddling vast distances and also straddling non-religious boundaries of language, ethnicity and race, such as Pentecostals, the pietism Muslim revival movement Tablighi Jama'at and ultra-Orthodox Jewish sects and cultures. (David Lehmannhttp)

3. Religion and International Relations

Religion is a domain of its own whereby international relations is a domain in social science. The thesis of this paper is that religion, although sometimes rejected or denied by western social scientists, remains a force in our modern political scenario. This is contrary to the old belief that religion as a primordial factor has no role in the political sphere or in the modern world; and that is what I call the failed assumptions. Those who have rejected the influence of religion, mainly western political thinkers, focused on western nations, where the influence of religion is not that obvious, and for that they wrongly assumed that the influence of religion on the eastern world will disappear as it picks up with the process of modernization. It seems however, modernity failed to lead to the demise of religion, or replace it; instead, it led to its resurgence not only in the East but also in the West, particularly in the Muslim World. My argument revolve around the notion that the more religion is ignored, undermined or misplaced in the study of world affairs the lesser we are nearing a solution to the political problems of the world. I further argue that international relations as an essential field of study in political science, is a direct product of religious wars and its subsequent repercussions.

Although history is reach of evidences that support the aforementioned contention, when evaluating the role of religion in international relations, one finds no theory of international relations that addresses religion and on those uncommon occasion that has been raised it is to the negative. KabalKova argues that:

“Religion tends to be characterized as fundamentalist, extreme, radical or military.” (Vendulka KabalKova, 2000)

Other Western scholars also complain that religion is being treated sub-class or an outsider in international relations:

“The rare cases where international relations literature deals with religion, it is presented as a secondary aspect of the topic.” (Jonathan Fox et al., 2004)

In the theories and literature of international relations is a forgotten subject:

“Western social scientists did not give religion much weight in their theories and in fact often predicted its demise as a significant social and political force...this is a tendency strongly rooted within the field of international relations than in the rest of the social science.” (Jonathan Fox et al., 2004)

However, religion must be accepted and studied within international relations. Those who subscribe to this theory list various reasons on why religion was not taken serious in the study of international relations. First, social science has its origin in the rejection of religion and international relations evolved from this premise adopted by the western social scientists. Second, international relations is western centric. Third, the study of international relation is heavily influenced by behavioralism school of thought and the use of qualitative methodology. (Jonathan Fox et al., 2004) These three reasons point to the fact that western research on social sciences is not compatible with religion as it adopts approaches that are not in temperament with religion.

Simply put, the western modern thought could not understand religion as it is secular and it could not measure religion as it is quantitative. It has been argued by contemporary western social scientists that most of the western social scientists of the last three centuries including Durkheim, Marks, Freud, Comte, Nietzsche and Weber were of the opinion that enlightenment would overtake and subsequently replace religion. (Appleby R. Scott, 1994) The same scholars have contended that Nietzsche's "God is dead", "is a thesis that refers to the loss of credibility in Christianity and loss of commitment to absolute values". (Brian S. Turner, 1991) In fact Weber believed that secular ideologies will replace religion as the basis of legitimacy in the nineteenth century society". (Brian S. Turner, 1991) However, as the world ushers into the epoch of twenty-first-century paradigms of modernization theories in social sciences and theories of secularization seem to be overpowered by the least expected enemy, religion. What is ironic is that up to the 1980s western social scientists were still subscribed to the notion that societies will become secular and that will lead to advanced political modernization and in turn religious legitimization will be replaced by democracy and its institutions. (Jeffrey K. Hadden, 1987) The contrary took place. Modernization and secularization theories are directly responsible for the resurgence of religion let alone causing its demise. (Jonathan Fox et al., 2004)

4. Turning Away from the Failed Assumptions

Sizable numbers of western social scientists have changed their mind. They now tend to agree that in the Muslim world efforts on modernization have rather caused religious counterattack against the west and its secular political ideologies. In these Muslim nations religion is seen as the main legitimizing political force, western political agenda is associated with colonialism and western lifestyle is interpreted as valueless and foreign; creating sphere of clash and conflict.

"in many parts of the third world efforts at modernization have failed...modernization has undermined traditional lifestyle and community values and morals... modernization allowed both state and religious institution to increase their sphere of influence...political participation and modern communication allowed religious groups to export their views more easily." (Jonathan Fox et al., 2004)

Christianity diminished in Europe after the Enlightenment for the one reason that European societies view it as an obstacle to progress, reason and science. It has never been the case in the Muslim world. But in all over the world, religion is becoming more relevant day after day across the globe. It attempts in many ways to shape national identity of various nations. Steve Bruce recorded that:

"Between 1945 and 1960 just over the worlds civil wars were to some large degree formed by religious... identity... between 1960 and 1990... the proportion rose to three quarters... the conflict in Azerbaijan or Palestine or Indonesia or Nigeria result from religious affiliations..." (Steve Bruce, 2003)

He further explains:

The Iranian revolution of 1979 changed fundamentalism from a unit in the currency of protestant ideological argument into universal unit of political analysis... the United State, was affected by its own fundamentalist movement when the moral majority, Christian voice and other conservative Christian Pressure groups became active in electoral politics, and then came 11 September 2001." (Steve Bruce, 2003)

I tend to agree with the proposition that 11/9 forced western intellectuals, social activists and political leaders to revisit the role of religion in the international arena. The bombing of the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington D. C. became a watershed event that was absolutely impossible to deny the role of religion. The rareness of 11/9 lies in the fact that it has devastated the western political and economic institutions more than any other time in history. Yes there were some other events, such as the bombing of WTC in 1993 but the casualties and scale are far different. It was impracticable for scholars of international relations, a field that has evolved and focused national and international security and developed mainly out of World War I and II and other related events, to ignore the link between the two.

After all what those scholars who have ignored religion in international Relations forgotten is that in the history of Europe religion had been an important entity particularly following the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century. Christianity, although sidelined, also remains influential state religion and provides identity for European nations. One may speculate that the rejection of EU of Turkey's entry is mainly associated with the fact that EU is a Christian Club. Similarly in the history of European political identity, religion played a crucial role as the doctrine of sovereignty was rooted in divine norms and the monarch had divine rights to rule his subjects. In addition to the aforementioned, the origin of the nation state system that had emanated from Westphalia is closely linked to the protestant reformation. History also records that until the enlightenment religion was the basis of political legitimacy in Europe and the right to govern was from God to the Church.

Today, European governments derive political legitimacy from the people through the constitution and through the political process or democratic representation. But with this too religion plays its role. On the main street of Europe the voice of those who sideline Islam is gaining support. The referendum on the minarets in Sweden is one latest example of this argument. The more Muslims become Islamic the more likelihood the Christians and people of other faiths feel being less religious and this will in turn influence the domestic and international affairs of the state be it in Europe or elsewhere.

5. World Conflicts Emanate from Religious Grounds

In the past, state used to be the only actor in international relations, over the period of time or in the passage of history, however this position has changed. Actors are now multifaceted as more different types of actors are gaining prominence. Religion is one of these actors that may overtake state to influence the future directions of international relations. In most civil unrests, international conflicts and political clashes religious influence is the core component alongside with ethnic and economic differences. As a matter of fact, the three decades of war in Northern Ireland was religious in nature. The Roman Catholics Nationalist Community was seeking union with Ireland whereby the Protestant Unionist Community was fighting to remain part of United Kingdom. The Ogaden revolt against the Ethiopian regime for decades is largely conceded based on religion; the one hundred percent Muslim Ogaden region intend to secede from Christian ruled Ethiopia. Cyprus conflict falls under the same category. This island is partitioned mainly because of the conflict between ethnic Greek Christians and the ethnic Turks Muslims.

Back in Africa, the Cote d'Ivoire conflict is relevant, after the 2000 election the government security was said to have targeted Muslim civilians openly and explicitly on the ground of their religious beliefs. In this tiny nation the overwhelmingly majority of the victims came from the largely Muslim north of the country. In East Timor, Muslim Indonesian military systematically targeted Christian independency leaders after the former annexed to East Timor. As a result, Christian leaders as well as civilians were exterminated. We all know how the Serbian Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics carefully planned that program of genocide and religious cleansing against the Bosnian Muslims. India sporadically has to manage various conflicts resulting from the Hindus-Muslims or Christians and Sikhs minorities on religious grounds. In the province of Orissa the Hindu extremists occasionally attack the Christian minority civilians. In the state of Kashmir, the conflict is mainly due to the fact that Pakistan, predominantly Muslim nation and India, mostly Hindu are involved on religious grounds. In Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Christians are up against the ethnic Albanian Muslims, also in Macedonia ethnic Albanians are targeted for their belief. Nigeria is most of the time on fire as Christians in the south battle Muslims in the north. Conflicts based on religion are also evident in the Philippines, Russia, Thailand and Sudan.

6. The Islamic Revival and International Relations

The current events in international political affairs and the increasing role of religion in international relations are both directly related to the revival of Islam among Muslims. From the 1950s to the present throughout and across the Muslim world, from Syria, Somalia and Sudan, to Egypt, Bosnia and Nigeria, to Jordan, Iran and Turkey, to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Chechnya, to Iraq and Saudi Arabia; Islam as one of the major religions of the world influences international relations. No agreement however, among scholars on the definition and factors that caused Islamic revival or resurgence. Some blame colonialism; others lament the attitude of the secular governments ruling Muslim societies. Others argue that Muslims are not adequately committed to Islam, while others blame Israel and American foreign policy toward Muslims. Nonetheless attempt should be made to define it. Contemporary scholars of Islamic studies, or at least those who write in English among them, such as Mohammad Ayoob, John Esposito, Hillal Dessouki have contributed to the idea of giving meaning to the phenomenon. According to Dessouki Islamic revival is a political activity in the name of Islam. (Ali Hillal Dessouki, 1982) Meanwhile Mohammad Ayoob talks of the idea of regaining power and position by Islamists. (Mohammad Ayoob, 2008)

In effect, the rest of the definitions revolve around these two definitions. I shall argue that the Islamic revival or resurgence or reawakening embodies a broader meaning than that mentioned above or that of fundamentalism, extremism and terrorism. It is a call of the return of Islamic values and its ethical political systems. It is a call upon all Muslims to reevaluate themselves, their institutions, their educational system, political and social systems; it is a renewal of religious thoughts, cultural purification, Islamization of attitudes and return to pure Islamic teachings. It is a call of reorientation to understand the Qur'an so that Muslims could climb the hierarchy of success among nations in the world, compete in knowledge and command respect. It is a search for the true power that Muslims lost, it is a search for the original position of the Muslims in this world (*Khaira ummatin*), it is an attempt to correct and shape a perfect worldview (*Tasawur Islami*), it is a comprehensive agenda.

Nonetheless, I am aware and I do agree that some of the orientations, by some Muslim groups are devoid and outside the mainstream teachings of Islam. With all the talk on the methodology of who is right and who is wrong, the main street, young and ordinary Muslims are with that type of revival which I have described above. I therefore submit that, the future development of international relations will mainly revolve around the Islamic revival for the following reasons:

1. More Muslims are joining this school of thought and majority of them are of young age,
2. Muslim population around the world is increasing,
3. The number of Muslim immigrants have swell into what use to be “Christian land” such as Europe and United States of America,
4. Western culture and values have failed to redirect or penetrate the minds of Muslim youth,
5. The economic development which was meant to modernize the Muslim world supported by Western nations is not gaining momentum,
6. Governments in Muslim nations are becoming weaker by the day,
7. The spread of nuclear weapons into numerous hands is in the predictable future,
8. The hatred by Muslim youth toward America and Israel is of its highest in centuries,
9. More Muslim nations are militarily becoming powerful, take Iran as an instance.
10. The containment of Muslim militants or formulation of rehabilitation mechanism is proving intricate,
11. As the world political map changes economically and politically America will in the near future sit down with equal partners in the international arena and that scenario may further consolidate the power of the militant groups,
12. The secular governments in the Muslim world are in power only because of the protection provided by the west.
13. If fair and free elections are conducted in the Muslim world today, the Islamic parties will come to power,
14. The number of young Muslims joining the radical and far-reaching Islamic groups, such as al-Qaeda, alshabaab and Taliban is doubling every year since the invasion of Iraq,
15. Muslims perceive the destruction of Iraq as annihilation of Islamic civilization and that has left a deep-seated resentment in the minds of many Muslims.

The core of these submissions emanates from the consensus of the international relations theorists. We all remember Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis which holds the view that religion has emerged as one of the primary causes of conflict in international relations in 1993. Huntington predicted the likelihood of religion replacing the nation-state as the primary source of international conflicts. Here we may relate to his clash thesis. Huntington’s theoretical framework of his clash thesis is based on two seismic, as he calls it, indicators or fault-lines between and among various civilizations; among them Islam. It was only after 11/9 that the values of Huntington’s predictive thesis were somehow appreciated and critics who earlier thought the thesis was full of exaggerations had come to terms with the essentials of the thesis. Huntington divided the world into eight major civilizations and the Islamic civilization as one of these civilizations was solely defined on the basis of religion. Huntington also grouped all Muslims under that civilization regardless of their background, localization, territorial, physical traits or nationality. In Huntington’s view, three types of conflict will take place; first, state conflict; second, international fault-lines conflict; and third, domestic fault-lines conflicts. (Samuel P. Huntington, 1996)

Our concern here is on the Huntington’s argument that Muslim immigrants in many western countries will cause political tensions since the Islamic civilization, according to him, is the most violent of all civilizations with its bloody borders. (Samuel P. Huntington, 1996) This sweeping statement is so persuasive for many in Europe or rather in the west. Nonetheless religions are not bloody, man is and Huntington erred on this assumption. But he was right on the assumption that religion, be it Islam or others, will play a role in the international arena. In actual fact, after almost two decades his predictions became apparent, as Europe developed irritations with the existence of mosques and Muslim women dress. France banned the *burqa* as commission was set to deliberate on a move to bar Muslim women wearing the full veil. Prior to this law President Nicholas Sarkozy declared earlier in December 2009, that “burqa is not welcome in France as it is a symbol of women’s subservience which cannot be tolerated in a country that considers itself a human rights leader” (AFP, 2010) It seems to me, Europe has taken the definition of religion contained in Henry Fielding who said in his definition of religion that: “by religion I mean Christianity by Christianity I mean Protestantism, by Protestantism I mean the Church...” (Henry Fielding)

7. Conclusion

This study is a journey to enrich the volume of knowledge on the role of religion in international relations. Both religion and international relations are associated with peace, war, values, human nature and violence. The bible in its fourth chapter narrates man’s first murder, the Qur’an talks how the sons of Adam involve in a bloody conflict and other religious scriptures including the Bhagarad Gita discuss topics of the same nature. Throughout the history of humanity it seems, violence and war remained part of human conditions. Although, the text of the major religious scriptures advocates peace, in reality, we are living in a world that peace is seen respite. War, terrorism and violence - aberrant conditions- now dominate our world. The role of religion is obvious in these activities.

Having highlighted the above, one must also add that we are at pivotal moment in the history of the relationship between religion and international relations. On the one hand, Muslim governments will remain under political duress from the West to eliminate religion in Muslim public life, education and politics and on the other hand, radical Muslim groups will persistently play the religious card to influence public opinion in both Western and Islamic worlds. However this approach will only consign religion on a popular stage in the international arena.

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