Persistent Orientalisms: the concept of religion in international relations

Robert M. Bosco

Department of Political Science, The University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA.
E-mail: Robert.bosco@uconn.edu

This article sets recent scholarship on religion in international relations (IR) into the context of contemporary debates in religious studies. When this is done, an important internal tension comes to light between conceiving of religion as a 'sui generis' phenomenon and acknowledging that 'religion' is a constructed, historically contingent category. This article argues that when seen in a geopolitical context, such tensions reveal a number of familiar Orientalist conceits in recent IR theorizing on religion. Thus, the study of religion in IR should take the matter of how 'religion' is defined more seriously.

Introduction

Since 11 September 2001, a refreshing wave of literature on religion has emerged by and for scholars of international relations (IR). Much of this literature succeeds in bringing to light an alternative history of IR by placing the theoretical development of the discipline into the wider context of sociological processes of secularization in early modern Europe (Thomas 2005) which in turn influenced the formation of IR's 'secularist' conceptual assumptions (Philpott 2002). Hatzopoulos and Petito, for example, write that a 'rejection of religion … occurred' in IR theory 'because the main constitutive elements of the practices of international relations were purposely established in early modern Europe to end the Wars of Religion' (2003: 1). From a European perspective, the principle of *cuius regio eius religio* codified this 'jettisoning of religion' from the practice of international politics and in time 'our thinking about the international was imagined as a process based on the suppression of theological concepts and their replacement by new, areligious categories, above all sovereignty' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 12). But things have changed; 'a global resurgence of religion' is now 'transforming our understanding of international relations' (Thomas 2005: 1).

There are multiple ways of approaching the topic of religion in IR. In the interest of clarity it is useful to explain these with some familiar domestic analogies. One way of approaching the topic is to think about the tensions between religious and secular. Whether Muslim women should be allowed to wear headscarves in public schools in France, whether the Ten Commandments should be posted on state property in the United States, or whether religious perspectives on scientific matters should be included in public school textbooks are all examples of how the boundaries between religious and secular are contested. It is possible to see this theme in a global perspective, and to ask how the boundaries between secular and religious are contested and constructed on the international political scene. This project is currently underway (Hurd 2008; Hallward 2008).

Another way of approaching the topic is to enquire into the politics of how religion is defined in the first place. Again, here, we can illustrate with some well-known domestic analogies. Current debates in the United States about public funding for groups designated as 'religious', or in the United Kingdom over religious education, or about whether groups such as Falun Gong in China are to be considered religious or not — and the political consequences that attach to this designation — attest to this phenomenon. Thus far, however, the politics of definition of religion in the wider context of international politics remains largely unexplored. In much recent work on religion and IR, the consequences of defining religion in different ways receive little sustained attention (although there are moves in this direction; e.g. Byrnes 2006; Lilla 2007).

This article attempts to open a conversation among IR scholars about the politics of defining religion. It argues that recent efforts to define religion in the context of IR threaten to reproduce a number of Orientalist ways of thinking. Given this, this article recommends shifting the focus of the study of religion in IR away from the analysis of religion and to an analysis of the theoretical and practical consequences of different definitions of it. At issue are these questions: does it matter for the theory and practice of international politics how religion is defined, or whether, when, and by whom a phenomenon is classified as religious in the first place? I suggest that it does for two reasons.

First, by not devoting enough attention to the problem of the politics of definition, much recent scholarship on religion in IR threatens to reproduce a host of Orientalist conceits. This is especially the case when certain visions of Islam inform definitions of religion. One can detect this, for example, in the ways in which sensitivity to the imbrication of power and knowledge is absorbed by IR scholars and applied to the construction of religion as a category inside of 'the West', but curiously, a similar critical approach is not applied to the very definitions of religion that are used to understand the very 'worldwide' or 'global resurgence' of religion that underpins much of this

scholarship. For outside and beyond 'the West' — particularly in the Middle East, and especially with regards to Islam — a mode of understanding religion predominates that often equates the religious with the phenomenon of violence (or alternatively as a benign ethical system that contains the seeds for future peace or world order, itself a familiar anti-Orientalist cliche), feverish or irrational beliefs, primordial loyalties or identities, or reading a 'global resurgence of religion' as a desire to protect pre- or anti-modern social formations from the encroachments of the modern secular state. Such characterizations are notable in part for the way in which they suggest — often explicitly — that the *present* of Islam resembles the West's *past*. To Western audiences, current interventions into the international political scene under the banner of religion threaten a return to the high tide of religious-based violence in early modern Europe, an episode from which both liberalism and secularism have promised an escape. Such readings only further solidify the notion that a contest between the West and radical religious movements threatens to cycle international politics back to a condition from which the West has already emerged. Curiously, this way of thinking about religion in the international sphere persists even as the very designation of the West comes under increasing scrutiny, as for example when traditional 'others' to Latin Christendom increasingly find themselves within the European project (Nancy 2003; Nexon 2006: 258).

Second, various understandings of what is to count as religious and what will not, and the very act of defining a phenomenon as religious in the first place are relevant to the practice of international politics. Various understandings of religion may act as important mechanisms by which the complex machineries of empire and hegemony in the international system craft their legitimacy, influence how foreign policy is conducted and how international conflicts are perceived, impact how the concept of 'international development' is understood and applied, or finally, play an important role in how larger geopolitical dynamics are imagined by scholars and policymakers alike.

This article begins with a brief review of how religion is understood in some recent IR literature and moves on to show how, in both subtle and not so subtle ways, Orientalism persists in IR theorizing on religion. In a more constructive vein, I then build on insights from Religious Studies to demonstrate how a greater appreciation for the politics of definition of religion can help to shift the study of religion in IR away from its persistent Orientalisms to an approach that helps us to appreciate that religion, like the secular, is not a neutral category in international politics. I then suggest that the politics of definition of religion are particularly relevant for IR scholars in matters of foreign policy, empire, and in the field of International Development. My overall aim is to demonstrate that a more critical approach to religion in IR, inspired by insights from Religious Studies and more sensitive

to the politics of definition of religion, may be better suited for understanding exactly what it means to 'take religion seriously' in IR.

Defining Religion in IR

IR scholars devote increasing critical attention to the various modes of construction and deployment of the secular (Hurd 2008; Hallward 2008), yet exactly what is meant by religion in the context of IR theory and practice and the potential implications of various ways of understanding this term receives relatively little sustained attention in many studies of religion in IR. This is curious given that in the opinion of one scholar, 'bringing culture and religion back into IR is part of a wider effort to bring ideas, values, and more broadly, ideational factors back in' to the study of IR (Thomas 2005: 69). Earlier reflections on the return of culture and identity in IR theory, however, took matters of definition and basic ontology seriously. Part of the purpose behind theorizing the return of culture and identity in IR theory is precisely to move questions of definition and ontology to the centre of IR thinking, and interdisciplinary research is considered indispensable for doing this (Lapid 1989; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996: 3–11). As the complexion of international politics becomes more 'fluid, hybrid, and polyethnic', identity and culture must be redefined accordingly, and so two new 'motifs', the 'perception of multiplicity' and 'social construction' are taken from their original contexts in social theory and elaborated upon in the context of IR (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996: 3–11). This is a risky venture, for if scholars appropriate notions of culture or identity without redefining them to reflect increasing pluralism and complexity in the international arena, the result is something like Huntington's 'clash of civilizations', where an initially promising move away from state-centric assumptions and towards matters of culture and identity terminates disappointingly in a 'reified world of pregiven cultural agents with inherently conflicting interests' (Lapid and Kratochwil 1996: 8).

For IR scholars concerned with theorizing culture and identity, matters of definition are very important indeed, for concepts must keep pace with empirical developments. If they do not, interpretations arise that only simplify identities, exaggerate threats, or give encouragement to antagonistic discourses already in popular circulation. How concepts are defined and understood thus have a direct relationship to both the theory and practice of international politics, and the concept of religion is no exception. The following section gives a sense of the various definitions of religion that have been employed thus far in IR scholarship, highlights their multiple tensions and ambiguities, and hazards some preliminary thoughts as to what the implications of these various definitions of religion might be.

Religion in IR: tensions and ambiguities

In 'The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations' Daniel Philpott argues that on September 11, the 'Westphalian Synthesis' — a particular structure of political authority founded on the displacement of 'religion' from the public, political sphere — was shaken by 'a figure whose identity is public religion' (Philpott 2002: 67). Yet how are we to understand this 'public religion'? For Philpott, religion is defined as 'a set of beliefs about the ultimate ground of existence, that which is unconditioned, not itself created or caused, and the communities and practices that form around these beliefs' (Philpott 2002: 68). Philpott is here searching for a conception that is more 'embracing and open-ended' than the conception of religion in its 'modern' sense, where it denotes 'private, propositional beliefs' (Philpott 2002: 68). Philpott's notion of religion as 'a set of beliefs about the ultimate ground of existence … which is unconditioned' and 'not itself created or caused' is meant to distinguish religion from other, more secular ideologies that also inspire devotion and 'feverish belief', such as 'Marxism, Nazism, nationalism, and witchcraft' (Philpott 2002: 68). The implication of this definition is that although Marxism, Nazism, etc. may *look* like 'religions' because of their outward manifestations it is the *object* of this 'feverish belief' that distinguishes what should be considered 'religion' from what should not. That *object* is an uncreated or uncaused ground of existence. Like religions, Marxism or nationalism may also inspire people to 'worship, kill, die, idolize, genuflect', but they do not 'encompass beliefs about the ultimate ground of existence' (Philpott 2002: 68). Philpott further reinforces this definition of religion when he rejects other approaches, such as the functionalist one, which on Philpott's reading holds that religious ideas 'are nothing more than the product of underlying economic, organizational, technological, or other material forces' (Philpott 2002: 93). The purpose, then, is to identify and protect what is distinctive about religion to allow it to function as an explanatory variable in international politics.

Philpott's notion of religion as 'a set of beliefs about the ultimate ground of existence' is a similar sounding formulation to that in another recent contribution. Eric O. Hanson, in *Religion and Politics in the International System Today* maintains that what is needed is a 'general definition of religion' relevant for the 'explanation of the influence of religion on politics' (Hanson 2006: 70). Hanson defines religion as 'that pattern of beliefs and activities that expresses ultimate meaning in a person's life' and goes on to claim that 'of course secularism, nationalism, or even atheistic materialism could also constitute religions if adherents practiced them as non-theistic faiths of "ultimate concern"' (Hanson 2006: 71).

We have then two definitions of 'religion', which employ similar terminology but in fact classify the phenomena very differently. For Philpott, 'religion' is 'a set of beliefs about the ultimate ground of existence' that *precludes* Marxism and other ideologies we often consider to be 'secular' (Philpott 2002: 68), while for Hanson, religion is 'that pattern of beliefs and activities that expresses ultimate meaning in a person's life' and these can be taken to *include* other 'secular' political ideologies (Hanson 2006: 73).

A number of ambiguities arise from such definitions of religion. First, for Philpott, if ideologies such as Marxism, nationalism, and secularism itself may produce the same outward behaviours that religion does (killing, genuflecting), the only thing that demarcates religion as a distinct category is the *object* of belief, in this case, belief about an ultimate ground of existence 'that is not itself created or caused'. What is the difference, then, between this ultimately subjective orientation to the object of belief and the 'modern' (private propositional) notion of religion that Philpott wishes to distinguish it from? Belief in an ultimate ground of existence 'that is not itself created or caused' can only be known not by outward behaviour but by subjective orientation, and thus this conception overlooks the fact that it does not at all follow that recent interventions into the public sphere under the banner of 'religion' signify that the individuals or communities staging these interventions take religion as the 'ultimate ground' of their existence, or even that the practices, texts, or pronouncements of their respective traditions are necessarily the 'central sphere of concern' of their lives. Consider for example one scholar's comments on Islam: 'Islam provides shelter to a wide range of commitments, weak, strong, and uncertain. On balance, Muslim identities are structured less by religion than social circumstance: locality, ethnicity, class, occupation, or language' (Pasha 2003: 118). One can easily imagine other voices from equally well-known traditions expressing similar sentiments. It seems then that the 'definition' of religion as 'ultimate concern' or something similar in fact accomplishes the very thing it presumably set out not to do: impose a substantive definition of religion on other people and other places.

More importantly, however, such a definition of religion has direct consequences for one's reading of geopolitics. In a post-September 11 context, a conception of religion based on 'ultimate concern' or 'ultimate meaning' seems designed to communicate to the reader that 'religious' interventions in the global public sphere — particularly *violent* ones — simply must have behind them 'ultimate' convictions, and such ultimate convictions are the explanation for such violent interventions. Belief in an ultimate, uncaused, and uncreated ground of existence is designed to explain the actions of 'radical Islamic revivalism', especially in its violent forms, for IR scholars must 'come to understand that these (radical Islamic) groups are defined, constituted, and motivated by religious beliefs, beliefs about the ultimate ground of existence'

(Philpott 2002: 92). From this perspective 'religion' must be a force of such power that it would lead an individual or group to sacrifice their own lives and those of others, and so a definition of religion is needed to capture such uncompromising sincerity and commitment and help account for acts of unfathomable 'religious' violence. Thus the very *definition* of religion is linked to the phenomenon of violence, particularly violence from 'radical Islamic revivalists' outside and against the (secular) 'West'.

If, on the other hand, *pace* Hanson, 'religion' as 'ultimate concern' may include phenomena such as secularism or nationalism it is unclear how IR scholars are to preserve 'religion' as an independent variable (as Hanson wishes us to do). For how exactly does it come to pass that something 'religious' becomes a matter of 'ultimate concern' over other competitors presumably available in any complex society such as race, class, nation, region, ethnicity, or others? More importantly for the estimation of the dynamics of international politics, if religious and secular shade into one another, one wonders in what sense 'the West' was ever really *secular*, and what then becomes of the notion that a global resurgence of 'religion' can be explained by *religious* resistance to the authority and global expansion of the modern, *secular* state?

Other approaches to the definition of religion in IR only compound the ambiguity. In a recent edited volume, *Religion in International Relations: the Return from Exile*, Petito and Hatzopoulos explicitly state their concern to avoid a 'modernist-instrumentalist' interpretation that regards religion as nothing more than a malleable device whose political manifestations can be reduced to modern sociological factors (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 7). They argue that such an approach leads to a 'simplistic, dismissive attitude toward the contemporary resurgence of religion in world politics' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 7). As in Philpott, then, one detects a wish to protect religion and keep the phenomena distinct to preserve it as an independent force with its own internal dynamics and explanatory power. Given this, what definition or conception of 'religion' can help us understand the 'return' of 'religion' from its 'exile' in a more meaningful way?

Religion in International Relations: the Return from Exile 'emanates from a normative reaction toward existing studies on religion in international politics' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 2). This normative reaction lies behind the editors' intention to resist associating 'the resurgence of religion' with 'the danger of fundamentalist politics' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 2). Thus the project recommends 'thick engagement' with 'worldwide religious traditions' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 3). To move toward such engagement, Hatzopoulos and Petito opt for a more contextualized and nuanced conception of religion, different from the liberal 'invention' of religion as a set of privately held doctrines or beliefs, for liberal theories of the separation of religion and politics 'foreclose the centrality of religion in the

everyday practices of "really existing communities"' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 9). The editors go on to write: 'the paradox is that the growing importance of issues of religious identity and alterity in world politics has not corresponded to a growing attention to the *multiple understandings of religious belief articulated by religious thinkers themselves*;' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 5; emphasis mine).

When we enquire, however, as to what is gained by this contextual approach to 'the world's religious traditions' and the normative concerns that underpin it, what we find is that the allowance of *interpretive freedom* to 'religious' individuals or communities to express their 'multiple understandings of religious belief' is in fact constrained by a surprisingly strict binary frame: 'is religion ready to stand on the side of a "global peaceful ethos" and not of a "global war" as the "clash of civilizations" thesis predicts?' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 2). There is a tension here between eschewing a general definition of religion to make way for multiple or heterodox interpretations and a barely concealed demand that 'religion' be ready to stand on the side of a 'global peaceful ethos'. The appeal to a future global peaceful ethos thus downplays difference, heterodoxy and dissent as creative counterforces to the establishment of a liberal internationalist vision of a future world order underpinned by ecumenical coexistence. That various individuals or groups — who may be considered heterodox or orthodox from the viewpoint of a given religious tradition, or may not even be considered 'religious' at all — assert difference through grievance or critique is pushed to the side in favour of a quintessentially liberal vision of a future global peaceful ethos. This approach is problematic, however, for not only do attempts to harness religious traditions in this way often end up seeing religious traditions as monolithic entities, but it should be a matter of concern for IR scholars whether ecumenical religious dialogue can ever fully rectify the variety of injustices that continue to be meted out by states, international institutions, or nonstate actors.

In a review of this volume, Jeffrey Haynes writes that 'neither the editors nor any of the contributors seek definitively to define what religion *is* nor how it might usefully be operationalized' (Haynes 2004: 455). This is problematic for Haynes because if there is no agreement among IR scholars on what is meant by 'religion', how can we be certain that the book's contributors are all 'talking about the same thing, understanding it in the same way?' (Haynes 2004: 455). Yet Haynes' critique somewhat misses the mark, and the way in which it does so bears directly on my argument. The issue is not that IR scholars need to agree upon a definition of 'religion' in order to study it, but that the complexion and dynamics of international politics look very different depending on how 'religion' is defined.

Nor is the solution, to take up one final example, to abandon the notion of 'religion' altogether because trying to define the concept is just too

complicated. In *Bringing Religion into International Relations*, Fox and Sandler refer to the sociologist of religion Brian Turner who 'demonstrates ... that religion is one of those terms that is extremely difficult to define' and go on to cite with approval Turner's observation that 'most definitions attempt to deal with existential issues that are not really relevant to social scientists trying to examine the impact of religion on society' (2006: 2). Taking this difficulty to heart, Fox and Sandler adopt a behaviourist approach that 'does not rely on a specific definition of the concept' of religion (Fox and Sandler 2006: 2). Rather, they 'accept that it exists and influences human behavior' (Fox and Sandler 2006: 2). The logic then runs as follows: 'religion' can 'legitimize or delegitimize just about any policy or action', and so to make the question of religion 'simpler to manage' in international affairs,

> the key is to focus not on what religion is, but what it does ... that is, rather than addressing the more philosophical issues involved in defining religion, it is easier to stress what role religion plays in society. This has the advantage of avoiding difficult philosophical and existential issues while focusing on the core issue of the social sciences, human behavior. (Fox and Sandler 2006: 176)

Could this appeal to simplicity and parsimony, and the simultaneous desire to avoid 'philosophical and existential' issues signify an unwillingness to engage with the deeper implications of the authors' own claim that the events of September 11 constituted a *religious* 'intrusion of the non-West into the West' that was 'more profound than any previous event' (Fox and Sandler 2006: 21)? Now, if what is meant by 'philosophical and existential issues' are questions such as whether religion is a fundamental, *a priori* category in the human psyche, whether there is an *essence* of religion beneath a plurality of manifestations (*a la* Eliade), or whether the variety of theological or religious traditions in history are *true* or not, then the authors' point is well taken. It remains to be substantiated, however, how the various roles that religion plays in a given society can be consistently divorced from the question of what is meant by 'religion', who exactly defines this term, and how.

Persistent Orientalisms

Following Edward Said (1978) Orientalism divides the world into the Occident and the Orient (or 'the West' and the 'non-West') with little or no ambiguity. It seeks to reduce the complexity of multiple worlds taken to be 'outside' of the Occident to a simpler and thus more comprehensible whole. The Orient, the other, is unknown and hence unpredictable, irrational and so always potentially dangerous, profoundly complex and so in need of experts to

capture it, distill its features, and explain it both to itself and to Occidental audiences who, tantalized, hunger for knowledge of it. For Said, Orientalist discourse was and remains remarkable in part for its ability to take ever new and more subtle forms and yet persist through time. Orientalist discourse is durable and persistent because it is produced over and over, and this 'continued investment' is what makes Orientalist discourse a 'grid' that 'filters' knowledge, and ultimately allows Orientalist statements, images, and representations to proliferate out into the general culture, a process that eventually obscures their complex relationship to power.

The contemporary study of religion in IR is captive to a host of Orientalist figures of thought. In IR, Orientalist discourse most often takes the form of conceptualizing and defining religion very differently in what are perceived to be Western and non-Western contexts. Thus Scott Thomas notes that 'the concept of religion was invented as part of the political mythology of liberalism' (Thomas 2005: 21). According to this 'mythology', the early modern state used the invention of privatized religion 'to legitimate the transfer of the ultimate loyalty of people from religion to the state as part of the consolidation of its power' (Thomas 2005: 25). As 'religion' came to signify an inner, private relationship with a transcendent god, religious individuals or communities were to keep their passions and concerns out of the public, political sphere. Our contemporary liberal notion of religion as a set of privately held beliefs or doctrines was therefore 'a product of statebuilding' necessary for the rise of both the modern state and international society (Thomas 2005: 24). For Philpott, IR's traditional neglect of religion has much to do with the arrangements reached at Westphalia, in the sense that religion should be exiled from the public, political sphere both domestically and internationally. On 11 September 2001, however, the 'Westphalian synthesis' was 'shaken by the fitful rumblings' of 'public religion', that is, 'religion that is not privatized within the cocoon of the individual but that dares to refashion secular politics and culture' (Philpott 2002: 67). Finally, in his article 'Religion and International Relations after "9/11"', Jeffrey Haynes notes how the successful development of 'modern political, economic, and social systems … depends on the continued "privatization" of religion' (Haynes 2005: 400). The notion that religion should be understood as a matter of individual belief with no relevance for domestic or international politics is thus acknowledged as a deficiency of the European trajectory and interpreted as the reason why religious — especially Islamic — movements attempt to reconstitute the political sphere.

One can see here, however, a new transposition of familiar Orientalist conceits when in attempting to capture the 'global resurgence of religion' Enlightenment notions of religion as irrational fanaticism and unreason (Bell 2006) are transformed into notions of religion as 'feverish belief', 'ultimate concern', or 'primordial loyalties' (Philpott, Fox, and Sandler). In more subtle

forms, liberal 'mythologies' of religion are replaced with communitarian ones, and religion is conceived as 'a type of social tradition', as 'religious traditions shape identity, thought, and experience' (Thomas 2005: 89). Thus 'religious traditions' are reified in the social world as culturally *a priori* producers of 'situated selves', reminiscent of the subjection of individuality to collectivity that is itself a familiar Orientalist theme, particularly when describing the Muslim world (Al-Azmeh 1993: 131).

Particularly striking are the ways in which the 'blatant intrusion of religion into the West' (Fox and Sandler 2006: 21) often summarily conceived as 'radical Islamic revivalism' are represented and imagined as phenomena from Europe's past. For Philpott, the methods and organization of 'radical Islamic revivalists … evoke those of transnational movements of Protestants and Catholics in early modern Europe' (Philpott 2002: 85). Scott Thomas' 'social definition of religion' and his presentation of pre-modern, medieval 'social understandings of religion' suggests a dialectic of *modernity/individualism/ threat vs pre-modern/community wisdom/security*, with the 'global resurgence of religion' conceived as an instantiation of the latter set (Thomas 2005: 24). After all, Thomas writes, what was 'being defended' in early modern Europe was 'a sacred notion of the community defined by religion', and this communitarian — and medieval — notion is taken up as the *definition* of religion for the larger purposes of the work, and then abstracted onto the non-West. Thus, 'most of the non-Western world', just like the pre-modern medieval and Reformation communities of the West's past 'have still not entirely made, or are struggling not to make, this transition to a modern concept of religion' (Thomas 2005: 26).

The persistent Orientalisms in IR discourse on religion thus often take the form of positing worlds that are considered to be outside of the boundaries of 'the West' — particularly the worlds of Islam — as *both* known *and* unknown, an important feature of Orientalist discourses. Orientalism is a type of thinking in which 'one tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, things seen for the first time, as versions of a previously known thing' (Said 1978: 58). Worlds outside the boundaries of 'the West' are thus 'at once something to be freshly discovered and something entirely and already known' (Prakash 1995: 206). This ability of Orientalist discourse to seamlessly appropriate new phenomena into received representations is what gives the discourse its flexibility and helps to account for its persistence over time. Such persistent Orientalism leads scholars to overlook the politics of the definition of religion, and its implications for understanding various topics in IR. Before turning to these topics, it is first necessary to engage with recent developments in the field of Religious Studies to explore what is meant by the politics of the definition of religion.

Engaging Religious Studies

Like identity and culture, religion is a category of analysis (Baird 1971). Different notions of 'religion' classify the world differently, sorting out what is to count as religious from what will not. Unlike the concepts of culture and identity, however, there has been little sustained attention given in IR to what exactly is meant by 'religion' in the context of international politics or to the wider implications of various definitions of it. Interestingly, this has not gone unnoticed by Religious Studies scholars. While acknowledging that recent international events in world politics such as 'the transformation of the international system after the fall of communism in Europe' require a 'reanalysis of the relationship between religion and politics', Lucian Leustean writes that 'studies in the literature of international relations have not fully identified an independent definition of religion' (Leustean 2005: 371). Earlier, Russell McCutcheon, an important contemporary voice in Religious Studies, undoubtedly had both scholars of Religion and other social sciences in mind when he wrote that 'the very ones yelling loudest about the need to "take religion seriously" have, so far, been the least serious in how they treat the most fundamental category in our scholarly vocabulary' (McCutcheon 1998: 56). For McCutcheon, this is cause for concern partly because as a scholar of Religion working in a critical vein, McCutcheon (and like-minded others in his own scholarly community) insists that who gets to count as 'religious' and what gets counted as a 'religion' in the first place are scholarly practices with *geopolitical* implications. Although written in 1998, prior to the post-9/11 wave of IR scholarship on religion, McCutcheon's complaint — and central contention that it matters very much how one defines 'religion' — is even more relevant for IR scholars than before.

Religion's 'Relative Autonomy'

According to an eminent scholar of Religion, lately there has arisen a 'gang' of Religious Studies scholars who, out of 'naivete', 'bad faith', or 'ignorant mischief' are hell-bent on 'destroying religious studies' and 'eliminating the study of religion from higher education' (Strenski 1998: 120). This 'inbred clique' of religion's 'despisers' — whom I will introduce later in this essay — launches 'nihilistic polemics', 'fashion statements' and 'manifestos' against the very idea that 'religion is one of those larger social realities which exist beyond anything intellectuals control' (Strenski 1998: 118). For Strenski, the offending ideas are ones like these: the category of 'religion' 'picks out nothing distinctive and it clarifies nothing' (Fitzgerald 1997: 93); 'the category "religion" has no analytic value whatsoever' (McCutcheon 1998: 56); 'religion is an ideological category' (Fitzgerald 2003: 210) or 'religion is solely the

creation of the scholar's study' (Smith 1982: xi). According to Strenski, such ideas if implemented would spell 'disaster for the study of religion' (Strenski 1998: 118). Rather, religion has 'some sort of referent'; it can be considered, for example, as an 'interactive social complex in some sort of tension with other sub-systems of a given society' (Strenski 1998: 128).

In the course of defending the relative autonomy of religion from its 'despisers', Strenski appeals to *transnational* religious phenomena. Citing the 'reinvigoration … of Muslim identity in the "modern" world', what draws Muslims from all over the world together 'across national, ethnic, class, and other boundaries is their *religion*' (Strenski 1998: 127). Moreover, Strenski appeals to Susanne Hoeber Rudolph (1997) to support his claim that 'people increasingly identify themselves today transnationally as Jews, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and so on — either over against their national identities or in some combination with them' (Strenski 1998: 131). In other words, that various communities increasingly identify themselves transnationally as 'religious' is presented as evidence against those who would argue that the category 'religion' is only an 'ideology' or 'picks out nothing distinctive' about the world.

The implication of Strenski's argument for scholars of religion in IR is that the category 'religion' has a distinct referent, and so when IR scholars write, for example, of a 'worldwide resurgence of religion' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 1) or a 'global resurgence of religion' (Thomas 2005) they are describing, not constructing, the phenomena. It is interesting that one concerned to defend religion as a distinct category should appeal to phenomena so relevant to IR, for the notion that 'religion' refers to a relatively autonomous dimension that can be demarcated, more or less, from other spheres of social life is crucial to the entire enterprise of the study of religion in IR and functions as a core assumption in this literature. For it is accepted that the 'global resurgence of religion' (Thomas 2005) is *real*; and especially after 11 September 2001, perhaps 'the discipline of international relations' is finally ready for 'inclusion of *the religious variable* into the contending paradigms of the discipline' (Fox and Sandler 2006: 1; emphasis mine).

For IR scholars, then, like Strenski, the category 'religion' really does pick out something important in the world, and that 'something' is conceived as relatively autonomous from other realms of social life. Scott Thomas writes that 'if religion is to be examined as a fundamental category … this means that one cannot get behind it to some more fundamental category such as the "social", "class", or the "economic"' (Thomas 2005: 78). These remarks approach Strenski's stronger claim that religion is something of a cultural *a priori*. In fact, much recent scholarship on religion and IR must embrace this claim in its strong form in order to avoid falling into contradiction, since it is precisely the assumption upon which this scholarship rests: thus Philpott

argues that 'inattention' to religion in international politics made IR scholars 'blind' to September 11 'not only in the predictive sense, but also in the conceptual sense … their concepts gave them little reason to think that an event like this could happen' (Philpott 2002: 81).

Enter Religion's 'Despisers'

Religion is like a shot of vodka, observes one Religious Studies scholar (McCutcheon 2004a: 165). Odourless, colourless, and tasteless, vodka serves a critical regulating function, providing 'the illusion of free choice, making possible access to a private life that is seemingly closed to the state' (McCutcheon 2004a: 165). Like vodka, the deployment of 'religion' in early modern Europe served a similar function, because 'the very public and politically useful rhetoric of privatized faith and experience proved to be a highly effective means of organizing an emergent, oppositional group intent on unseating — and thereby replacing — long established centers of political power' (McCutcheon 2004a: 167). The multiple, heterodox groups unleashed by the Protestant Reformation could in this way be controlled and 'civilized' by the emerging, sovereign state. Like vodka, then, religion is a 'category without qualities … that makes a particular world possible by allowing marginal groups to gain some sort of acceptance' if only they privatize — *depoliticize* — their beliefs (McCutcheon 2004a: 178). For McCutcheon, even in our contemporary world, debates about who or what counts as 'religious' are in reality debates over what counts as *civility*. Thus 'the odourless, colourless, and tasteless category — "religion" — is a wonderfully useful rhetorical tool that packs a significant socio-political punch' (McCutcheon 2004a: 171).

In this way, the distinction between religion/politics or religious/political maps neatly on that between public/private, for interior religious belief is seen as apolitical and 'concerned with deep issues of feeling and morality, whereas organized public action is political through and through' (McCutcheon 2004a: 173). Religion in liberal societies is thus constructed as in opposition to politics. Religion as 'real, internal, and secret' may reproduce 'the myth of privacy, the fable of the lone individual, and the illusion of free agency, all of which are necessary for the smooth workings of the modern liberal-democratic nation-state' (McCutcheon 2004a: 179). What is at issue then, is the construction of the category of 'religion' as something opposed to politics that makes it possible to 'confect the sorts of selves we call citizens who, for the luxury of benefiting from their participation in some public spaces, internalize and repress their own dissenting voices' (McCutcheon 2004a: 179). According to Tim Fitzgerald, another critical scholar of Religious Studies, 'a dominant concept of the nature of religion derives from Protestant piety' in which

'"religion" is imagined as a private faith about salvation in the other world with no direct relevance to politics or the state and freely adhered to by an autonomous individual' (Fitzgerald 2003: 211).

For this group of 'religion's despisers', then, the concept and category 'religion' exists as a 'means of classifying, and thus containing, parts of the observable world *as* religious in the first place' (McCutcheon 2004a: 176). Thus the category of 'religion' assists both scholars and politicians to 'accomplish their acts of identity formation' (McCutcheon 2004a: 171). While more traditional camps of religious scholarship may ask, 'what is religion?' Religious Studies scholars like McCutcheon and Fitzgerald are more interested in asking who or what gets classified as 'religious' or a 'religion', by whom, and why. It is these sorts of arguments that led Strenski to caution us against falling in too thickly with this 'gang' of 'religion's despisers', for the implication is that the proper subject matter of Religious Studies should be the study of the *category* of 'religion' and its various means of deployment. Scholars of religion in IR would do well to take this suggestion seriously. Indeed, second-order questions such as how phenomena are defined as religious in the first place and the implications of various definitions of religion are themselves political phenomena that cannot be overlooked.

Definitions Matter

Engaging with insights from Religious Studies suggests that along with the secular, religion is also a category that can be constructed and deployed by scholars, social movements, international institutions, and state authorities alike. Religious Studies scholars highlight how religion came to be defined as a *state of mind*, an inner, private, invisible phenomenon during sovereignty's formative periods in early modern Europe. This construction understood itself to be apolitical, though in reality it was not. Rather, this definition of religion functioned as a state ideology, deployed to transfer people's loyalties to the emerging forces of territorial sovereignty. Religion on this definition serves a political function by redirecting people's energies toward otherworldly concerns, clearing the way for the construction of obedient political subjects.

The politicization of the category of religion is not a bygone episode of Europe's past. One can see this for example in the ways in which religion is deployed in the ongoing process of Europe's search to define its self-identity, as Europe's boundaries 'are becoming more sharply defined in religious terms', and 'Islam, as it has so often been in the past, is being used once again by "Christian Europe" as a way of defining itself by placing the concept of Europe in contradistinction to the concept of the Islamic world' (Byrnes 2006: 284).

The category of religion can therefore be deployed to define the boundaries of geopolitical spaces, and this points to the continuing hegemonic role of European political authority in defining what gets to count as religion and how that category is to be deployed, as the very notion of 'world religions' or 'worldwide religious traditions' was itself a construction of the Great Powers — especially European ones — in the post-World War I period (Masuzawa 2005). I will return to this point in the conclusion to this article, but the European case suggests that the category of religion may be constructed and deployed by states and emergent geopolitical formations in the international system. How, when and by whom this is done deserves further research in the study of religion in IR.

For example, the construction and deployment of the category of the religious may be an important dimension of the ways in which empires and other hegemonic projects construct their legitimacy in the international system. If it is indeed true that the existence of 'imperial relations' changes the dynamics of international politics by shifting from interstate relations to relations among 'imperial authorities, local intermediaries, and other peripheral actors' (Nexon and Wright 2007: 262), exactly how contemporary relationships between imperial authorities and their local intermediaries may be constructed along religious lines and the role played by transnational forces in this process remains to be fully explored. The well-known strategy of divide and rule (not itself exclusive to empire) may also 'depend upon exploiting categorical differences', including those of religion (Nexon and Wright 2007: 265). One thinks here of how the British defined India's various communities on the basis of religion, or how the French deployed religion to favour Maronite Christians over Muslims in Lebanon or Catholics over Buddhists in Vietnam, as well as recent attempts by the United States to deploy the notion of a Shi'ite Crescent against a favoured Sunni axis in the Middle East. Thus, the deployment of the category of religion is indeed an important dimension of how imperial (or even corporate) power crafts its legitimacy.

IR scholars of religion would also do well to consider that both within the boundaries of states and among transnational actors, there are important struggles among various interpretations of religious traditions, what Robert Hefner has called 'rival carriers of tradition' (1998: 2), and these may matter just as much if not more for understanding the complexion of international politics than macro-theories of global religious resurgence. For such contestations over who gets to define the parameters of a given religious tradition — or what is meant by 'religion' itself — can alter the international political landscape as state-sponsored scholars increasingly vie for control with other, non-traditional authorities in a process that may result in repression, democratization, or civil war (Hefner and Horvatich 1997). Here, what counts

as religion is very important indeed; there is some dispute among Muslim thinkers, for example, whether what has been termed 'radical Islam' is really religion at all (Arkoun 2003: 38; Mirsepassi 2006). These debates suggest that IR scholars should revise their interpretation and analysis of 'religious resistance' on the international political scene. Perhaps it would be better to engage seriously with various voices from other traditions, not to discover the roots of an ecumenical vision of the future or a new definition of religion that can explain political behaviour, but to investigate how competing authorities in a variety of religious traditions currently negotiate and contest interpretations of their own traditions as well as the very category of religion itself. For debates about the meaning of a religious tradition (or who is to count as religious at all) bear directly on who is considered to have the right to contest the legitimacy of power in both domestic and international politics. There may be important tensions between civil societies and states that continue to see themselves as allied with one particular version of a tradition (consider, for example, the tensions among Haredi Jews, 'post-Zionist' Jews, and the state on the question of the scope and legitimacy of Israel's claims to sovereignty, both external and internal).

The politics of the definition of religion are also important in the arena of foreign policy discourse. Shortly after September 11, for example, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair remarked that 'calling those who carried out the September 11 attacks "Islamic terrorists" is … an insult to Islam' (McCutcheon 2004a: 169). The implication here is that those who are truly 'religious' (or truly Muslim) do not (or should not) consider their faith to be a resource for forceful intervention in the public, political sphere, and so "religion" becomes a classification 'only extended to "peaceful" and there-fore "civil" social movements that do not conflict with the nation-state's dominant interests' (McCutcheon 2004a: 169). Moreover, non-governmental groups may pressure states to define conflicts as religious ones, as in the case of Christians United for Israel and the Israel–Palestinian conflict. Defining conflicts as religious may heighten perceptions of that con-flict's intractability, and give policymakers more reason not to act. Non-governmental groups may also pressure governments to define conflicts as religious ones to justify intervention on behalf of a particular religious group, as for example when Christian groups pressure the U.S. admini-stration to intervene in the conflict in the Sudan in the name of protecting religious freedom. In a similar vein, states may also resist defining emerging transnational forms of spirituality (what are often defined as 'New Religious Movements') as 'religious' in the name of the preservation of sovereignty as an act of 'boundary maintenance' (Clarke 2006b: xvi). While it may be true that transnational religious movements challenge the sovereignty of states, demarcating which groups will be considered religious

and which will not remains an important way in which states police their sovereign borders.

Finally the politics of the definition of religion is also important in the field of International Development, as international institutions such as the World Bank employ a certain definition of religion to allow it to be linked to the meaning of 'development' itself. In this context, religion is defined as a set of ethical principles or moral values embodied in societies, communities, or institutions that can either hinder development or enhance it. Yet there is much contestation over this. Because this notion of religion has very real consequences for who gets to define and participate in development itself, many scholars prefer to use alternative formulations such as 'Faith' (Clarke 2006a), 'the Sacred' (Kumar 2003), or 'Spirituality' (Ver Beek 2000). What these various definitions do, and the various ways in which they help to determine what it means to be 'developed' is yet another important dimension of the politics of the definition of religion in the international system.

Scholars of Religion and International Development have realized this. In her examination of orthodox development discourse about religion, Leah Selinger notices that when religion has been taken into account in the development arena it is usually conceived as an inner, private, 'spiritual' phenomenon, and this conception has 'served to reinforce the existing situation of religion as marginal and subjective' and not as a 'significant feature' of development (Selinger 2004: 525). The discourse of the World Faiths Development Dialogue for example relies on an understanding of religion as personal and private, and the consequence of viewing religion in this way is that 'development can only be achieved once individuals have attained a more developed value system within themselves' (Selinger 2004: 539). Alternatively, if religion is understood as a spiritual dimension that binds all human beings together, the implication here is that the notion that experts or elites from 'developed' countries 'somehow know better than others how to define the "good life"' is out of place (Tyndale 2003: 24). Definitions of what religion is can also reinforce orthodox hierarchies of the 'world religions' at the cost of local, heterodox conception of what religion is. Indeed, when dealing with the topic of religion in the context of international development, scholars and practitioners 'have to be more on our guard about the powerful alliances being made' (Harcourt 2003: 4). Clearly then, it matters very much for the study and practice of international development how religion is defined, for different notions of religion have different implications.

These brief examples illustrate that, following the suggestion of Religious Studies scholars, there may simply *be no essential definition of religion* that can explain behaviour in various realms of international politics. Rather, the very category of religion is constructed and deployed, its boundaries and sites of

application closely kept under surveillance and contested by various forms of national and transnational authority in many areas of IR.

Conclusion

The very invention of 'world religions' and world religious traditions took place between World Wars I and II, a period in which Anglo-European scholars, internalizing a general sense of both novelty and crisis, came to feel that 'one should want to acquire, and acquire quickly, a sweeping knowledge of the multiplicity of religions in the world because a new techno-geopolitics was unfolding dramatically before one's eyes' (Masuzawa 2005: 41). Reacting to these new perceptions of global connectedness and the resultant vulnerability of Western political power, the very category of world religious traditions was born of a need to reclaim some semblance of order in, and control over, the international system (Masuzawa 2005: 41).

We can detect a reprisal of this theme in our time as many recent reflections on religion in the context of the international begin, like their post-war forbears, with an acknowledgment of sweeping global change (as when we are told that 'the global resurgence of religion confronts IR theory with a theoretical challenge comparable to that raised by the end of the Cold War or the emergence of globalization' (Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003: 3). According to this perspective, like very the invention of world religion itself, the project of 'bringing religion in to international relations' becomes less one of understanding than of predicting when, where, and why religious-based violence will occur, or discovering how to harness such volatile forces into a more palatable 'Post Westphalian' future wherein religious traditions are conceived as containing the normative content needed for an ecumenical 'dialogue of civilizations'. When IR scholars of religion enjoin us to 'take religion seriously' or 'thickly engage' with worldwide religious traditions to help foster a future world order founded on religious ecumenism, they draw on a notion of religion that was in large part a construction of the European Great Powers. As Said tried to show us, the connections between knowledge and power are often very subtle indeed.

This article has argued that Religious Studies scholars are fundamentally correct when they claim that the category of 'religion' might 'not exist as a self-evident and distinct aspect of human life and cognition' but is only 'one concept among many employed by human beings … to order and authorize experiences, behaviors, belief systems, and organizations' (McCutcheon 1997: 159). Failure to recognize this, at least insofar as the study of religion in IR is concerned, threatens to reproduce a host of Orientalist ways of thinking. Instead, IR scholars of religion should study more closely the different ways in

which the category of religion is deployed and defined in international politics. This entails shifting the focus of the study of religion in IR away from the analysis of religion to an analysis of the political consequences of various definitions of religion. Instead of leaving the politics of the definition of religion safely to other disciplines, it would be better for IR scholars interested in religion to continue their innovative work with greater sensitivity to the possibility that, to borrow a locution from one IR scholar, perhaps definitions of religion are more interesting as aspects of the political world that need to be explained than as explanations of it (Walker 1993: 6).

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About the Author

Robert Bosco received his M.A. in International Affairs from American University in Washington, DC and is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science at the University of Connecticut. He focuses broadly on the relationship between Political Theory and International Relations, and more specifically on the subject of religion in international affairs. He is currently researching parallels between Reformation/Counter Reformation political theologies and contemporary Islamic political theologies.