Teaching Religion and International Relations: Disciplinary, Pedagogical and Personal Reflections

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Conclusion: Five Challenges to Teaching Religion and International Relations

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The six contributions to this Forum provide a wealth of different and unique perspectives on teaching religion and international relations. Each essay includes a multiplicity of insightful disciplinary reflections, personal anecdotes, and pedagogical tools for stimulating learning, encouraging critical thinking, and developing positive practices and attitudes among students. Despite the diversity of experiences represented, there are a number of important challenges that—to a greater or lesser extent—we all grapple with in our classrooms. Some are quintessentially pedagogical; matters that most social scientists would face one way or another when teaching any course. Many, though, are specific to engaging with a complex and normatively charged subject like religion in the context of the modern academy, and the many, disparate, debates that animate scholarship on the sacred.

Five broad challenges, in my view, powerfully emerge from the collective contributions to this forum. First, there is a need to challenge assumptions and myths about what religion is and does. Second, the role of context proves to be of critical importance, as well as, third, the role of our own identities and beliefs. Fourth, we must confront normative issues and ethical dilemmas. And, fifth, we must be cognizant of the kind of knowledge *from* and *of* religion that we should seek to bring into the classroom. I explore each of these themes in greater depth, partly drawing on my own experience, in the rest of this conclusion.

Assumptions and Myths

As scholars, we are generally torn between two, often conflicting, impulses: the urge to *make sense of complexity*, on the one hand, and the need to *complexify common sense*, on the other. When teaching the subject of religion and international relations, it seems to be the latter impulse that we are mostly called upon to exercise. This is because students rarely, if ever, come to our courses as "blank slates" (Sandal in this forum). Given the importance of the issue, and the personal attachments and passions that religion elicits, most students tend to approach the subject with a

variety of preexisting, strongly held, opinions about what religion is and what role it does or ought to play in social and political life. Many of these ideas may be rooted in a combination of subjective beliefs, at best, and conventional wisdom (mis)informed by the popularity of Huntington's (1993) "clash of civilizations" theory, at worst. This is what Cesari in her contribution calls the "Huntington syndrome." Along the way, many of the assumptions students carry with them are often underpinned by deeply held "myths" (Cavanaugh 2009) that structure the modern, Western-centric understanding of religion itself. Therefore, as all contributors explain, much time is spent throughout our courses on unpacking and complicating students' implicit assumptions about religion (see also Schwarz 2018).

First and foremost, attention is given to highlighting the contested nature of the concept of religion itself and the complex definitional debates that surround it. Most of us in this forum seem to be loosely working from a constructivist informed perspective, rather than a strictly substantivist or functionalist one. A common denominator is our intention to expose students, using different pedagogical tools, to the role that social, political, geographical, and historical context plays in defining what religion is as a category of analysis and of practice.

Buckley, for example, is especially attentive to avoid an elite-centered approach to religion that focuses solely on official institutions and declarations, seeking to demonstrate—through an analysis of newspaper articles—the importance of what sociologist Orsi (2003) terms "lived religion." Cesari is adamant about contrasting her students' overwhelming tendency to approach religion one-dimensionally as "belief" with a more multidimensional perspective that includes also "belonging" and "behavior." Sandal takes students to different places of worship (mosques, temples, synagogues, and churches), an experience she argues "adds to their understanding of the subtleties and context in religion and religious practice." Shani faces the dilemma that in Japan—a non-Western, non-Judeo-Christian, and highly secularized society—"the concept of 'religion' seems alien and distant to the majority of people." This requires, in his case, "familiarizing students with the main doctrines of the Judeo-Christian tradition *and* Western 'secular' theories before bringing the former into the latter."

In my own teaching, I ask my students to unpack the main understanding of religion that transpires from a flyer explaining the services offered by the University of Exeter's Multifaith Chaplaincy. Working through the flyer, students come to realize how it presents a view of religion mostly as belief rather than practice, as private rather than public, as individual rather than

communal, as ecumenical rather than exclusivist, and as something that stands apart from but also can contribute to the "secular" experience of being a student. We explore why religion is represented in this particular way, highlighting the Christian and Protestant, Western and British, liberal and secular, influences at play. Understanding religion as context-dependent does not however prevent us from approaching it then as a social fact throughout the course, being attentive nonetheless to its different and complex manifestations along the lines of Laborde's (2017) "disaggregating approach."

Challenges do not end here though. Across the forum, contributors identify a number of further commonly held "myths" about religion that we seek to question and problematize in class. These include deconstructing the dichotomies that present the secular as uniquely rational, modern, and peaceful, and religion as exclusively irrational, pre-modern, and violent. Stressing how religious traditions often do not have a fixed, monolithic, unchanging essence that is either quintessentially bad (i.e. irrational, violent, oppressive) or good (i.e. a force for peace, justice, democracy), showing instead how religions are complex social entities that evolve across time and space, and which largely exhibit an "ambivalent" (Appleby 2000) character. Underscoring the need for a relational and context-sensitive analysis of religion's impact on global politics and, *vice versa*, of global politics' impact on religion, that avoids one of two extremes: either seeing faith as an all-powerful and deterministic force or conversely as an epiphenomenal and irrelevant one. Warning about the analytically and normatively pernicious "securitizing" and "orientalizing" lenses through which one religion in particular today, Islam, is generally understood and approached in world affairs.

The extent to which some or all of these assumptions about what religion is and what it does are implicitly and strongly held by students, and equally vigorously made explicit and questioned by us, is very much dependent on a variety of factors. Most of these factors are tied to the other four themes explored in the rest of this conclusion—context, identity, normative considerations, and religious knowledge—to which I now turn.

Context

Both spatial and temporal context matters enormously in shaping what, how, and who we teach. In terms of space, context presents itself most immediately in the type of university we belong to, whether it is secular or religious, private or public, research intensive or teaching focused, and so on. Universities are themselves located in different geographical settings, which vary in scale and

scope. For instance, important differences exist within countries, between large diverse cities or more rural and homogenous localities, and across the globe, whether we are located in Europe, the United States or outside the West. All of these factors influence the kind of students a university attracts in terms of their socio-economic, national, ethnic, or religious background and composition. They also matter to the extent that they impact the kind of knowledge and assumptions about religion that students carry with them and the broader cultural and ideological environment within which we operate.

Haynes, for instance, teaches at London Metropolitan University in one of the world's most cosmopolitan cities. With a highly multi-ethnic, multinational, and multi-religious student body that reflects the city's diversity, it has been imperative to Haynes that his teaching be "inclusive" about the world and its peoples, and "fair" and "even-handed" towards religious traditions. I face an opposite challenge. I teach in a research-intensive institution located in the English countryside and my students are overwhelmingly white, upper-middle class, British, and of Christian background. In such an environment, I regularly find myself having to deal not with the challenges of heterogeneity, but rather with those of homogeneity. As such, I seek to actively expose students to a multiplicity of different ways of being and thinking, attempting to unsettle many of their implicitly shared assumptions.

Buckley explores in detail how the different university contexts in which he has taught—first at Georgetown University to "cosmopolitan" and "elite" students in the nation's capital and currently at the University of Louisville a "public institution serving a wide spectrum of students" in a Southern State where Christian Evangelicals play a large role in society and politics—have shaped his approach to the classroom. Likewise, Sandal at Ohio University in the United States, actively seeks to "decolonize the classroom" making sure that her students "do not disproportionately focus on Western approaches" and "do not privilege any particular tradition." For Shani, the challenge presented by the context in which he operates is even more radical, given that "the extension of the category of 'religion,' to non-Western societies"—such as the Japanese one in which he teaches—"is problematic since the category [of religion] itself is a Western construct."

The historical context in which we convene our classes matters in fundamental ways too. Most importantly, 9/11 and the enduring fixation with terrorism, has profoundly shaped our students' interest in the subject and the political environment within which we are situated. The

tragic events of 9/11 have been a double-edged sword. While on the one hand they spurred a great deal of attention among students and scholar regarding the role of religion in world politics (Fox 2001; Philpott 2002; Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003; Thomas 2005; Hurd 2008), on the other hand such attention has not been unproblematic. First, 9/11 appeared to vindicate and breathe new life into Huntington's (1993) (in)famous "clash of civilizations" thesis. Second, 9/11 reinforced many Western and secular biases towards approaching religion in general, and Islam in particular, through a narrow security lens. As Abdelkader notes in this forum, the study of Islam and Islamic groups has unfortunately often been "reduced to a fast paced reaction to policy related questions that are particularly dictated by US national security overseers." In multiple and different ways, all contributors to this Forum seek to overcome such predicaments, among others, by exposing students to a wide range of debates and issues about the role of faith in world politics that go beyond the news headlines and their overwhelmingly preoccupation with Islam and violence.

Identity and Beliefs

Alongside the spatial-temporal context within which we operate, our own personal and professional identities are of pivotal importance too. We need to be aware of how both the religious (or non-religious) beliefs, belonging, and practices that define us as individuals and the philosophical, theoretical, and methodological traditions which define us as scholars, shape how we research and teach our subject and how our students perceive us.

Some of us, driven by particular theoretical and normative assumptions, may wish— paraphrasing Max Weber (2004)—to maintain a strict distinction between our vocation as morally grounded religious (or non-religious) individuals and our vocation as scholars pursuing objective, value-neutral science. Peter Berger (2011), for instance, insists that his theological views and scholarly endeavors could and did operate on entirely separate—at times even conflicting—tracks. During our ISA convention roundtable, Haynes explained how his students were often left wondering throughout the course what their instructor's religious orientations and opinions were.

Others, however, take a more skeptical view on the possibility of neatly separating the subjective from the objective, values from facts, and feel it is imperative upon them to "reveal" to the class their identities and perspectives as it relates to religion. This is due to at least two, often mutually reinforcing reasons. First, a critical theoretical standpoint understands knowledge production as being irremediably context-specific and situated. This is the case whether we embrace a more Marxian position in which theory is viewed as "always *for* someone and *for* some

purpose" (Cox 1981, 128), or a more reflexive orientation that recognizes that "although theories are thought to be objective, what goes into those theories and, in turn, their explanatory power is ultimately shaped by subjective, lived experiences" (Lake 2016, 1113). On the other hand, there is the notion that there is no "view from nowhere," as Shani writes in this forum. Sometimes this is projected onto us in the form of student assumptions and expectations when our ethnic, religious, or national identities do not match the context in which they live and we teach.

For both theoretical and personal reasons I therefore feel compelled, similarly to Sandal in this forum, to disclose my identity and intellectual inclinations to students. In particular, as an Italian who grew up in Catholic Rome now teaching in the United Kingdom—where Catholic-Protestant tensions and violence have been an important part of these isles' history and contemporary politics—I am well aware that my mostly British students might perceive me as a possible "Papal emissary." Hence, I spend time at the start of the course openly discussing my religious background.[1] I also ask my students to do the same, giving them the opportunity to opt out if they so wished, premising this exercise on the need to recognize and respect differences of experience and beliefs.

Some may be caught in the tensions and dilemmas that these two poles generate. Buckley, for example, explains how he has sought to strive "for objectivity in the classroom" thus avoiding as much as possible "highlighting [his] own religious commitments." Yet, since our 2017 ISA roundtable, he has come to hold a greater appreciation for how the boundaries between objective analysis and personal normative commitments may be more blurry than he had previously thought. As Buckley puts it in this forum: "there is something a bit ironic about a course that spends much of its time analyzing what Casanova (1994) termed 'public religion' involving a professor practicing privatization." Having said this, ultimately, Buckley remains apprehensive about completely breaking these boundaries down, particularly due to concerns for students' privacy and the potential perverse effects of pressing those "from smaller religious traditions … to service as the 'class representative' of their faith."

Normative and Ethical Issues

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[1] In the spirit of full disclosure, despite having a Catholic background, I think of myself mostly as a secular individual or, better, a post-secular secularist (e.g. Habermas 2006), rather than a religious person.

Our courses and class dynamics inevitably raise a multiplicity of contentious normative and ethical issues that we are all called upon to confront. It goes without saying that many of these are intrinsic to a subject that is deeply shot through with existential questions, truth claims, and value commitments; let alone one that touches upon many of the most morally and politically charged debates of our times, whether culture wars, religious freedom, the boundaries between faith and politics, or the meaning of progress. To some extent, our teaching may or may not necessarily need to weigh directly into these matters. What we can hardly do away with, though, is confronting two key issues that do require us to adopt—explicitly and implicitly—some kind of normative stance in our classes.

The first revolves around the ways in which we confront and manage pluralism both in terms of identity (religious, ethnic, racial, gender, sexual) and beliefs (religious, political, social, moral, theoretical). Assuming that we as educators and scholars all eschew some kind of fundamentalism—whether religious or secular—that seeks to do away with diversity altogether, the way we aim to foster an open and respectful environment in our classes is nonetheless likely to vary. Some may tend towards a liberal, cosmopolitan, and/or ecumenical ethic that stresses the existence of or desirability for some universally valid and commonly shared norms and understandings. The emphasis here is on focusing on what it is that unites, rather than divides. This is very much the road taken by Haynes. In classes that are likely to hold individuals from most major religious traditions and where an "orthodox Jew and a 'radical' Islamist" can be found rubbing shoulders with one another, Haynes would actively seek to promote norms and practices that fostered "diversity and global citizenship," reduced "stereotypes and identity-based tensions," and promoted "intercultural harmony and social justice."

Others, instead, may adopt an approach that views difference between peoples and religions as deep and often incommensurable, while nonetheless simultaneously stressing the need for tolerating and respecting, at minimum, or understanding and appreciating, at best, this plurality. Such a commitment may be found in a variety of philosophical and theoretical perspectives more sensitive to the particular than the universal, including realism, communitarianism, and post-colonialism (for an example of this latter perspective, see Shani in this forum). In my case, I am quite sympathetic to such a sensibility, having found in my research that while some religious norms may be translated into liberal values, others are likely—despite all efforts—to continue to clash with liberal understandings of politics (Bettiza and Dionigi 2015).

Overall, it is important that whether we take one or the other stance, we are mindful of their more extreme and pernicious manifestations. These are, on the one hand, certain forms of unreflexive and dogmatic (liberal) universalism, and on the other hand, an idle (cultural) relativism. Partly speaking to these concerns, Haynes candidly ponders a paradox in his own teaching when he asks whether "teaching 'religion and international relations' should deliberately seek to foster and inculcate liberal values among students?"

The second normative and ethical challenge which confronts us revolves around the boundaries we set between what is good or bad knowledge and what are acceptable or unacceptable arguments. We all certainly wish to generate lively debates in class, build critical thinking in our students, and passionately support freedom of expression. Yet, these well-meaning goals can take us only so far. For instance, when does a legitimate critique of Islamism, Israel, the Christian Right, or the Pope's involvement in politics become, respectively, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, secular fundamentalism, or radical anti-clericalism? When does highlighting the particularities of one religion become "othering"? When does a comprehensible desire and attempt to generalize become a problematic exercise in essentialization? In short, where do we set limits, step in, and invite our students to think *differently* or even discipline them to think *correctly* about a certain issue?

Sandal, for instance, asks her students to reflect on the global political implications of religious interpretations and manifestations "without passing judgments." Yet some judgments will inevitably be passed. Which will she allow to be aired freely in class and which ones will she seek to actively challenge? Abdelkader finds that a fine balance always needs to be struck "that does not treat Islamic activism as an exclusive phenomenon, and that does not avoid addressing its particularities and its specificity." Still, where is she prepared to draw the line between these two poles? Buckley is blunt with his students that "comments hostile to or disparaging of particular religious traditions … are not consistent with our classroom mission." Based on which criteria would he evaluate a comment as "hostile" or "disparaging"? What if some hard truths or deeply held moral beliefs may always sound hostile and disparaging to some? There are of course no clear-cut answers to these questions. Having said this, we should probably be more cognizant of how far we are willing to let speech be "free" and thinking "independent."

Knowledge About and From Religion

The fifth, and final, theme emerging from the forum relates to the kind of *religious knowledge* and *social scientific knowledge about religion* we expect from our students and aim to bring into the classroom. The issue here is not just what Orsi (2011, 11) labels the "insider/outsider question"; namely, whether a religious tradition or the religious world is best or only understood by a faithful practitioner, or instead can be understood by someone external to that tradition or with no faith at all. Both insider and outsider perspectives may bring their own advantages and disadvantages, as both Buckley and Cesari note when discussing some of their students' blind spots towards religion.

Common sense suggests that students taking our courses—even though our classes are taught chiefly from an international relations and political scientific perspective—would benefit from possessing some knowledge of and about religions. Beyond basic religious literacy, however, significant questions emerge about how much religious knowledge should be brought in the classroom and, especially, from where. The issue is particularly complex when we approach religious knowledge in the form of a more sustained engagement with texts, beliefs, and theologies. At first sight, it would seem paradoxical and improbable to study religious actors and their behaviors in world politics without taking meanings and ideas seriously. Yet a variety of intellectual currents, rooted in specific philosophical and theoretical debates that animate both the social sciences in general and religious studies in particular, warn us not to take them *too* seriously.

If we can study politics in general and agents' behavior in particular by focusing on interests and rational calculations—rather than ideas, identities, culture, or norms—then our students would not need to know much about a religion's sacred texts, teachings, or political theology.[2] Others, situated in more sociologically-oriented milieus like Cesari, warn against focusing exclusively on religious declarations, texts, and theology on their own, stressing the need instead to understand them in relation to their geographical, historical, institutional, and political context. At the same time, a further tendency has emerged towards de-emphasizing the social relevance of faith and belief in favor of stressing instead religion as lived experience or practice (e.g. Orsi 2003; Asad 2011).

Complications do not end here. If we think that religious beliefs and interpretations matter and require space in our courses—and we remain mindful of contextualizing them to avoid essentialization—new questions immediately emerge. For example, what counts as a (legitimate) religious source or voice, and what does not? Abdelkader poignantly asks, "which groups and what

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[2] A point, for instance, Jonathan Fox made during the ISA roundtable's question and answer period.

understandings does one teach as 'Islam,' given that variations are endless?" Are we, as political scientists, best suited to make such judgments or should we defer to theologians, religious scholars, and faith authorities? These dilemmas become all the more thorny if we attempt to bring into the class the discourses of certain religio-political extremists. If we assign Osama Bin Laden's *fatwas* to read (as I do), are we endorsing him—even implicitly—as an authoritative, although reprehensible, Islamic voice? Further ethical and security considerations may crop up, particularly in European and American contexts where much emphasis is on "preventing" and "countering" radicalization by policing the kind of extremist content that individuals consume and engage.

Another dilemma we face is how far do we draw exclusively from the discipline of international relations and political science when we teach about religion. A multidisciplinary approach that combines a range of fields including sociology, anthropology, law, history, philosophy, area studies, religious studies, and theology seems to be the norm among the contributors to this forum. This is so for a variety of reasons.

First, international relations is a relative newcomer to the study of the sacred. Other disciplines have engaged for centuries, if not millennia, with religion's role in our personal, social, and political lives, and thus regularly prove to be invaluable resources. Moreover, international relations' underlying "Westphalian presumption" (Thomas 2005), which assumes that religion is best kept within the domestic sphere otherwise chaos ensues internationally, makes the discipline generally inhospitable to the study of religion, or, alternatively, disproportionally preoccupied with its more violent manifestations. This also explains why many in this forum, myself included, opt out of using the disciplinary terminology of "international relations" in our course titles, preferring to define the field more broadly as international, world, or global politics instead.

Second, a number of contributors worry about the extent to which the positivist epistemology and quantitative methodology that dominates international relations, especially American-based international relations, provide a useful entry point into the study of religion. Cesari, for example, explains that in an effort to make her students "aware of a more complex understanding of reality," she has to introduce history and processes in order to go beyond, or at least complement, standard social scientific approaches that value a "parsimonious approach to reality, with the assumption that simplification allows generalization." Similarly, Abdelkader notes how approaches that seek to "measure" religion and provide "large-N studies" of Islam and Islamism, often do not give enough space to the specificities of its objects of investigation, force

Islam and Islamism into preconceived ideological and methodological straightjackets, and overlook historical and geographical differences.

Third, a multidisciplinary approach to the study of religion has important educational, normative, and political merits of its own. It helps avoid "parochialism," according to Sandal, while Haynes argues it encourages "young people to steer away from … exclusivist thinking." Even more radically, Shani suggests that religion "affords us an opportunity to question the universal claims of social science" as such. Hence, for Shani, the study of religion can productively lead both to questioning the "secular assumption" that "analytical claims should be prioritized over normative claims" in the social sciences, as well as to opening up space for "the articulations of different worldviews or cosmologies," which can truly make "IR more *global*."

Conclusion

In this concluding essay, I sought to tease out a number of common themes and challenges that, to my reading, vividly emerged from the multiple perspectives represented in this Forum. My intention certainly has not been to offer the last word on this subject, but rather to provide an opening for further reflection and discussion on teaching religion and international relations. As we seek to raise new generations of students, scholars, and practitioners sensitive to the complex role that religion plays in today's post-secular age, there is no time more pressing than the current one to be debating these important issues.

Acknowledgments

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