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

Gregorio Bettiza

University of Exeter

Deina Abdelkader

University of Massachusetts Lowell and Harvard University

David T. Buckley

University of Louisville

Jocelyne Cesari

University of Birmingham and Georgetown University

Jeffrey Haynes

London Metropolitan University

Nukhet Sandal

Ohio University

and

Giorgio Shani

International Christian University

Abstract: The study of religion and international religions has witnessed an exponential growth in recent decades. Courses and programs exploring the complex entanglements between faith and global politics have likewise mushroomed around the world. Despite this ferment, reflections on teaching religion and international relations have so far lagged behind. This forum seeks to remedy this general silence. It brings together a diverse range of scholars from a multiplicity of national, religious, methodological, and theoretical backgrounds who teach across a variety of different geographical settings including North America, Europe, and East Asia. Contributors reflect on three broad themes. First, how do we engage with the contested character of religion as a category of analysis and practice, and with the multidisciplinary nature of its study? Second, how does the context within which we operate—be it geographical, cultural, institutional, or historical—influence and shape who, what, and how we teach? Third, how do we address the important and, at times, contentious personal and ethical challenges that our research and teaching on religion and politics inevitably raises in the classroom?

Resumen: El estudio de la religión y de las religiones internacionales ha sido testigo de un crecimiento exponencial en las últimas décadas. De igual manera, los cursos y programas en los que se exploran los entrelazamientos entre la fe y la política mundial han proliferado en todo el mundo. Pese a esta agitación, las reflexiones sobre la enseñanza de la religión y las relaciones internacionales han quedado, hasta el momento, rezagadas. En este foro se apunta a poner fin a este silencio generalizado. En él, se reúne a diferentes académicos de una gran variedad de contextos nacionales, religiosos, metodológicos y teóricos que enseñan en distintos entornos geográficos, incluidos América del Norte, Europa y Asia del este. Los colaboradores reflexionan sobre tres grandes ejes temáticos. En primer lugar, ¿cómo interactuamos con el controvertido

carácter de la religión como categoría de análisis y práctica, y con la naturaleza multidisciplinaria de su estudio? En segundo lugar, ¿de qué manera el contexto —ya sea geográfico, cultural, institucional o histórico— en el cual operamos influye y moldea a quiénes, qué y cómo enseñamos? En tercer lugar, ¿cómo abordamos los importantes y, en ocasiones, contenciosos desafíos personales y éticos que nuestra investigación y enseñanza sobre religión y política inevitablemente plantean en el aula?

Extrait: L'étude de la religion et des relations internationales a connu une croissance exponentielle au cours des dernières décennies. Des cours et programmes décortiquant les relations complexes entre la foi et la politique internationale ont également proliféré dans le monde entier. Malgré cette effervescence, les réflexions sur l'enseignement de la religion et des relations internationales se font toujours attendre. Cette tribune cherche à répondre à ce silence général. Elle réunit plusieurs spécialistes de nationalité, religion, méthode et théorie différentes qui enseignent dans une grande variété de pays en Amérique du nord, Europe et Asie de l'est. Les contributeurs réfléchissent sur trois grands thèmes. Premièrement, comment abordons-nous le caractère contesté de la religion en tant que catégorie d'analyse et de pratique ainsi que la nature pluridisciplinaire de son étude? Deuxièmement, comment le contexte dans lequel nous agissons – qu'il soit géographique, culturel, institutionnel ou historique – influence et façonne les personnes à qui nous enseignons, la matière que nous enseignons et notre méthode pédagogique? Troisièmement, comment abordons-nous les problématiques importantes et parfois contestées, personnelles et éthiques que nos recherches et notre enseignement sur la religion et la politique ne manquent pas de soulever chez nos étudiants?

Keywords: religion, international relations, global politics, teaching, pedagogy

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Introduction

GREGORIO BETTIZA

University of Exeter

With the onward march of modernity, the world was supposed to become ineluctably secular—or so, over the past two centuries, the vast majority of social scientists assumed, if not even hoped. Yet the world does not seem to have followed the teleological path towards modernity that secularization theory had assigned to it and which secularist ideologies had dreamed of. Various forms of religious fundamentalism, terrorism, nationalism, and identity politics have emerged across most traditions and regions of the world breeding new forms of intolerance and violence. In parallel, religious actors and communities are at the forefront of many of the most pressing battles against poverty, inequality, discrimination, and climate change in the context of a global capitalist system that appears to have spun out of control. States are ever more consistently seeking to promote international religious freedom, support interreligious dialogues, and engage with faith-based actors in order to solve many of the world's most pressing issues and intractable conflicts.

In an international system where religions seem to be persisting and thriving in multiple and complex ways, and their powerful entanglements with social and political dynamics at the local and global levels are being felt by millions of people everywhere every day, social scientists have become increasingly disenchanted with theories positing humanity's progressive disenchantment. Scrambling to make sense of our present condition, scholars have invariably defined it in a plethora of ways: "God's revenge" (Kepel 1994), the "desecularization" of the world (Berger 1999), the

emergence of "multiple modernities" (Eisenstadt 2000), a supposed "clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996), or the dawn of a "post-secular" age (Habermas 2006).

It is within this social, political, and intellectual context that over the past decades, the discipline of international relations (IR)[1] has witnessed an exponential growth in research on religion.[2] Considerable soul searching and reflection has taken place over the years as to why international relations has tended to empirically neglect and under-theorize religion, how best it should approach the subject, and whether faith can seamlessly be integrated within international relations' existing theoretical and methodological frameworks. Or, alternatively, whether a serious engagement with the divine and the sacred requires the complete re-thinking of the philosophical and normative foundations on which the discipline rests (Kubálková 2000; Philpott 2002; Hatzopoulos and Petito 2003; Thomas 2005; Haynes 2006; Hurd 2008; Snyder 2011; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011; Sandal and Fox 2013).

Against this backdrop, undergraduate courses and Master's programs dedicated to the study of religion in comparative and global politics have been proliferating around the world. Yet, little reflection and guidance exists to this day in the literature on how to navigate the complex waters of approaching this subject in the classroom. As Sandal in her contribution to this Forum finds, a Google search for "teaching religion and international studies" or "teaching religion and global politics," yields no results, while a search for "teaching religion and international politics" or "teaching religion and international relations" will bring up only three results each.[3]

The present forum, which emerges from a roundtable organized at the International Studies Association Annual Convention in Baltimore in 2017, seeks to remedy this general silence by bringing together a canopy of experiences. These include those of established and emerging scholars in the field of religion and political science/international relations from a multiplicity of national, religious, methodological, and theoretical backgrounds, who teach undergraduate and postgraduate classes across a variety of geographical settings including North America, Europe, and East Asia. The type of courses being taught also varies, some approach religion from an

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[1] International relations is hereby understood not exclusively as a sub-field of political science concerned with (peaceful or violent) interactions among states, but more broadly as a field attentive to a multiplicity of transnational, international and global actors, processes, and relations.

[2] For a useful overview of the field of religion and international relations, see Bettiza (2016).

[3] This dearth of reflection does not afflict only international relations, but multiple other disciplines. Quite notable are a series of recent "conversations" around teaching that *The Immanent Frame*, a leading blog on religion in the social sciences and humanities, has begun to publish (*The Immanent Frame* 2017; 2018).

international relations/global politics perspective while others from a more comparative one, some focus on religion in general while others on one tradition in particular—especially Islam.

The pedagogical challenges of teaching religion and international relations are many, as one can expect. Contributors reflect on three broad themes. The first of these revolves around the category of and knowledge produced about religion. The very subject and object that we teach in our classes, i.e. religion, is itself a highly contested concept. In what ways, therefore, do we as teachers go about addressing, if at all, the continued and at times acrimonious debates about what constitutes "religion" (and, potentially, also its antonym the "secular")? Moreover, this very same subject and object of inquiry requires bridging multiple disciplinary boundaries, including bringing into our classes insights from sociologists, anthropologists, philosophers, theologians, and religious studies scholars who have thought longer and harder about religion than political scientists/international relations scholars have. This inevitably begets the question: how do we go about navigating the challenges of interdisciplinarity in the context of a disciplinary age?

A second set of issues pertains to how the context within which we operate—be it geographical, cultural, institutional, or historical—influences and shapes how, what, and who we teach. In particular does it matter whether we teach in North America, Europe, or Asia; in a mostly secular or religious cultural context; in a research-intensive or teaching-intensive university; or before and after September 11, 2001? If so, in what ways does context influence our practices, and how do we approach our students differently depending on the multiple different contexts we simultaneously inhabit?

A third set of issues revolve around a range of personal and ethical considerations that the topic of religion raises. Etiquette notoriously suggests that one should avoid talking about religion and politics in polite company. The assumption, not unfounded, is that these subjects are too intimate, emotionally charged, and contentious to be discussed in public settings without incurring into controversy and possibly conflict. Scholars, like those of us in this Forum who teach both religion and politics (broadly understood), however, inevitably do away with such conventions in the classroom. As a result, a number of conundrums emerge: How far, for example, should we seek to appear objective and neutral, or actually reveal our own subject-positions—especially religious/non-religious identities and beliefs—to students? How do we approach political and religious diversity in the class? Following on this, how do we manage potential tensions that may arise when treating particularly sensitive issues and debates, including the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, the clash of civilizations, or religious freedom? Although a key aim of education is to develop students' ability to think critically, there are often some intellectual boundaries that—implicitly or explicitly—get enforced in the classroom around what constitutes (in)appropriate discourse. Should we be setting any boundaries and, if so, which ones?

A multiplicity of different perspectives along with important areas of overlap emerge from this forum, where each contributor reflects in a frank and thoughtful manner upon his/her own experience. Abdelkader, for instance, identifies a number of "quagmires"—rooted in particular ideological and methodological assumptions—that she seeks to explicitly overcome when teaching courses on Islam and international relations, including the tendency to singularly approach Islam as an irrational and violent force. Buckley's contribution, instead, explores how the university and geographical context within which he teaches, not just particular intellectual traditions, considerably impact what his students think and how he approaches the classroom. Cesari highlights the importance of bringing the wealth of knowledge from religious studies into her political science classroom and moves beyond the propensity to approach religion as a rigid, de-contextualized, and de-historicized, set of beliefs.

A key concern for Haynes, who teaches in a cosmopolitan city like London, is to find ways to manage productively the world diversity—including religious—that he and his students encounter in the micro-cosmos of the class. Sandal gives an insightful panoramic of her own "global" approach to teaching religion, at the core of which lies a profoundly self-reflexive attitude centered on making her own identity and experiences explicit to students. Last, but certainly not least, Shani reflects in important ways on what it means to teach religion "outside the West" and, I would add, beyond a generalized focus on the Abrahamic faiths which marks most other interventions. In a concluding piece, I seek to bring these multiple voices together by highlighting five broad challenges to teaching religion in political science/international relations that emerge from this forum as a whole.

During his tenure as President Barack Obama's Secretary of State, John Kerry was fond of saying that if he were to go back to college he would probably major in comparative religions. A sense that faith matters today in world affairs more so than ever, despite multiple (premature) pronouncements of its death, makes the study of religion and international relations especially important at this historical juncture. This forum emerged precisely in response to these pressing needs. Rather than seeking to provide any definitive answers, though, we hope to stimulate a lively discussion about this complex subject. Let the conversation begin!

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