



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Religion and its Practice in International Relations

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## ABSTRACT

The religious ideas, institutions, and actors have been increased considerably both in numbers and influence around the world, and the world is witnessing the “post-secular age,” which has offered wider space for religion. Besides, an optimality of religion in national and international affairs has also created multiple problems. Extreme religiosity in a number of countries has led to religion-based violence, which is more prevalent mostly in economically and socially backward states. This paper highlights the historical place of religion in IR studies, and subsequent paradigm shift in the nature of practice of religion in the political domain of national regimes and international relations.

**Keywords:** Religion; International Relations; Nationalism; Nation-building; Religious Violence

## INTRODUCTION

The religious ideas, institutions, and actors have increased considerably in numbers and have influenced the world. Many so-called secular countries have also transformed their stand on religion and started adopting it as an important influential factor in the national politics. Particularly, the developing countries of Asia or the global south have strongly clung to extreme religiosity. About eighty percent of the world's population believes in the existence of God, and the number of atheists is declining substantially.<sup>1</sup> This shows that religion cannot be separated from human life, and this deep association is now a global phenomenon. Because religion is a comprehensive phenomenon that embraces emotions and feelings of human beings that deliberately affects the whole society of the universe and also incorporates socio-political and cultural dynamics. It pro-

vides a specific identity to an individual that comprehends shared beliefs, morals, ethics, and practices as well. Snyder described religion as “one of the basic forces of the social universe, not just an omitted variable.”<sup>2</sup> He believed that religious beliefs and practices shape international politics and IR theory. Therefore, given its immense significance in IR, he supported the bringing back of religion in IR theory. The word religion is commonly defined as an accomplishment of the duties prescribed by the eternal instructions or set of ethics and morals. Furthermore, the political thinker Immanuel Kant described religion as “the recognition of all our duties as divine commands, not as sanctions.”<sup>3</sup> Kant, being an idealist thinker of international relations, correlated ethics with religion that contextually develops humanity and kindness over the people.

Significantly, religion has had a strong connection with the state since ancient times, which provided moral or



ethical control over the ruler of the state, by which the ruler was assured to work for public welfare as an appellation of his duty. Some believed that the state was the creation of a supernatural power that incorporates a set of rules, duties, rights, laws, and welfare of the public. The state and religion have multi-dimensional relations that mutually influence people in the larger sphere. The responsibility of the state is to ensure accountability amidst the citizens, who follow rules and perform their duties, which further helps to maintain the socio-political structure of the state. Besides, religion has a broader objective to generate humanity in the minds of people, which help to develop the real entity of human beings. Shah and Philpott's observation is that "religion is older than the state, and its aims encompass not just politics but all of life."<sup>4</sup> Religion in a broader way is not only connected with human perspective, but it also affects international relations (IR) as a whole. In the field of IR, religion performs the role of "transnational actor,"<sup>5</sup> which is independent from certain boundaries that stimulate global societal organization and values. According to US IR analyst Chris Seiple's study, religion "predates the field of international relations" and "has been and will always be integral to human identity."<sup>6</sup>

In reality, religion contains the integral quality of attraction and tends to create unity among the people to establish a global village and a peaceful international order. However, the nature of its applicability in national and international politics falls into question. Many contemporary regimes around the world using religion as a means in their national and foreign policies to influence the legitimacy of the masses. In some case, religion plays the role of nation-building, while in some case practices of religion are transformed into extreme religiosity, which cause dysfunctional role at both the levels. This paper focuses on the application of religion in context of IR and an analysis of overall religious violence that has been taking place around the world due to extreme religiosity.

## RELIGION IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Between the 18th and the 19th centuries, many observers claimed the substantial declining of religion, especially in the western world. This claim was substantiated by religious historians McLeod and Ustorf (2003) by identifying four stages to explain the decline of religion (Christianity) in Europe. These include: "toleration of alternative forms of Christianity in the Reformation and post-Reformation era, from the 16th century onwards; publication of literature that was critical of Christianity during the Enlightenment era in the 18th century; separation of church and state from the 18th century onwards; and the eventual gradual loosening of the ties between the church and society in the 20th century."<sup>7</sup> In 1778, the Presbyterian General Assembly had noted "a general dereliction of religious principles among fellow citizens... and an abounding infidelity, which in many

cases leads to atheism itself."<sup>8</sup> Further, it was claimed that "Irreligion hath become in all parts of our land, alarmingly prevalent. The name of God is blasphemed; the Sabbath is profaned; the public worship of God is neglected."<sup>9</sup> And Tocqueville said that by the 1830s, "There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America." This shows that religion was valued in some countries and not valued in the larger world politics, especially Europe, which had been the epicenter of world politics.

The study of IR remained "state centric," because of which religion as an integral factor of IR studies had no significance. Jeffrey Haynes described religion in IR as "an understudied subfield of research [...] still in its infancy."<sup>10</sup> The Westphalian system of international relations, which was born in Europe at the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648, saw the establishment of the "nation-state," "national sovereignty" was "sanctified", and "religion no longer had a place."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the justification for the separation of religion in IR studies states that religion was kept away from the political power in Europe as an important mechanism in view of keeping international relations "peaceful, harmonious, and cooperative." International relations were maintained in a highly secular environment, especially during the period from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) until the end of the Cold War (1988), during which public places for religion were completely absent.<sup>12</sup> The presupposition for this appears to be that European thinking might have assumed religion had ingrained features of discouraging pluralism and promoting violence. Most of the literature of the similar line focused on "the negative aspects of religion and its influence on non-state terrorist groups. Religion's role in states' policies has still been understudied."<sup>13</sup> Further, according to Reus-Smit, religion and culture were "largely neglected" in IR until al Qaeda attacked the Pentagon and New York's Twin Towers on 9 September 2001 (9/11).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the communists' way of understanding religion was also negative. Consequently, the communist countries also excluded religion from both of their domestic and international domains, claiming it as "opiate of the masses." Reinhold Niebuhr (1931) held Communism as "ostensibly a highly scientific and irreligious social philosophy."<sup>15</sup> Religion was to be substituted by promoting "scientific atheism" and restricted religious activities.<sup>16</sup> However, many communist countries have transformed and relaxed their stand on religion, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In a number of the Central and East European countries, where the communist governments earlier had repressed religious practices such as worshipping and promoted atheism, religion has emerged and reasserted itself as a significant matter of individual and national identity. Now, the majority of the people in communist countries believe in God.<sup>17</sup>



In the 20th century, as has been observed, especially after WW II, barring a few countries (like Iran, Saudi Arabia and few more), no other government amongst 200 countries has consistently used religion as the driving principle in its domestic and foreign policy. "No countries explicitly have Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish values and beliefs guiding state behaviour and policies."<sup>18</sup> Fox believes that the discipline of IR basically ignored the topic of religion for a long period. While answering the question of why religion was ignored in IR by scholars as an important factor of studies in world politics before 1980, he analyzed that the main focus of the scholars or theorists was on paradigms like realism, liberalism, and globalism that placed their emphasis on military and economic factors and rational calculations as well; as a result, these factors left little room for religion, and scholars also believed that "the era of religion causing wars was over."<sup>19</sup> This simply indicates that the main focus of the IR theorist was the study of factors that caused wars among the states and the perception that religion did not cause a war. Furthermore, it is also believed that religion emerged as one of the most significant and influential factors in world politics of the last generation but remained as ignored and "one of the least examined factors in the professional study and the practice of the world."<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the academics and policymakers marginalized the significance of religion due to "secularism in minds" in view of maintaining and nurturing the structure of plural society. In other words, as what Toft called, "religion...was shuffled off into the error term."<sup>21</sup> However, in the contemporary studies, many scholars held religion as a very important factor that has global significance and occupied a larger space in the studies of international relations. Except for Europe and Japan, for the rest of the world, especially the global south, religion has increasingly entered the political sphere, and the secular thinking fall under question. However, on the increasing role of religion in international affairs, Philpott argued, "9/11 emphasized, possibly more than any other recent historical event, that religion continues to be a potent force in global politics."<sup>22</sup>

Adam Smith, in his *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), held that "religious competition" and "church-state relations" are market phenomena, and argued that "the absence of state religion allows for competition," and he also said that "religious activity is greater where religion is more free from state's control."<sup>23</sup> This consequently, creates an environment further for "a plurality of religious faiths" in society. For Smith, religious beliefs and activities of the people are rational choices.<sup>24</sup> However, some scholars believed, "religion has been invaded by the political sphere, questioning the modern logic of separation of spheres and turning faith into an instrument at the service of the will to power of short-termism and reductionist discourses."<sup>25</sup> The 20th century was held as "an age dominated by prophecies of religious decline."<sup>26</sup> The discourses such

as "the end of Christendom," "God is dead," and "the advent of the post-Christian era and even post-religion era" became prominent as the new label of the secular era. However, various "non-secular," "de-secularizing," "post-secular," and "sanctification" theories came up and became the prominent paradigms of academic religious studies around the world.<sup>27</sup> The resurgence of religion in the national and international politics has actually compelled the downfall of secularist thinking or the space for secular debate has been shrinking. Religion has become the most prominent means of governance and nation-building project for many regimes. In other words, the politicization of religion has become saliency.

## RELIGION IN PRACTICE

To establish a clear and scientifically rigorous relationship between religion and violence, in fact, is very difficult.<sup>28</sup> In general practice, a religiously honest person or community abstains from indulging in violence because "religions as a rule espouse values of peace and harmony, even in contexts of challenge and contestation."<sup>29,30</sup> But for a religious person ingrained with religious extremism, violence is common in such minds. And therefore, because of such minds, we see "across the world, religion appeared resurgent: from liberation theology to the religious right and militant Islamism, religion seemed an increasingly important aspect of emerging conflicts."<sup>31</sup> Besides the power politics and the conflicts/wars for resources and territories or faith, the scholars of IR have identified that an extreme religiosity has posed a direct threat to international peace and security that triggers violence and conflicts amongst the humanities. In fact, no religion promotes violence or hatred. Religious violence is the origin of the human mind or human imagination to impose religious values and norms on global humanity. The religious chauvinism mostly is engaged in undermining other existing faiths. There we also see a religious competition and conflicts imposed, especially to uphold superiority over other faiths or beliefs. Therefore, involvement of religion in international relations is also sometimes premised on competition and conflicts.<sup>32</sup> As mentioned earlier, Adam Smith's idea of religious competition is different, focusing on economic prosperity and cooperation. But religious competition in contemporary times appears more dysfunctional towards society at large. Some scholars argued that "violence by religious actors is driven by competition...(and) factions with a religious ideology have a greater incentive to use violence than nonreligious factions."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, according to Toft, "religious outbidding"<sup>34</sup> is also a responsible practice in aggravating violence<sup>1</sup>. As mentioned by Sandal,

<sup>1</sup>Religious outbidding is defined as 'elites' attempt to outbid each other to enhance their religious credentials and thereby gain the support they need to counter an immediate threat. For details see, Toft, M. D. (2007). *Getting Religion? The Puzzling Case of Islam and Civil War*. International Security,



“outbidding is more likely to occur among religious terrorist organizations than their nationalist counterparts.”<sup>35</sup> The examples in the case of religious outbidding are Al-Qaeda and ISIS, two jihadi organizations, which are known to compete with other terrorist actors in the Muslim world. Furthermore, the process of social construction of religious violence or killings can also be observed. The killings of the members of one or more religious faiths in any violent conflict can be potentially reframed as a religious matter, or by reframing a conflict as a “religious conflict,” especially by “a corrupt, incompetent, or otherwise unsuitable leader” to “attract sufficient resources” for the personal interests.<sup>36</sup> Even for that matter, some historical evidences have also reported the question of religions in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as one of the causes of wars.<sup>37</sup>

In contemporary international politics, it has been observed that the inclusion of religion and cultural dimensions in foreign policy affairs and its influence on states policy towards other nations has consistently become the order of the day. And, in most cases, religion has occupied negative connotations. Religion (may not be all) has been mostly seen through extremism and violence. Cavanaugh believed, “Everyone knows that religion has a dangerous tendency to promote violence.”<sup>38</sup> Some scholars observed “religion as an agent acting in the world with malign intention” and Fitzgerald also viewed, “religion returns from exile, or resurges irrationally and fanatically and threatens the calm, rational, and only reluctantly violent liberal state.”<sup>39</sup> From the end of the Cold War, international relations experienced plenty of conflicts and violence that have ingrained roots in religion, culture, and ethnicity at both the national and international levels.<sup>40</sup> As a result, western countries led by the US have launched a war on terror, especially to counter religious (Islamic) terrorist organizations, which are in fact supported by some state actors, especially in the Middle East and West and South Asia. In other words, some states have sponsored religion-based terrorism in the foreign policy against the hostile country of similar or other religious faith and ideology. Therefore, the interlinking of religion and militancy emerged as an area of discourse in the realm of IR. Mostly, religion in IR has been seen as dysfunctional rather than functional in the regulation of world order given the practices of religious fundamentalism that are creating religio-cultural crises. As has been pointed out, “different religious traditions have different fundamentalist beliefs.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, it can be seen that although fundamentalism is found as a global phenomenon, its most potent and influential presence and existence is found in the “developing world in general” and the “Muslim world in particular.”<sup>42</sup> Christian fundamentalism originated in the United States in the late 19th century against theological modernism, and it entered politics in the 20th century. However, its impact might not have been

observed more violent. The religion-based worldview is termed as the “post-secular” world.

Moreover, extreme religiosity has shunted the overall progress of South Asia and some Southeast Asian countries. Buddhism is globally known for peace. However, there are some cases of violence by Buddhist states also. It has observed that Buddhist nationalism has contributed in the expansion of religious violence in some South Asian countries.<sup>43</sup> Countries like Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar are some case studies in this context. The fact is also that all forms of Islamism are not militant and revolutionary.<sup>44</sup> Several states in the Islamic world have no evidence of support/sponsorship for religious extremism/violence or religious fundamentalism, because of which their level of overall development and nation-building appears commendable. Take the example of Saudi Arabia; given its special role in the Islamic world, Saudi Arabia has been practicing and promoting “Moderate Islam,” which has immense global significance. Given the rise in religious extremism in the Arabian subcontinent, Saudi Arabia’s transformation towards moderation and coexistence can be looked at in a positive way. However, there are some sources raising funds for terrorist activities, but they are not supported by the state.<sup>45</sup> In reality, most of the backward and developing states, as observed, indulged in religious violence and are also victims of terrorism. Perhaps missing education and scientific temperament and an extreme religiosity left such states backward at multiple levels. Further, besides the economic and social dynamics, politicization of religion is also prone to religious violence.

Renowned political theorist Bhikhu Parekh opined that: Although religion can make a valuable contribution to political life, it can also be a pernicious influence, as liberals rightly highlight. It is often absolute, self-righteous, arrogant, dogmatic, and impatient compromise. It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc, and create a veritable hell on earth. It often breeds intolerance of other religions as well as of internal dissent and has a propensity towards violence.<sup>46</sup>

It has also identified that “religiously-identified states more often engage in violent intrastate conflict, international crises, and cross-border military interventions on behalf of co-religionists... Conflicts between assertively religious and assertively secular states and between states with more religiously committed populations are also more severe.”<sup>47</sup> Some scholars have observed religious troubles in some states caused by “religious gangs” and “rival religious death squads, often for no other reason than membership of another confession.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the terms like “confession,” “faith,” “belief,” and “piety” “are used throughout to categorize religion...in conjunction with such adjectives as fanatical, senseless, irrational, and barbarous,” and besides this, the IR has reported “religious terrorism,” “religious bloodlust,” “religious cleansing,” “religious goons

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and thugs,” “religious bigots,” “religious death squads,” and “religious authorities” with violence in mind.<sup>49</sup> After the 9/11 incidence, Mark Juergensmeyer study found “Religion in bed with terrorism,” and religion acted as “a global troublemaker, the cause of all barbarous mayhem, rearing its ugly head wherever the forces of enlightenment are weak or absent, inciting violence, clouding the calm voices or reason and tolerance.”<sup>50</sup> There has been a negative line of thinking also, which was observed by Hitchens as, “Religion poisons everything. As well as a menace to civilization, it has become a great threat to human survival.”<sup>51</sup>

Honestly, every religion is pious and pure, which promotes peace and cooperation until it is contaminated by impure human minds. However, mutual hatred, violence, and extremism in religiosity create a “bad religion” or a “false religion.” And, religious extremism is often seen as the main root cause of violence and terrorism.<sup>52</sup> Religious extremists, in the name of God, are always ready to sacrifice everything, including their own lives, for afterlife rewards in return. “Religious extremists are willing to murder because they embrace theologies that sanction violence in the service of God. They have no sympathy for their victims, because they view those victims as enemies of God.”<sup>53</sup> The myriad real-world violent events have disproved the modernist theorists that posited the demise of religion. Such violent events in world politics premised on religion are included as acts of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iranian Revolution, the rise of religious fundamentalism/extremism, religious rebellions and opposition movements throughout the Islamic world (Egypt, Algeria, and Afghanistan), religio-political movements like the liberation theology movement in Latin America, and ethno-religious conflicts like those in Chechnya, East Timor, Tibet, Sudan, and Sri Lanka.<sup>54</sup> The radical Islamic groups using terrorism have been motivated by religion (often with an apocalyptic worldview).<sup>55</sup> According to the Pew Centre as mentioned by Gorur and Gregory:

From 2007 to 2018, religion-related war or armed conflict declined from 21 to 13 countries. However, these 13 countries continue to have grave impacts on civilians. In 2018, religion-related armed conflict took the greatest toll on the populations in: Syria (with millions killed or displaced), Afghanistan, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen (with hundreds of thousands killed or displaced), and Iraq, Libya, Philippines, and Sudan (with tens of thousands killed or displaced). Interreligious violence has also been steadily declining on a global level and in all regions, except for Sub-Saharan Africa. However, numerous incidents of interreligious violence can be found in the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Mali, Nigeria, Syria, Thailand, Yemen and the countries in South Asia.<sup>30,56</sup>

The above data of Pew Centre shows that most of the countries of the Muslim world, especially poor, are grappled with the religious violence. Scholars without any doubt believe that religion has increasingly been “in the frame

as a critical component of contemporary terrorism and political violence.”<sup>57</sup> It is also observed that the religion-based terrorist activities have spread to only a few new countries; however, the casualties that occurred because of these activities have increased significantly. The Sahel and Sub-Saharan regions in Africa fit into this observation in the present scenario. Further, the religion-related terrorism caused attacks against civilians by ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Al-Shabaab in Somalia, and Boko Haram in Nigeria.<sup>58</sup> However, in the Western developed countries, religious attacks declined by 82%<sup>59</sup>, because of which the overall progress of the countries of these countries is high as compared to countries in Asia, Africa and others.

## CONCLUSION

Religion is regarded as a motivator for peace and cooperation among communities and nations. “Religion is generally understood as a universal and distinct kind of human practice and institution. Though it is frequently (not always) defined by belief in the supernatural, religion is generally seen as a natural aspect of human experience and action.”<sup>60</sup> Many scholars see religion as an instrument of cooperation that directly leads toward the establishment of global peace, harmony, and stability. The religious cooperation rather than competition amongst the different faiths and beliefs motivates all for the mutual respect for each other’s faith that directly helps in building and binding the cohesive bond of global fraternity and brotherhood. Religion has been seen focusing on “conflict resolution and peacebuilding, human and social development” as well.<sup>61</sup> However, the politicisation of religion, extreme religiosity, dysfunctional minds of the religious gurus/leaders, and irrationality in some of the followers have actually defamed religions. The communities or societies are also envisaging competitions on the lines of religious practices of opposite religions that eventually lead to communal violence destroying the societal harmony. Irrational religious followings have largely promoted religious violence/conflicts between/amongst communities and the states in some cases that disturb the international peaceful order. As a result, given its wider impact on international order, religion has become an important subfield of study in international relations. By and large, like other factors such as economics, politics, and ethnicity, religion has also emerged as a major factor in contemporary domestic and international violence and conflicts. Though most of the states are not indulged in wars or violence on religious lines, the religion-based terrorism/violence has support from some states against the hostile countries in a hidden way that directly or indirectly impacts the international relations of the nations. Even for that matter, the serious and honest collective efforts to counter religion-based violence by the global community do not appear, as no one wants to intervene in the religious matters of the nations. Nations are also struggling to reach



unanimity against the religion-based violence, because of which religious violence has become part and parcel of the international relations. Nations with “moderate religiosity” appear socially, politically, and economically prosperous as compared to the nations with “extreme religiosity.” By and large, religious violence/terrorism caused by extreme religiosity restricts the state in nation building and economic development, and this hampers the overall progress of the state. In the name of religion, the rulers of such states enjoy the power by exploiting the lives of innocent people who suffer from multiple problems like poverty, hunger, health, and other humanitarian issues, and dealing with such humanitarian problems becomes a major challenge before the international community and order. With such a situation, the objective of establishing a “Peaceful World Order” has become a mirage.

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