International Political Theology

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SOVIET ANALYST ANDREI KORTUNOV ONCE said that the U.S. intellectual framework for understanding international relations is like a bottle with a very narrow neck into which world affairs are poured from a large pail: a little bit gets inside the bottle, but a lot gets spilled. During the cold war, superpower bipolarity helped to mop up much of the spillage. Now, in the aftermath of 11 September, we are knee-high in spillage. This article is about International Political Theology, an approach to international relations which integrates into theory major aspects of world affairs that would otherwise be ignored by mainstream intellectual IR frameworks.

MODERNIZATION AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The state of the world can generally be characterized as late modern. Late modernity is the culmination of a several-centuries long crusade on the part of the West to modernize the rest of the world. Historically speaking, this is the greatest and most successful attempt at universalization of any particular societal model. But it has encountered serious obstacles.

Modernization has meant challenging and eventually overcoming traditional ways of life in highly stratified, allegedly unenlightened societies. From a so-called modern perspective, traditional societies are gripped by religious dogmas that make them incapable of creating a just society or advancing on the path of modernity toward the installation of democracy and capitalism. Of relevance to IR scholars and teachers is the key role IR played in this process: modernization has proceeded hand in hand with the expansion of the states system worldwide. The Westphalian peace legitimated the states system created in a small area of Europe, and the

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system has since spread to the entire globe. In its path, there has been a great deal of destruction and dislocation, as well as the dismantling of the political arrangements that drew support from, and gave support to, traditional religion-based status ordering.

The state has replaced the old apparatus of rule. Governmental legislation supplanted the old customary rules for conferring status with new rules rationalizing administration and conferring individual rights and duties. It thereby created the necessary conditions for a just society and the conscious adoption of additional rules to aid the development of commerce, capitalism, and democracy. In the early stages of the state system, new rules strengthened government but limited its reach: civil society began to thrive and so did competition and commerce. Material prosperity increased confidence in the apparatus of the state and the division of its space into public and private spheres, which further strengthened all sectors. At some point the modernizing society, as Walt Rostow famously pointed out, “took off.”

It is naïve to think that, once dispatched, status ordering and the stratification of traditional societies will never return. As will be argued below, status ordering even has a place in the late-modern world, together with the form of reasoning that underpins it. This article follows Nicholas Onuf’s revised version of the modernization two-step. In practice, modernization involves a third step, but one that is not consciously taken. First, the old regime of status is dispatched; then modern institutions are put in place; and finally new rules assigning status seep back into society, in the process compromising rational administration and undercutting equal treatment. As these rules proliferate, status-based stratification resumes its place, providing society with structural integrity. As modernizers kick tradition out the front door, the process of modernization brings new status markers in through the back door.

Religion has always been a key component of any traditional society. Modernizers assumed that, after centuries of Western-led modernization, religion would either die out or become rationalized in the manner of Enlightenment deism (the belief in a supreme being whose existence is revealed not in sacred texts but in nature and through reason). The return from exile of “traditional” religion to modern societies has therefore come as a shock. U.S. scholars and policy-makers seem to have problems figuring out the exact role religion plays in conflicts across the globe—in the Middle East, southern Sahara, the Balkans,
the Caucasus, central Asia, and South Asia. It is in all of these parts of the world that global religions meet and clash. The main axis of conflict, of course, occurs where traditional religion clashes with modernizing, Western secularism.

In most Western analyses, religion is subsumed under modern, secular categories and “isms”: left and right; fundamentalism and terrorism. Even the much despised Marxism (still a Western doctrine) has been called upon to help explain the causes of the current religious resurgence. Religiously motivated suicides are baffling to us because they represent highly irrational action on the part of perpetrators, yet they are becoming fundamental to the nature of modern warfare. In response to the 11 September attacks, the United States changed its military doctrine from that of cold war deterrence to President Bush’s doctrine of a unilateral, preemptive war on terror, waged against individual acts of violence and linked to states wherever possible. This declaration of war on individual actors has led the administration to suspend or violate important elements of international law such as the Geneva conventions. In fact, many observers think that the entire system of states has been seriously compromised and may even be in the process of being superseded. In the name of very much misinterpreted “jihad,” a “holy alliance” composed of states, transnational groups, and individuals is developing to oppose the United States and the West. Likewise, in many parts of the world, the United States is interpreted as an imperial power leading its own “holy alliance” of Christian states (not to mention the Jewish state of Israel) on a modern crusade. Traditional terms, such as “good” and “evil,” are now commonplace on both sides, giving this exercise of violence the flavor of a religious mission.

In the field of IR, there are some signs of growing attention to the many shocks to traditional assumptions about modernization and modernity. One of the main figures of this movement, Robert Keohane, castigated his peers in 2002 for not taking religion seriously. Currently, there is remarkably little theoretical interest in the resurgence of religion throughout the late-modern world. From its inception, IR has focused attention on a modern system of states based on the twin concepts of sovereignty and anarchy, themselves presupposing a positivist-rationalist foundation. In this respect, even Keohane’s call is all too indicative of how entrenched this framework has become, for in his very next sentence he insists that religion could be studied within a synthesis of the existing approaches—classical realism, institutionalism, and constructivism—all positivist and committed to rationalism. But all these approaches, including the constructivism of the mainstream variety to which Keohane in his article has referred, are methodologically incapable of doing any more than de-legitimizing “irrational” religion by forcing it into their own secular and positivist categories, at best treating it as culture or
identity. Modern social scientists, including the majority of IR scholars, have reduced religion to religious organizations and have categorized them as elements of transnational civil society or even as cultural “civilizations.” The faithful are presumed to act in accordance with rational choice theory; if they engage in violence, then it must be because they believe the ends justify the means.

This simplification has resulted in a profound misunderstanding of the strength of passion that many religious people feel, a fervor that infuses religious organizations and compensates for their lack of material resources. This, in turn, produces surprise when, on occasion, religious organizations/states act “irrationally” or “non-rationally” and with a force beyond their material strength, thus confounding positivist expectations.

There is growing literature by scholars of religion, theologians, historians, and sociologists of religion commenting on the disregard for religion rife in the social sciences, including IR. Most of this literature ought to be included in IR reading lists. To paraphrase one commentator, everyone understands the importance of religion except a U.S. academic.

Since most scholars focusing on religion teach and write outside of the social science mainstream, they have no standing in the IR community. Because their status is negligible, those teaching large IR classes feel unjustified in inviting these scholars to guest lecture. Thus, the importance of religion in IR is simply omitted entirely from the curriculum.

**INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL THEOLOGY**

Well before 11 September 2001, I worked to develop a framework into which both religion and traditional IR discipline could be synthesized. This synthesis is now called International Political Theology (IPT). During the 1990s, I organized the University of Miami series of public lectures entitled “International Political Theology.” In 1998, I presented a paper of the same name at the London School of Economics conference which was subsequently published in a special issue of *Millennium,* and again later as a chapter in a book entitled *Religion in International Relations: Return from Exile.* The concept draws inspiration from a variety of intellectual sources—a common practice in a field with interdisciplinary pretensions. Unfortunately, it seems that the term “theology” acted as a red flag for many a secular-oriented scholar. Granted, the choice was meant to shock the traditional study of IR and indicate the need to bring to an end what Luttwak has called:

A learned repugnance to contend intellectually with all that is religion... [based on the]
mistaken Enlightenment prediction that the progress of knowledge and the influence of religion were mutually exclusive.11

This use of the term theology did not go as far as the political theologians’ claim that political theorizing should have its ultimate ground in religious revelation. The term, which I explicitly defined for my purposes, is meant to accommodate and join those elements that are never treated together. Here, theos and “theology” refer to the systematic study of discourses and relations among those who search for—or claim to have found—a response, transcendental or secular, to the human need for meaning and purpose.12 My objective was to find a way of bringing the study of religion and IR together, possibly for the first time, in a manner that would minimize their distortion and facilitate their understanding. In order to bridge the so far unbridgeable gap, IPT had to do three things:

First, IPT had to avoid using positivist methodology, since positivism explicitly rejects those parts of reality that the senses cannot reach, but which are included in a religious understanding of reality. The IR mainstream insists on the strict “use of evidence to adjudicate between truth claims,”13 and assigns theories that are not “testable” to the “margins of the field,” because it is “impossible to evaluate their research program.”14 The transcendental universe common in religions exists outside of the human senses, and religion often prohibits its logical examination. Thus, IPT had to be non-positivist. Instead, IPT is designed to use the linguistic/rule-oriented constructivism worked out by Nicholas Onuf.15 Expressly post-positivist, this sort of constructivism ought not to be confused with the form of constructivism associated with Alexander Wendt and Peter Katzenstein, which is the only form of constructivism recognized by positivist scholars in the field.

Second, because most religions take texts and interpretations as their core, IPT needed an approach that takes texts seriously and does not dismiss them in favor of purely observable facts and actions. Therefore, IPT could not be based on the constructivism popular in the IR mainstream. This would be of no use since, as Maya Zehfuss points out, “Wendt’s actors do not speak. They signal each other.”16 Unlike mainstream constructivism, IPT had to adopt the form of constructivism that bases itself on the “linguistic turn” and treats language as a human universal with a very significant social role. Here, language is not just a passive tool reflecting or reporting reality; language plays a role in creating social reality. As Onuf says, speaking is doing.

Third, IPT is founded on Onuf’s well substantiated claim that all societies—
especially those speaking Indo-European languages—use language and reasoning in three distinct ways. Following C.S. Peirce, Onuf recognizes abduction as a category of reasoning in addition to induction and deduction. Abduction is reasoning by reference to the resemblance of wholes; metaphors and articles of faith make sense as wholes or not at all. IPT recognizes rationality, but it acknowledges different forms of rationality, none of which are universal to all humanity. There are, therefore, other forms of rationality—not just that based on the Western concept of rational choice, which draws on economics to define what is rational in material terms.

Many social activities fall into three categories because they reflect the inherent (possibly physiologically grounded) three forms of reasoning. Some can be suppressed, or their existence denied. Historical forms of human activity are those of the priest, the warrior, and the provider. They are based, respectively, on assertive, directive, and commissive forms of speech—the corresponding three forms of reasoning; and they give rise, respectively, to instruction-rules, directive-rules, and commitment-rules, translatable into political hegemony, hierarchy, and heteronomy as forms of governance. The modern social sciences recognize no more than deductive and inductive reasoning, thereby relegating truths accepted on faith (as a form of abduction) to the status of a dismissible barrier to modernization.

The predominantly assertive nature of religious reasoning goes some way toward explaining its neglect in the social sciences. We have become accustomed to viewing assertive-based religions as archaic and ancient—if not as extinct—forms of social activity. Political systems based on instruction-rules and the hegemony of common faith have been regarded as traditional and pre-modern, impervious to change and antagonistic to Western values. But these categories of thought and hierarchy are mixed in practice. None can ever be gotten rid of entirely, because people will always be prone to deploying all three forms of reason.

If developed properly, IPT will highlight the ineradicability of abduction, the acceptance of truths beyond demonstration by induction or deduction, the power of the instruction-rules that give faith its content, and the comfort to be had in beliefs held in common. IPT is inclusive. It can engage with discourses based on faith and those based on narrowly defined reasoning without facing problems of incommensurability. IPT allows for advances in cognitive science that will challenge, once and for all, the dogma of rational choice theory and turn that simplistic structure into a more complex edifice that is capable of truly analyzing and comprehending social structures of every sort, at every level.17 Even before such a paradigm shift is forced upon us by discoveries in the natural sciences, constructivism, and IPT with it, will accommodate as an integral part of the human reasoning
process the individual emotions that influence choices. IPT can, for example, show how the human level, involving feelings and emotions, functions in complex relation to the state level.

**PROFESSORS AS “PRIESTS OF THE PROFANE”**

Acts, rules, and reasoning, the three forms of speech, can be found in different mixes in every society. The three main roles—those of “priests, warriors, and cultivators”—and their modern day derivatives seem to be at the core of human activities, even in modernity. We have not managed to eliminate them even from late modern society. In traditional societies priests are responsible for instructing other members of society on matters of truth and faith. In our late-modern world, professors have come to share in and indeed take over this responsibility. As Onuf writes, “If priests are professors of the sacred, professors are priests of the profane.”

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To instruct us, priests and professors deploy rules telling us what we should believe and how we should act. These are instruction-rules. They are derived from abductions formed into assertions and warranted as true. Instruction-rules are the most basic of all rules because of the immediate demand that they make on the listener. These rules state a belief coupled with the speaker’s desire that the listener accept this belief. Children learn to appreciate such rules before they are mature enough to respond to directives. Only once they have developed a firm abductive basis do they take on the responsibilities of choice and mutuality inherent in promises and commitment-rules. Education typically takes or should take this form. Instruction-rules require no more than a passive acceptance of certain information, including information about values. These rules assume that the listener does not or could not know, but obviously ought to know. They elevate the agent—priest or professor—by granting him or her special status and an aura of respect.

By way of contrast, commitment-rules are the currency of modernity. The contract is the model form of such rules, built around the rationally consenting individual. Western culture, liberalism, capitalism, individualism, modernity, and international relations are of a mainly commissive nature. Commitment-rules exist in a mix with directive-rules to provide sanctions and enforcement. The guardians of liberalism, individualism, democracy, capitalism, or indeed of international relations are concerned mostly with maintaining the right balance of commitment-rules and directive-rules.
Yet, as argued above, instruction-rules have not disappeared. We follow instruction-rules extensively, all the way from reading the instructions on the use of an unfamiliar appliance to pledging allegiance, swearing oaths, reciting prayers, and singing hymns and anthems. Abduction too, like induction and deduction, is a creative act with social consequences. Generally speaking, three sorts of consequences of abduction, all of them normative, are possible. Here, they are all relevant for my purpose.

The first consequence points to religion; abduction, assertion, and instruction take on tremendous normative force through incantation and ritualization. Believers are discouraged, indeed prohibited, from subjecting their faith to the rational inquiry appropriate for “this world.” They are not, however, irrational. Faith exhibits the distinct form of reasoning characteristic of religion. This is the non-linear form of reasoning: it draws on consciousness and eludes the methods of deductive or inductive reasoning and their rules of inference and evidence. The religious experience is built on a non-inferential mode of cognition analogous to sense or feeling. The unknown is crucial in interpreting experience. Rhetorical devices, similes, metaphors, and intuition are all abductive in nature. Belief here precedes reasoning and controls it, unlike secular discourse where beliefs are introduced but allegedly remain subordinate to reasoning. Religions consist mainly of assertive speech acts and instruction-rules.

While commandments might seem to be commands (directive-rules), it is probably better to refer to them as “declarations” (a species of assertive speech act). While it is usually possible to identify directive-rules and commitment-rules within religious reasoning, believers derive ultimate religious sanctions from the divine authority and the essence of religion, which is generally faith. Asserted truths, the codification in ordinary language of that which “passeth all understanding” are accepted on faith and often supported by powerful emotions. One’s identity, one’s understanding of the world, and one’s main values are typically received in instruction-rules articulated by human agents, albeit based on revelation; when internalized, they constitute the core of consciousness and culture.

The second sort of social consequence stemming from abductive reasoning has nothing to do with religion and points to science. Better known as conjecture, abduction leads to theory once it is linked to inductive or deductive logic. All of us formulate hypotheses—guesses or conjectures that we then proceed to verify (or...
falsify) either by inductive or deductive reasoning according to positivist rules. Research based on induction takes the form of either “hunting and gathering” for clues, from the parts to wholes, or attacking the problem deductively, reasoning from the wholes to parts.

All of us engaged in social science use the term “hypothesis,” not always appreciating its connection to assertive speech acts. “Hypothesis” is a dignified way of referring to an intuition, conjecture, belief, guess, dogma, or speculation, which is or is not then subjected to further “rational” treatment based on the rules of “falsification” and “verification.”

Third, abductive reasoning might lead to the establishment of a secular religion. Marxism followed this path and so does late modern culture more generally. Conjectures are lifted out of context, advertised as scientific truths, and disseminated through the mass media. No less than religious beliefs, secular notions of individualism, liberalism, consumerism, and all the rest are repeated ad nauseam, presented in Hollywood-made stories and public spectacles, and developed into strict codes of behavior. In academia, many social scientists firmly believe in their scientific objectivity, yet a great deal of what gets written and said is based on a set of shared myths. Books are written about books, articles about articles, and articles about books. Theorists write about writing, theorize about theories, create heroes, and honor them in rituals. Status is conferred; stratification follows.

What happens to the main professors of abductive reasoning in the three social situations listed above? In religion, priests continue to play an important role. In societies without the separation of church and state, including some Islamic societies in particular, priests hold government office. In Marxist-type societies, the Party assumed the role of priests and Marxism–Leninism became the secular theos. In the late-modern world, societies’ educators play the role of guardians of societal values. Educators are parents, peers, teachers, and professors. Professors deal in abduction, assert truths, and instruct us on what to believe. Our bias against abductive reasoning leads us typically to describe these activities in euphemistic terms: we claim they are transactions among equals who are engaged in rational discourse. In contemporary Western societies, the three roles have been turned inside out. Abductive thinking and acceptance on faith have been dismissed as things that “reasonable people” do not do. Deduction and induction dominate Western culture—or so we think.

Social sciences, together with the natural sciences, acknowledge exclusively the validity of deductive and inductive reasoning while denying the normative nature of their work. By doing so, they deny the abductive underpinnings of their profession and undercut their own roles as guardians of societal values. Addition-
ally, in the pervasive setting of capitalist and democratic society based on commitment-rules, the role of education has been changed and commercialized. Learning is now said to occur on the basis of a rational transaction between students as consumers of knowledge and the university, which produces knowledge for consumption. A leading scholar of religion in this country summarizes the role of modern educators as follows:

There exists an international subculture composed of people with Western-type higher education, especially in the humanities and social sciences, that is indeed secularized. This subculture is the principal “carrier” of progressive, Enlightened beliefs and values. While its members are relatively thin on the ground, they are very influential, as they control the institutions that provide the “official” definitions of reality, notably the educational system, the media of mass communication, and the higher reaches of the legal system… I cannot speculate here as to why people with this type of education should be so prone to secularization. I can only point out that what we have here is a globalized elite [secular] culture.”

Somewhere along the way, a transformation has taken place. Professors are no longer priests and through secularization they seek to debase their own abductive role, ceding that role to whatever influence—be it Hollywood, popular trends, or the media—is around to take it over.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES**

There have been innumerable assessments of modernity, many of them following Max Weber, that are critical of the world’s progressive cycles of rationalization and disenchantment.

Constructivism and IPT ask that we radically rethink our understanding of the world. After all, modern social science is only 200 years old, and IR only half that age. As Peter Berger points out, “the world today, with some exceptions...is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.”

Modernity has accomplished a great deal. Non-Western societies are quick to adopt its achievements in science and technology, as it would be self-defeating for them to do otherwise. Nevertheless, non-Western societies often regard the late-modern world as having failed or fallen backward. The modern world’s pathologies offend and alienate people who listen to their priests, put their faith in religious experience, and deeply cherish what they know to be sacred. Some pathologies of the late-modern world fuel anger, make suicidal rage seem reasonable, foster violence among neighbors, and make even the most privileged beneficiaries of modernity feel deeply insecure. If we in the field of IR think that these pathologies, and
the consequences of ignoring them, are the proper subject of some other field of
inquiry, then we have become irrelevant to modern society.

Despite the origins of the field, IR cannot limit itself to the study of state-
craft. It must bring culture and religion into the picture. It must put values back
where they belong—at the heart of the human experience. Universities must reas-
sert the importance of education as an abductive process, and we must recognize
that even those of us who teach IR are teaching values—whether we wish to or not.

Beyond this understanding, we discover that IPT and constructivism paint a
very different world than do traditional state-centric perspectives. This world is
much more complex and nuanced. It adds faith and passion to the understanding
of power, and treats religions and faith-based organizations as extremely powerful
factors in world affairs. It returns us to our own understanding of ourselves, as
permeated by the universalizing drive of Christianity. It makes us pay attention,
not just to the spillage I referred to at the beginning of this article, but also to that
which we have not even seen.

NOTES

1. “Take off” is a metaphor made famous by W. W. Rostow. *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-
Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960). Quoted in Nicholas Onuf “In
Time of Need: United Nations Reform, Civil Society, and the late Modern World,” paper presented to the
2. Onuf, “In Time of Need.”
3. Ibid.
4. Aisha Y. Musa, “Struggle and Fighting in the Qur’an” a paper presented at the University of Miami,
unpublished.
5. Keohane chastised the discipline for the parochialism of its paradigmatic disputes and urged IR
scholars to pay more attention to synthesis and less to differentiating their views from those of others.
Suggesting that 11 September could best be understood through a synthesis of classical realism, institu-
tionalism, and constructivism, Keohane claimed that understanding this tragic event also demanded
taking other worldviews, including religious worldviews, seriously. Robert O. Keohane, “The globalization
of informal violence, theories of world politics, and the ‘liberalism of fear,’” in *Power and Governance
6. Ibid.
7. See Samuel P. Huntington et al., *The Clash of Civilizations: The Debate* (New York: Council on
Foreign Relations, 1993).
8. “The difficult-to-understand phenomenon is not Iranian mullahs but U.S. university professors—it
might be worth a multi-million-dollar project to try to explain that!” Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization
of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*
(Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 2. Please note that Profes-
sor Berger is not a professor of international relations but a leading sociologist and scholar of religion in
this country.
9. Vendulka Kubálková, “Towards an International Political Theology,” *Millennium: Journal of Interna-
tional Studies* 29, no. 3 (2000).
10. Vendulka Kubálková, “Toward an International Political Theology,” in Fabio Petito and Pavlos
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19. The Blessing in Rite I, The Book of Common Prayer, 339 used in the Anglican masses every Sunday. It is a paraphrase of Philippians 4:7. See also Peter 1:2.


21. Ibid.