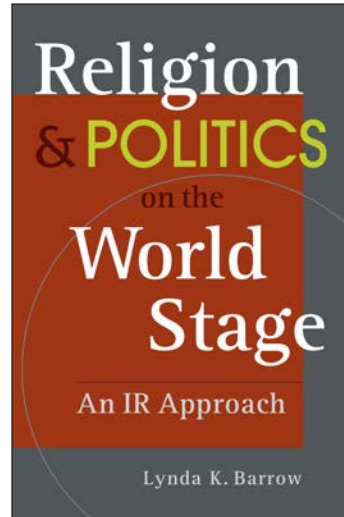


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Religion and Politics  
on the World Stage:  
An IR Approach

Lynda K. Barrow

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# 1

## Setting the Stage

*Religion and Politics on the World Stage* is a book about the politics of religion; it is about the ways in which religion is shaping world politics and, to a lesser extent, about how world politics affects religion; and it is also about assumptions, theories, and the ways in which people perceive religion's role in the world. As a book about politics, it concerns collective choices and public policies—laws, treaties, and so on—that affect how people live together. How and by whom those decisions are made usually says something about those who have power. As a book about world politics, it is about actors, actions, institutions, interests, and norms that transcend state borders. As a book about religion and world politics, it is about systems of belief (understandings of the divine and claims about what is true and right) and, in light of those beliefs, how one is to live (what can or must be done—or not done) and the institutions that guide and govern individuals and communities.

The book's argument is straightforward: although often marginalized, religion matters in world politics. As recently as the 1990s, the study of world politics and the practice of statecraft paid little heed to religion's role—and both were impoverished because of it. Religion is influencing politics and power on the world stage and, in various times and settings, is a force to be reckoned with. Therefore, to comprehend the world around us, we need to understand how and why religion matters, to analyze it in a systematic way, and to have a framework in which to fit facts and events that we cannot anticipate today. By the end

of this book, readers should know a lot about religion and politics and know how to think about their interactions on the world stage.

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Headlines, crises, and a diverse cast of characters—how can we make sense of religion’s role on the world political stage? Does religion tend to be the “glue” that binds together societies and alliances or a wedge that drives people and states apart? When is a conflict really about religion? In August 2019, members of the worldwide multireligion organization Religions for Peace gathered to recommit themselves to preventing and transforming violent conflicts, while the United Nations commemorated those who have been victims of violence because of their religion or belief. The following year, the global pandemic (COVID-19) was implicated in inflaming religious tensions. In India, for instance, Hindu nationalists blamed Muslims for the virus. The hashtag #coronajihad began trending, and some members of the Muslim minority became victims of hate crimes. This puts yet another spin on religion, suggesting members of a particular religion can be on the receiving end of violence.

Religion can inspire the construction of breathtaking temples and reconstruction of foreign lands after natural and human-made disasters—and it can inspire the destruction of centuries-old statues, such as the 2001 Taliban bombing of the Bamyán Buddha statues in central Afghanistan. Today, the “hotter bits” of religion often involve one or both of the world’s two largest religions, Christianity and Islam, which have fault lines within and between them as well as bridges across them. However, religion is also a hot issue in India, which has a large Hindu majority, and Myanmar (formerly Burma), which is majority Buddhist. These matters affect not only domestic politics but regional and global politics because India is a regional power and the world’s largest democracy and, in both cases, what happens at home affects neighbors as well.

Clearly, religion plays diverse roles. How do these glues, wedges, and inspirations interact with politics on the world stage? To frame the answers to such questions, this book explores the trends, theories, assumptions, and actors behind the front-page news. Each chapter begins with two illustrations, discussing specific events that depict key aspects of the nexus between religion and world politics. They range from big, world-rocking events such as the Iranian Revolution to lesser-known events such as the rock musician Bono making Senator Jesse Helms cry.

These illustrations are entryways into the bigger picture, including global trends, such as the waxing of religion's role in politics, ongoing globalization, resurgent nationalism, the rise of populism and identity politics and, perhaps, the waning of liberal democracy.

Politics in the early twenty-first century cannot be understood without taking into account the religious explosion that is occurring. If religion is not taken into account, much that transpires in world politics is unintelligible. It would, for instance, be hard to explain the Iranian Revolution, theological justifications for and attacks on apartheid in South Africa, the events of 9/11, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the shifting politics of India, and the impact of the Islamic State without some understanding of the religious component. To get beyond the headlines and develop a nuanced understanding of world politics, it is essential to come to grips with how religion affects political leaders, states' foreign policies, and interactions among states and nonstate actors.

## Aims

Information is not enough. Informed citizens need a useful and coherent framework for understanding how pieces of information and scraps of analysis fit together. This is the principle aim of *Religion and Politics on the World Stage*.

This book also has some secondary objectives, which go hand-in-hand with its three distinguishing features. First, it explains concepts and situations so as to be accessible to newcomers to the topics. The book is intended as an introductory text in an interdisciplinary area that will help prepare readers for active citizenship in a democratic society. The focus is on religion and world politics, but this requires bringing in elements of domestic politics too, such as the nature of a regime (democratic or authoritarian) and how and by whom public policy is made. The primary audience for this text is the one with which I am most familiar: undergraduate students. In fact, it emerged out of a course on religion and world politics that I have taught since the mid-1990s.

The chapters that follow provide the information necessary to understand and explain significant ways in which religion enters international politics (and vice versa), how this is changing, and why it matters; to fit new events, policies, and pronouncements into a larger framework; and to

employ key analytical tools, especially the levels of analysis and major theoretical lenses. These are the central learning objectives.

The illustrations that begin each chapter provide a second distinguishing feature. These are slices of history or extended examples of the intersections of religion and politics, which provide thought-provoking and concrete illustrations of points developed in the chapter. One illustration, for instance, is about Pope John Paul II's impact on the Eastern Bloc and international communism, while another discusses Saddam Hussein's declaration of a holy war. An illustration in Chapter 9 introduces an imam and a pastor in northern Nigeria. The men confronted each other as leaders of rival militias, each believing he was fighting in defense of his faith. Then their relationship was transformed. They joined forces as peacemakers, pursuing a very different kind of faith-inspired work.

Finally, this text applies an international relations framework throughout. It frames the analysis by using the two sets of lenses that are more or less standard in international relations textbooks. One is seeing world politics through the lens of major theoretical perspectives, focusing on realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Theories are important to political scientists' efforts to understand, explain, and predict political phenomena. They are generalizations about how the world works with a set of key factors and central actors and, in the social sciences, assumptions about human nature (how we act when left to our own devices). The levels of analysis are the other set of lenses. This book employs three levels of analysis: individual, state, and systemic (international or global). "Snapping in" a lens "enables us to interpret events or 'facts'" from different vantage points.<sup>1</sup> Zooming in with a macro lens brings small details into focus, while zooming out and taking a panoramic shot provides a very different picture; the small details do not disappear when using a wide-angle lens, but they are no longer in focus. We see different dimensions of religion and world politics, depending on the lens through which we view it. Our perception of reality is altered. Often, we only get a partial or distorted view when we view the world through one and only one lens. Chapter 3 gets at the kinds of distortions and preconceptions that can result from seeing the world through a secularist-tinted lens. Of course, religious-tinted lenses bring their own sets of distortions and predispositions. Purposefully employing analytical lenses also helps us to become more aware of the assumptions and perhaps biases that we bring to our studies.

Each chapter ends with a framework for analysis that demonstrates how particular events can be framed. The bare bones of this framework are as follows:



1. Theoretical Perspectives
  - Realism
  - Liberalism
  - Constructivism
2. Levels of Analysis
  - International/Systemic
  - Domestic/State
  - Individual

## Overview

Chapters 2 through 9 follow the same basic structure. As mentioned above, each opens with a description of example events, followed by an explanation of the events' significance, and each closes by placing the material within an analytical framework.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the historical and theoretical backdrop that informs the rest of the book. They present tools of analysis that facilitate a deeper understanding of the sometimes dramatic and often perplexing events in which religion plays a role. Chapter 2 explains why it is important to understand religion's role in world politics (i.e., it answers the "So what?" question) and why this dimension is so often ignored. It includes an explanation for religion's marginalization in key international relations theories.

The third chapter develops the frameworks of analysis that will be employed throughout the balance of the book. It further builds the historical context, explains the origins and meanings of "secularization," and discusses the need to rethink the legacies of the seventeenth-century European Peace of Westphalia and the assumptions of secularization. It explains the usefulness of the levels of analysis as an analytical tool. It sets out the three major theoretical perspectives employed in the study of world politics. Built into each of the book's chapters, these frameworks serve as a sort of "spine" for the book.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore, in turn, each of the three basic levels of analysis. In other words, they analyze interactions between religion and politics on the systemic, state, and individual levels of analysis.

Chapter 4 digs into the systemic, or global, level of analysis, including transnational religious actors, the relationship between globalization and religion, and religion's impact on foreign policy decisionmaking and national security matters. Religious fundamentalism as well as changing norms and advancing technology all figure into this level of analysis.

Chapter 5 focuses on the state level of analysis, describing and explaining what goes on within states that may affect states' foreign policies and international relations. Often, what happens in one state does not stay there. Events in one country spill into adjacent countries and perhaps beyond. For instance, although the Lord's Resistance Army is based in Uganda, its impacts go well beyond Uganda, affecting three of its neighbors in central Africa: the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan. A state outside of this region, the United States, was also drawn into the Ugandan conflict. In Asia, the government of Myanmar has persecuted Rohingya Muslims, killing thousands and destroying hundreds of villages. This has prompted hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Ideas can spill over, too. During the Arab Spring that began in late 2010, the idea that aging autocrats could lose their jobs began in Tunisia, then spread to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and elsewhere. The state level is also important in the sense that, despite the well-entrenched international norms of state sovereignty and nonintervention (explained in Chapter 3), states often care about what goes on in other states and seek to affect it. An example here is the US government's criticisms of human rights abuses in China. In short, in the context of the broad trends of globalization and the global resurgence of religion, domestic religious ideas and issues can cross countries' borders, destabilize neighboring states, and become internationalized.

Chapter 6 zeroes in on the individual level of analysis. It includes religion's influence on perceptions, images, worldviews, and actions as well as saints, sinners, and secularists whose actions have affected international relations. Much of the focus here is on exemplars—religiously motivated individuals who, for better or worse, have had an impact on states' foreign policies and, in turn, world politics.

Chapters 7, 8, and 9 pick up important topics. Chapter 7 investigates the ways in which religion is bound up with identity and identity politics, ideologies (especially nationalism), perceptions, grievances, myths, and political action. Identity can link believers to transnational religious communities. A sense of a shared political identity has driven many a conflict in the 2000s. Identity politics contributed to the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Pope John Paul II's identity, especially his "Polishness," mattered to Poles living under a communist authoritarian regime in the 1980s.

In 1989, the year the Berlin Wall came down, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the triumph of Western liberal democracy over two competing ideologies, fascism and communism. Economic and ideological

concerns were the focus of twentieth-century politics. Now, he argues, politics pivots on matters of identity, and he opposes this turn to identity politics as contributing to a “crisis of democracy” and challenging liberalism.<sup>2</sup> Group identities, including national identities, are often rooted in ethnicity, language, heritage, attachment to a piece of territory, or religion (or a mix of these). Religion can be an identity marker and it can get wrapped up with ideologies, such as nationalism. Nationalism, the ideology of the nation-state, has been a potent ideology for more than two centuries. We see evidence of Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar and Hindu nationalism in India, each promoting the idea that the majority religion is central to national identity.

The final chapters look at religion’s role in conflicts and violence, and then at its role in cooperation and conflict resolution. Conflict and cooperation are central features of international relations, with some contending they are at the very heart of events on the world stage. Hence, these matters warrant special attention. Chapter 8 is about fault lines, conflicts, and violence. The world’s two largest religions, Christianity and Islam, are proselytizing and growing and, in some parts of the world, they are colliding. Sometimes, though, religion’s contribution to conflict is overdrawn. In addition, the term “holy war” is used rather promiscuously. A tricky but essential task is determining when a conflict is truly a religious conflict—a conflict *about* religion, rather than one that simply *involves* religion. It is one thing to recognize that the parties to a conflict have different religious affiliations, but another thing to say that they are fighting over religion. Making this distinction is all the more important in the early twenty-first century, when many conflicts are wrapped up with matters of identity, including ethnic and religious identities.

Conflict can mean a clash of words, interests, or ideologies, for instance, rather than a clash of armies. It might also mean cyberwarfare, attacks using the internet and other technologies against an adversary’s computer systems. When it comes to large-scale political violence, change is afoot. Warfare involving two or more states is not as common as it once was. Armed conflict between or among the world’s great powers is even less common. Most armed conflicts are now some variety of war within a state, such as the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan, Israel-Palestine, Libya, and Syria. Each of these four conflicts has drawn in outside states, internationalizing these conflicts.

In Chapter 9, we see that, while some dismiss religion as irrelevant to world politics in our day, others see religion as inherently divisive and, thus, both a source of conflict and an obstacle to peace and cooperation. Both assumptions need some rethinking. Religion has not gone

the way of the passenger pigeon or the saber-toothed tiger, either through the process of modernization or through secularist state policies. On the contrary, it continues to push its nose—and sometimes far more—under the tent of world politics.

As for the second assumption, religion is no more one-dimensional than the texts and histories that inform it and the people who practice it. Religions are not monolithic, nor do their adherents speak with one voice; rather, they contain multiple voices and can be marshaled to support or oppose the nation-state, for instance. Together, Chapters 8 and 9 show that the two-faced nature of religion means it can be a source of conflict or conflict resolution. Religious leaders may call for holy war or for pacifism. Religious organizations can stir up hate and enmity. Conversely, they can work together in transnational organizations in a spirit of cooperation, trying to solve the world's pressing problems, such as poverty and the scourge of war. Chapter 9 focuses on how religion can contribute to peacemaking, reconciliation, and cooperation.

The final chapter of the book steps back to look at the big picture of world politics in this “post” world—post-Soviet Union, post-Cold War, post-9/11 and, as Chapters 2 and 3 suggest, post-secular—to draw conclusions and to spell out some implications for the future. It revisits the idea that, to use Adrian Wooldridge's phrase, “God Is Back.”<sup>3</sup> God's “return” to the public and political arena flies in the face of long-held assumptions and theories about the impacts of modernization.

Moreover, religion has come back into a world undergoing some profound changes. States remain the central actors, but are being joined on the world stage by a growing number of nonstate actors, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit, religious and secular. This stage is growing ever more crowded. When it was founded in 1945, the United Nations had fifty-one member states. In 2011, with the addition of the world's newest state, South Sudan, UN membership grew to 193. This number will likely climb given the many peoples, for example the Catalans (in Spain) and the Kurds (in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey), pushing for independence. Nonstate actors that operate across state borders are likewise growing in numbers. This cast includes intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations (MNCs), terrorist organizations, religious actors, human trafficking rings, drug cartels, and ethnic diasporas. They can wield considerable power and influence. Power is thus shifting slowly away from states, while it is also shifting from the West (especially Western Europe and North America) towards the East (especially China and India).

Chapter 10 also returns to the importance of frameworks for analysis. It explains how religion is woven into the perennial tensions in world politics: conflict and cooperation (or war and peace), centralization and fragmentation (or integration and disintegration), and continuity and change (or “trend and transformation”<sup>4</sup>). We might add the coming and going of democracy along with concerns about the waxing and waning of the liberal world order.

The point of this text is not to suggest that politics on the world stage now revolves around the axis of religion. Far from it. Global climate change, the global economy, and global pandemics are not about religion. However, deciding who “we” are, who is in charge, what to do, whose ideas and values will prevail, whose rights are protected, and whether states cooperate or clash are areas in which religion and politics intersect. The point of this text, then, is to explain how and why ignoring the religious element leads to incomplete or even inaccurate understandings of the world in which we live.

## Notes

1. Cohen, *Understanding Environmental Policy*, 13.
2. Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics: The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy,” 91.
3. Wooldridge, “God Is Back,” 137–141.
4. Kegley and Blanton, *World Politics*.

