



Revista de Ciencia Política

ISSN: 0716-1417

revcipol@puc.cl

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile
Chile

STUMMVOLL, A. ALEXANDER

Mariano Barbato (2013), Pilgrimage, Politics, and International Relations: Religious Semantics for World Politics. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 229 pp.

Revista de Ciencia Política, vol. 33, núm. 3, 2013, pp. 715-720

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

Santiago, Chile

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=32430003007>

- How to cite
- Complete issue
- More information about this article
- Journal's homepage in redalyc.org

redalyc.org

Scientific Information System

Network of Scientific Journals from Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal

Non-profit academic project, developed under the open access initiative

Mariano Barbato (2013), *Pilgrimage, Politics, and International Relations: Religious Semantics for World Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 229 pp.

Jodok Troy (2012), *Christian Approaches to International Affairs*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 214 pp.

A. ALEXANDER STUMMVOLL¹

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

The study of religion is increasingly trendy in Political Science, International History, International Political Theory, and in International Relations (IR). The reasons and purposes behind this religious turn, however, have been quite varied. Political scientists have presented religious ideas and actors as important empirical factors to better understand important issue-areas such as war and peace, democracy, nationalism, or terrorism. IR theorists have focused on religion's theoretical ramifications for IR paradigms such as realism, liberalism, or constructivism or reflected on the secularist bias of their discipline. International historians, on their part, want to uncover the hidden role of religion during key periods such as the Cold War or European integration. International political theorists have begun to show how God is an important presupposition in the history of Western political thought. Curiously though, the study of religion has been almost entirely disconnected from normative theorizing as if religion can be used to explain aspects of the world but should not contribute to contemporary debates about the good life.

Mariano Barbato and Jodok Troy are two young European IR scholars who not only bridge the gap between the religious turn and normative theorizing but actually dare to argue for more religion in the study and practice of international relations. Barbato explicitly sets out to provide a "Catholic contribution to International Relations" (p. xi) and argues that religion –especially the narrative of pilgrimage– helps us to imagine and live out a more just, peaceful, and inclusive global community. Troy's guiding assumption is that "at its best, religion –just like democracy– respects the equality and value of every human being, and therefore offers unexplored opportunities for conflict resolution and peace building" (p. 6) if understood and approached correctly.

Pilgrimage, Politics, and International Relations ambitiously sets out to defend a new conceptual map of politics and international relations or a new "root metaphor" (p. 7). Just as Thomas Hobbes used the mystical biblical figure of the Leviathan to guide thinking about the

¹ La investigación se adscribe al Núcleo Milenio para el Estudio de la Estatividad y la Democracia en América Latina (NS100014). I want to thank Scott Thomas and Stephanie Hecht for their helpful comments.

modern state with a view to promote stability, so Mariano Barbato advances the religious figure of the pilgrim to guide our thinking about contemporary world politics with a view to encourage positive change. More concretely, he offers the religious semantics of pilgrimage in order to open up new perspectives on the self, on agency, and community –three important concepts of world politics that have remained in the shadows of the neorealist mainstream with its emphasis on the state, structure, and anarchy.

Drawing upon a series of small yet intriguing cases –the Black Nazarene of Manila, a popular pilgrimage site in the Philippines, Benedict Joseph Labre, the patron saint of pilgrims who crisscrossed Europe in the 19th century, and Ignatius of Loyola - Barbato inductively arrives at some basic implications of what pilgrimage means for the self. Barbato's pilgrim –the *homo viator*– likes to leave the familiar. He is always “on the way” –either geographically or spiritually– guided by a transcendental utopian vision about the fullness of good life. This religious vision imparts upon him a responsibility to actively engage with contemporary problems rather than flee away into the desert or be seduced by the idols of wealth and careerism.

In terms of agency, Barbato claims that the metaphor of pilgrimage can provide a new overarching goal with a strong appeal to motivate people from heterogeneous backgrounds to act together. The pilgrim's perspective of a “heavenly utopia of fullness provides the motivation and the yardsticks (...) for the pragmatic realization of a plurality of common but limited goals” (p. 87). Intriguingly, Barbato's notion of pilgrimage is both mystical and pragmatic. His pilgrim is a mystic who is averse to coercion and who believes that ultimately only God rather than human revolutions can help advance utopian visions. At the same time, he pragmatically pursues political short and mid-term projects that are informed by the direction of that utopian perspective, even if they remain fragmentary, fragile, or imperfect due to the vagueness of these religiously-inspired utopian visions and the sheer presence of competing political and religious projects.

As global agency requires the emergence of a global community, a utopian perspective can help to give rise to such a community by “widening the horizon within which we act” (p. 87). Using the examples of the Rome and the Lourdes pilgrim, Barbato invites us to rethink the relationship between the particular and the universal, between the sick and the healthy, and the strong and weak. The Rome-bound pilgrim always departs from particular places in order to come together in the Eternal City to discover commonalities, engage in discussions, and in appropriate communal practices. Reflecting the example of Lourdes –the Marian pilgrimage shrine at the feet of the Pyrenees in France– the solidaristic community of pilgrim requires the strong and healthy to take care of and remember the weak, the sick, and the dead despite the notable sacrifices and psychic and physical efforts.

Religious, above all Catholic readers will intuitively like *Pilgrimage, Politics, and International Relations*, especially Barbato's argument that “religious semantics can provide win-win narratives where others see no investment but only sacrifices” (p. 155). In liberal societies that tend to privilege immediate personal gratification over long-term communal efforts or simply rely on the mechanism of the free market to solve societal problems, religious

norms and discourses indeed have an untapped potential “to motivate people to act jointly for the common goal” (p. 156), especially on issue-areas such as development, population growth, immigration, war and peace, or culture.

Skeptical secular readers may be intrigued by Barbato’s line of argumentation but will wonder “so what?”. For them, the penultimate chapter entitled “Pilgrim’s Policy Conclusions: Cooperation, Conflict, Change”, develops a series of policy recommendations which largely reflect key concerns of Catholic Social Doctrine. Inter alia, Barbato calls upon the liberal West to change its consumption patterns rather than excluding the unborn or the poor from the global South, defends the just war tradition in case of existential threats but not with a view to foster regime change, and cautions that “the North Atlantic parts of the world will no longer live their lives as they used to do... The East will buy us out and the South will join in”. Rather than stemming itself against this process, the liberal West should focus on “inclusion right here and now” (p. 174) and refrain from assigning friends and foes in line with the pilgrim’s ethic of openness and encounter.

In sum, *Pilgrimage, Politics, and International Relations* offers a remarkable introduction to pilgrimage sites and discourses from all over the world, their connection to contemporary debates in IR and political theory, and encourages us to rethink notions of the self, the community, and agency. Barbato’s methodology of engaging in an almost constant back-and-forth dialogue with IR theorists, theologians, and sociologists such as Thomas Aquinas, Zygmunt Bauman, Jürgen Habermas, Friedrich Kratochwil, Joseph Ratzinger, Carl Schmitt, and Michael Walzer is very impressive although these other voices regrettably tend to overshadow the author’s own voice and may leave readers who are less versed in political and IR theory debates rather dizzy.

In *Christian Approaches to International Affairs*, Jodok Troy seeks to develop a “theoretical framework of understanding religion in international relations” (p. ix) that is different from mainstream social science approaches and that will “help pursue a better understanding of a large range of issues in international affairs including but not restricted to, religious issues” (p. 10). Rather than straight-jacketing religion into a single theoretical framework, Troy argues for a pluralistic approach that draws upon Alasdair MacIntyre’s narrative theory, social constructivism, classical realism, and the English School as they all view religion as an identity, a form of being, a way of life, rather than as a private matter, a functional element, or an ideology.

Why bother with religion in the first place? Drawing upon the work of Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Scott Thomas, and others, Troy locates the reason for integrating religion into IR in (1) the real-world importance of religion, as reflected in tumultuous events such as the 1979 Iranian Revolution; (2) the rise of Islamism in the Muslim world and the West and the rise of evangelicalism in the global South; (3) in a broader interest in ethical and religious values, and (4) the soft power of religious institutions such as the Catholic Church in civil societies. In contrast to neorealism’s emphasis on the anarchical structure of the international state system or neoliberalism’s stress on economic interdependence –both of which reduce religion to an intervening variable– Troy argues for a “holistic

perspective" (p. 10) which is sensitive to the impact of religion at all three images of international relations, i.e. man, the state, and the international system.

Troy prefers approaches that think "outside the box" (p. 65) of conventional theorizing. René Girard's mimetic theory, for example, shows how religion offers a pathway to overcome violence through processes of imitating good rather than bad desires and following rules, virtues, and rites. Alasdair MacIntyre's narrative theory views religion as a social tradition and puts the analytical focus on communal practices, virtues, and on integrity, especially of religious leaders. Social constructivists, on their part, stress the importance of social rules, meanings, and expectations which religious systems construct and live out through ritual, sacred texts, and daily behavior. The English School's emphasizes on the role of shared culture, rules of conduct such as international law, and international principles such as sovereignty. Together they form the normative foundation of international society yet depend on the support of global elites. Here, Troy asserts that "religious leaders can contribute to the way international society is, and may even change it" (p. 92) and encourages us to think of both religion and secularism as key institutions underpinning international society. In terms of classical realism, Troy reminds his readers of the Christian origins of that perspective. Acknowledging figures such as St. Augustine, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Hans Morgenthau, Troy stresses that realism –in its Christian or classical version– is all about prudence, self-restraint, responsibility, the lesser evil, the weighing of consequences, and tragic human choices rather than Realpolitik, neo-conservatism, and a lust for power.

The easiness with which Troy painstakingly examines the pitfalls and opportunities of mainstream and alternative theoretical approaches to the study of religion is remarkable. Yet his pluralistic approach leaves an important deeper question unanswered: What is the point anyway of trying to integrate religion into different IR theories? Barbató's argument is clear: we need new, better, and more religious discourses, perspectives, and practices to create a less conflictual and more just world. Despite its bold title *Christian Approaches to International Affairs* makes the more modest argument as the author oscillates between the normative argument that "religion, with its transcendental perspective, is necessary in politics" (p. 62) and the empirical argument that a better understanding of world politics simply requires an acknowledgement of its religious dimension and a variety of theoretical frameworks.

While it is important to have the right hermeneutic tools for grasping the religious dimension of world politics the problems of poor people in unsafe places are often far away from the theoretical debates IR theorists like to focus on. People who are stuck by poverty, discrimination, and conflict are not interested in what theories may best describe, explain, or predict their situation. They are interested in much more applied analyses, recommendations, and actions that will help mitigate or end their suffering in their very concrete circumstances. The religion and IR literature has already moved from its first debate "how, if at all, does religion matter?" to the current debate "how should we study and approach religion". It is to be hoped that the question "how can the acknowledgement and study of specific religions traditions and communities help solve or mitigate concrete cases of injustice and violence?" will be soon given closer consideration.

A problem bedeviling *Christian Approaches to International Affairs* is its approach to the concept of religion. Troy rightly argues that “a clear-cut definition of religion in the context of politics cannot be given: it is neither possible nor necessary” but then advances a rather substantive definition of religion as “absolute being” (p. 53). While this definition fits with the Christian understanding of a personal God, it is too fuzzy to summarize the bewildering variety of claims or acknowledgments that a given community or way of life constitutes a “religion”. As William Cavanaugh has convincingly shown, religion is a social construct (Cavanaugh, 2009) and “God is not religious” (Cavanaugh, 2004). It is not a biblical concept but a quintessentially modern concept which only acquired its contemporary meaning following the decline of the Church and the rise of the modern state in the 15th and 16th century. It is a concept whose very foundation rests on problematic distinctions (sacred/secular; private/public; faith/reason; peaceful/violent) which are either used to contain and discipline religious activities and truth claims or misused in order to seek legal privileges and tax exemptions.

While Troy asserts that we need “another notion of religion in world politics” (p. 123—the title of his concluding chapter), I am skeptical whether a reconceptualization of religion helps to overcome these entrenched conceptual blinders. The actual connotations of the concept of religion are so entrenched and problematic that they are either claimed by or used to characterize traditions or groups as diverse as pacifist versions of Christianity, al-Qaeda’s abhorrent version of violent Islamism, the brainwashing sect Scientology, or the satirical “Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster”, not even to mention contemporary forms of idolatry such as excessive nationalism or untamed capitalism. It may be time to “forget” general speculation about religion in favor of more concrete analysis of specific traditions, communities, and practices.

Nevertheless, despite my two critical inquiries about the purpose of integrating religion into different IR theories and the usage of the concept of religion, *Christian Approaches to International Affairs* goes at great length to expose the reader to the most prominent debates that have been discussed in the religion and politics literature over the past decade, such as the religious resurgence thesis, the de-privatization of religion, its ambivalence, the role of fundamentalism, or the nature of religious soft power. Together with *Pilgrimage, Politics, and International Relations* it deserves to be on every reading list for graduate seminars on religion and politics or ethics and international affairs, especially but hopefully not exclusively at Catholic universities.

Both books are well-written, sophisticated, and over-due attempts to bring Christian voices to bear upon established ways of thinking and talking about international relations which, given the secular nature, if not bias, of IR, will make the discipline more diverse and colorful. Given the depth to which Realpolitik thinking and concepts such as the national interest are entrenched in both IR theories but especially in the real world of international affairs, these interventions may not necessarily make the world more humane and peaceful but certainly constitute prophetic cries in the wilderness. Whether the concept of religion and a focus on its relationship with IR theories are useful to accomplish the humanist hopes of “less conflict and more justice” underpinning these attempts to Christianize international affairs remain open questions though for further methodological, conceptual, and political debate.

REFERENCES

- Cavanaugh, W. 2004. "God is not Religious" in *God is not...: Religious, Nice, "One of us", an American, a Capitalist* edited by D. Brent Laytham, 97-115. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Cavanaugh, W. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A. Alexander Stummvoll is Postdoctoral Fellow in the Instituto de Ciencia Política for the Núcleo Milenio para el Estudio de la Estatalidad y Democracia en América Latina, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. E-mail: astummvoll@uc.cl