

Faith and Power: Religion as the Missing Variable in International Relations Theories Din, Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorilerinde Unutulmuş Bir Değişken Olarak İman ve Güç

ایمان و قدرت: دین به عنوان متغیر فراموش شده در نظریات روابط بین الملل
الإيمان والسلطة: الدين كمتغير منسي في نظريات العلاقات الدولية

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical exploration of the exclusion of religion within dominant theories of International Relations (IR), particularly Realism, Liberalism, and Neo-Marxism; all of which originated in secular Western intellectual traditions. The study addresses the research question: In what ways can IR theory be reframed to adequately integrate religion as a fundamental element in the analysis of identity, power, and global political behavior? The main objective is to expose the conceptual blind spots in mainstream IR and to propose a broader, more inclusive theoretical approach. Utilizing a descriptive-analytical methodology grounded in thorough library-based research, the article investigates prominent examples of religion-influenced political movements, including the Iranian Revolution and Hindu nationalism, while drawing on insights from post-secular and decolonial theoretical traditions. The research finds that religion serves a critical function in the construction of international actions, values, and legitimacy. It concludes that recognizing religion within IR theory strengthens both analytical depth and policy applicability in a culturally diverse global landscape.

Keywords: Identity, IR Theory Critique, Post-Secularism, Post-colonialism, Religious Nationalism

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Özet

Bu makale, Uluslararası İlişkiler (Uİ) disiplininde baskın olan Realizm, Liberalizm ve Neo-Marksizm gibi teorilerin, seküler Batı entelektüel geleneklerinde şekillenmiş olmaları nedeniyle dini olguları büyük ölçüde dışlamasını eleştirel bir biçimde incelemektedir. Çalışma şu araştırma sorusuna yanıt aramaktadır: Uluslararası İlişkiler teorisi, kimlik, güç ve küresel siyasi davranışların analizinde dini merkezi bir unsur olarak nasıl içerecek şekilde yeniden çerçevelenebilir? Araştırmanın amacı, geleneksel Uİ yaklaşımlarındaki kavramsal kör noktaları ortaya koymak ve daha kapsayıcı bir kuramsal çerçeve önermektir. Tanımlayıcı-analitik yöntemeye dayanan bu çalışma, kapsamlı bir kütüphane araştırması yoluyla yürütülmüş; İran Devrimi ve Hindu milliyetçiliği gibi din temelli siyasi hareketleri incelemiş ve post-seküler ile sömürgecilik karşıtı kuramsal yaklaşımlardan yararlanmışır. Bulgular, dinin uluslararası eylemleri, değerleri ve meşruiyeti şekillendirmede belirleyici bir rol oynadığını göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak, Uİ teorisinde dine yer verilmesi, teorik derinliği artırmakta ve çok kültürlü küresel ortamda politika yapım süreçlerini daha etkili hale getirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kimlik, Uluslararası İlişkiler Teorisi Eleştirisi, Post-Sekülerizm, Sömürge sonrası, Dini Milliyetçilik

چکیده

مقاله حاضر به بررسی انتقادی کنار گذاشتن دین در چارچوب نظریه‌های مسلط روابط بین‌الملل (IR) به ویژه واقع‌گرایی، لیبرالیسم و نئومارکسیسم می‌پردازد؛ نظریه‌هایی که همگی در بستر سنت‌های فکری سکولار غربی شکل گرفته‌اند. این تحقیق به پرسش اصلی تحقیق پاسخ می‌دهد که: نظریه روابط بین‌الملل به چه شیوه‌هایی می‌تواند بازساخت شود تا دین را به‌عنوان عنصری بنیادی در تحلیل هویت، قدرت و رفتار سیاسی جهانی به‌درستی در برگیرد؟ هدف اصلی مقاله، آشکار ساختن خلأهای مفهومی در روابط بین‌الملل جریان اصلی و پیشنهاد رویکردی نظری گسترده‌تر و فراگیرتر است. با بهره‌گیری از روش توصیفی - تحلیلی و بر پایه تحقیق کتابخانه‌ای گسترده، مقاله نمونه‌های برجسته‌ای از جنبش‌های سیاسی متأثر از دین، از جمله انقلاب اسلامی ایران و ملی‌گرایی هندو را بررسی می‌کند و در عین حال از بینش‌های سنت‌های نظری پساسکولار و استعمارزدایانه بهره می‌گیرد. یافته‌های تحقیق نشان می‌دهد که دین نقش اساسی در شکل‌دهی به کنش‌ها، ارزش‌ها و مشروعیت در عرصه بین‌المللی ایفا می‌کند. در پایان نتیجه‌گیری می‌شود که

به رسمیت شناختن دین در نظریه روابط بین الملل موجب تقویت عمق تحلیلی و افزایش کاربست های سیاست گذاری در چشم انداز فرهنگی متنوع جهانی خواهد شد.

کلمات کلیدی: هویت، نقد نظریه روابط بین الملل، پسا سکولاریسم، پسا استعمارگرایی، ملی گرایی دینی

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة بالتحليل النقدي مسألة استبعاد الدين في إطار النظريات السائدة في العلاقات الدولية (IR)، ولا سيما الواقعية والليبرالية والنيوماركسية؛ وهي نظريات نشأت جميعها في سياقات فكرية غربية علمانية. وتسعى الدراسة إلى الإجابة عن سؤالها الرئيسي: كيف يمكن إعادة صياغة نظرية العلاقات الدولية بحيث تستوعب الدين كعنصر أساسي في تحليل الهوية والقوة والسلوك السياسي العالمي؟ أما الهدف الرئيس للمقالة فهو الكشف عن مواطن القصور المفهومي في التيار السائد للعلاقات الدولية، واقتراح مقاربة نظرية أوسع وأكثر شمولاً. واعتماداً على منهج وصفي - تحليلي مرتكز على بحث مكتبي معمق، تستعرض المقالة نماذج بارزة من الحركات السياسية المتأثرة بالدين، مثل الثورة الإسلامية في إيران والقومية الهندوسية، مستفيدةً في الوقت نفسه من رؤى الاتجاهات النظرية ما بعد العلمانية وما بعد الاستعمار. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الدين يؤدي دوراً جوهرياً في تشكيل الأفعال والقيم والشرعية على الصعيد الدولي. وتؤكد النتائج أن إدماج الدين في نظرية العلاقات الدولية يعزز العمق التحليلي ويوسع من آفاقها التطبيقية في بيئة عالمية متعددة الثقافات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية، نقد نظرية العلاقات الدولية، ما بعد العلمانية، ما بعد الاستعمار، القومية الدينية

1. Introduction

The study area concerned with global political interactions has historically been rooted in secular and Western intellectual frameworks, which has led to a critical gap in addressing the role of religion within International politics.¹ Prominent IR theories such as Realism, Liberalism, and Neo-Marxism have consistently overlooked or minimized the significance of religious factors, often relegating them to the realm of private belief or cultural remnants considered irrelevant to international affairs.² However, religion continues to exert substantial influence on the international stage, as evidenced by the Iranian Revolution, the rise of Hindu nationalism, and the growing impact of transnational faith-oriented organizations.³ This article aims to critically assess the inadequacies of mainstream IR theories in accounting for religion and to propose a conceptual framework that integrates religion as a central analytical factor in understanding power, identity, and political behavior in global affairs. By incorporating post-secular and decolonial perspectives, the study challenges the secular and Eurocentric assumptions that have long dominated the field and highlights how religion remains a pivotal driver of political and social processes worldwide.

The central goal of this study is to investigate how conventional IR theories have failed to capture the impact of religion and to explore alternative theoretical perspectives that redefine key IR concepts, offering insights into how religious beliefs shape authority, legitimacy, and transnational identities.⁴ Specifically, the research seeks to address the following question: In what ways can International Relations theory be reconceptualized to meaningfully include religion as a core factor in analyzing power, identity, and global political dynamics? By answering this question, the article seeks to contribute to broadening the theoretical scope of IR scholarship, moving beyond merely filling a gap to propose a framework that integrates religion into the analytical and normative dimensions of the discipline, with implications for both academic analysis and practical policymaking.

Methodologically, the study employs a descriptive and analytical approach, grounded in extensive library research. It critically reviews the existing literature

¹ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Politics of Secularism and IR," *E-International Relations* 7/5 (2008), 18.

² Shubha Kamala Prasad, "The Marginalisation of Religion in International Relations: Deconstructing Secular IR Theories," *South Asian Survey* 21/9 (2014), 35-50.

³ Ahmet Kayıntu, "The Criticism of Secular Criticism," *Bingöl University Journal of Social Sciences Institute* 2 9/18 (2025), 496-508.

⁴ Shameer Modongal, "The Resurgence of Religion in International Relations: How Theories Can Accommodate It?" *Cogent Social Sciences* 9/10 (2023), 1-12.

on IR theories, interrogating their secular biases, and combines this with detailed case studies of politically motivated religious movements, such as the Iranian Revolution and Hindu nationalism, to demonstrate how religion shapes international outcomes. In addition, the research incorporates insights from emerging post-secular and decolonial approaches to develop a more nuanced theoretical model that integrates religion into IR discourse. This qualitative methodology thus bridges conceptual analysis and empirical evidence, providing a comprehensive foundation for advancing theoretical innovation in the study of global politics.⁵ Finally, the paper is structured as follows: it begins with a critique of mainstream IR theories, highlighting their secular assumptions and marginalization of religion; it then examines case studies that illustrate religion's influence on political behavior and international outcomes; next, it proposes a conceptual framework for integrating religion into IR theory; and, finally, it discusses the broader implications for both research and policy-making.⁶

2. Literature Review

International Relations (IR) as an academic field has historically been shaped by intellectual traditions that emerged within secular Western societies.⁷ Dominant theories such as Realism, Liberalism, and Critical approaches like Neo-Marxism and Poststructuralism have, for the most part, ignored religion as a serious category of analysis.⁸ This neglect is not incidental but structural: the core assumptions of these theories systematically obscure religion's agency, limiting the ability of IR to explain phenomena where faith actively shapes political behavior.⁹ This oversight has increasingly come under scrutiny, especially in light of religiously inspired political phenomena such as the rise of Islamist political movements and the growth of Hindu nationalism in India. These developments challenge the ability of

⁵ Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito, "The Postsecular in International Relations: An Overview," *Review of International Studies* 38/5 (2012), 931–942.

⁶ Peter Phillips, "Religious Studies and Qualitative Research," in *Sage Research Methods Foundations* 19/1 8 (2019), 88.

⁷ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 10/2 (2004), 235–262.

⁸ Aabid Majeed Sheikh and Sayed Hanan Yusofi, "Religion in International Relations Theory," *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Research in Allied Education* 16/10 (2019), 120–145.

⁹ Jonathan Fox and Nukhet A. Sandal, "Toward Integrating Religion into International Relations Theory," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 17/5 (2010), 149–159.

secular IR theories to address the role of power and the persistence of religious identity and mobilization in global affairs.¹⁰

Classical Realist theorists, from early thinkers like Thucydides to modern figures such as Hans Morgenthau, emphasized state sovereignty, the anarchic structure of the international system, and the centrality of national interest.¹¹ Realism's focus on material power and strategic interests relegates religion to a tactical or instrumental role, masking its influence on legitimacy, authority, and collective identity. Religion, if acknowledged at all, was treated as a tool of manipulation or a backdrop to geopolitical maneuvering rather than a central driving force.¹² With the advent of Neorealism, particularly in the work of Kenneth Waltz, the focus narrowed even further to the structural level, sidelining all non-material and ideational variables, including religion, which were deemed irrelevant to state behavior under anarchy.¹³

Liberal theorists also largely disregard religion, assuming that political actors operate according to rational, secular principles and that cooperation and peace arise from democratic institutions, trade, and interdependence.¹⁴ Rooted in Enlightenment ideals, liberal IR thought inherited a normative separation of religion and politics. Consequently, it often treats religious beliefs as private matters with little bearing on international dynamics.¹⁵ Liberalism's rationalist assumptions obscure the role of religious motivations in shaping decision-making, alliance formation, and collective action, particularly in contexts where faith-based norms guide political behavior. Even when religion appears in liberal narratives, such as in democratization or civil society, it is rarely given a central explanatory role in political agency or conflict.¹⁶

While Critical approaches, including Marxist and Neo-Marxist perspectives, have been more attentive to ideology and power, they too display a clear materialist

¹⁰ Astha Chadha, "Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the Ethics of Scholarship," *Review of International Studies* 34/1 (2008), 5-27.

¹¹ Nawid Aria, "Exploring the Possibility of Overcoming the Anarchic Nature of the International System Through a Constructivist Approach," *IUP Journal of International Relations* 19/1 (2025), 7-20

¹² Sheikh and Yusofi, "Religion in International Relations Theory."

¹³ Nawid Aria, *Exploring the Possibility*, 12.

¹⁴ Brain D. Weigelt, "Understanding the Impact of Secularism within the Liberal International Order," *Journal of Church and State* 61/8 (2019), 106-123.

¹⁵ Tanya B. Schwarz and Cecelia Lynch, "Religion in International Relations," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* 17/3 (November 22, 2016), 32-45.

¹⁶ Andrew Lloyd Williams, "Religion and International Relations Theory: The Case of 'New' Historiography of Human Rights," *Religions* 13/2 (2022), 39.

and secular orientation.¹⁷ In line with Marx's view of religion as an ideological illusion, many of these frameworks regard religion as a secondary phenomenon that distracts from underlying class relations and economic structures.¹⁸ By reducing religion to a reflection of material conditions, these approaches fail to recognize its autonomous influence on social cohesion, authority structures, and mobilization, revealing a conceptual blind spot in understanding ideologically motivated movements. Similarly, although Poststructuralist and Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Michel Foucault have critically examined Western epistemologies, they often treat religion more as a discursive object rather than an autonomous political force.¹⁹

A more analytical reading shows that this descriptive treatment underestimates religion's operational role in shaping norms, identity, and political legitimacy, demonstrating how secular bias persists even within critical frameworks.

This theoretical oversight has resulted in significant gaps in understanding contemporary political events. The 1979 uprising in Iran, the increasing role of religious ideologies in foreign policy, and the political success of religiously motivated movements around the world reveal the inadequacy of frameworks that treat religion as irrelevant or marginal.²⁰ Scholars like Scott Thomas have made a strong case for rethinking this position. He argues that religion is not simply a cultural residue, but a profound source of identity, authority, and political energy.²¹ His notion of "faith diplomacy" points to the need for IR scholars to rethink secular assumptions and recognize religion's operational role in shaping political behavior.²²

Furthermore, the collaborative work of Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah provides empirical grounding for integrating religion into IR. Their studies regarding the influence of religious identity within national political

¹⁷ Robert M. Bosco, "Religion and International Relations: Critical Ways Forward?" *E-International Relations* 4/3 (2014), 45-60.

¹⁸ John Maguire, "Marx on the Religious Illusion," *New Blackfriars* 53/628 (1972), 408-415.

¹⁹ Aishling Mc Morrow, "Introducing Poststructuralism in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations* 7/5 (2018), 18-34.

²⁰ Jeffrey Haynes, "Religion and International Relations: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?" *Religions* 12/5 (2021), 328.

²¹ Scott Thomas, "The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Study of World Politics," *Millennium* 24/2 (1995), 289-299.

²² Scott M. Thomas, "R. Scott Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, Two Decades On: A Postsecular Reading for the Religious World of the 21st Century?" *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 18/2 (2020), 92-98.

spheres, conflict, and diplomacy underline that religious actors and ideologies are not anomalies but significant global forces.²³ post-secular and decolonial perspectives explicitly address these gaps by validating religious motivations as analytically significant and highlighting the limitations of secular Western assumptions in understanding non-Western political contexts. The sociological work of Peter Berger on the desecularization of the world, and José Casanova's analysis of the public role of religion, further challenge the foundational secularism of social science in general and IR in particular.²⁴

In more recent years, a limited yet expanding corpus of literature has attempted to incorporate religious perspectives into IR through the development of subfields such as "Religion and International Relations" and even "Theologies of International Politics."²⁵ However, these emerging approaches remain marginal in the broader discipline. As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd argues, the issue is not merely empirical but epistemological: the dominance of secularism in IR reflects a deeper ideological bias about what constitutes valid knowledge and political agency.²⁶ Her critique draws attention to the fact that IR theory itself is embedded in a specific Western, secular worldview that filters out religious expressions of power.²⁷

Taken together, the existing scholarship suggests that mainstream IR theories suffer from a structural conceptual deficiency due to their neglect of religion. While there is a growing recognition of the need to address this gap, the theoretical core of IR remains insufficiently equipped to explain the complexities of religion-driven global politics.²⁸ This article contributes to the ongoing corrective effort by positioning religion as a central, analytically indispensable factor, while demonstrating how post-secular and decolonial perspectives can provide a corrective lens to reinterpret global political dynamics.

²³ Paul Barker, "Review - God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics," *E-International Relations* 8/3 (2012), 15-35.

²⁴ Dylan Reaves, "Peter Berger and the Rise and Fall of the Theory of Secularization," *Denison Journal of Religion* 11/8 (2012), 65-88.

²⁵ Vendulka Kubalkova, "The 'Turn to Religion' in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations* 17/12 (2013), 35-61

²⁶ Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman. "Politics of Secularism and IR," *E-International Relations* 7/5 (2008), 18.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Jonathan Fox, "The Multiple Impacts of Religion on International Relations: Perceptions and Reality," *Politique étrangère* 4/2 (2006), 1059-1071.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study offers a critical analysis of predominant IR theories by emphasizing their core secular assumptions, which have contributed to the marginalization of religion as a meaningful political influence. Dominant paradigms like Realism, Liberalism, and Neo-Marxism, shaped by Western Enlightenment thought, focus on material interests, institutions, or class struggle, often neglecting the deep influence of religious beliefs on political identity and behavior.²⁹

Realism, with its focus on power and survival in an anarchic system, generally views religion as a secondary cultural factor or a tool for political mobilization rather than a core influence on state behavior.³⁰ Liberalism, grounded in secular ideals of rational cooperation and democracy, relegates religion to the private sphere, thus failing to account for its public and political roles.³¹ Similarly, Neo-Marxist approaches see religion primarily as an ideological reflection of material conditions, rather than as an autonomous force.³²

To challenge these limitations, this study employs a post-secular perspective that recognizes religion's ongoing and public influence in global politics. Scholars like Jürgen Habermas and José Casanova emphasize that religion has neither disappeared nor become irrelevant but continues to shape political identities and actions worldwide.³³ Peter Berger's concept of "desecularization" further supports this by showing how religion remains a powerful structural element in many societies.³⁴

Additionally, this framework incorporates decolonial critiques that question the Eurocentric secular bias embedded in IR theories. The assumption that secularism is universal ignores diverse political realities where religion and politics are deeply intertwined.³⁵ Decolonial thought encourages expanding IR's

²⁹ Kevin Bloor, "Theories of Global Politics," *E-International Relations* 21/8 (2022), 165-180.

³⁰ Brent J. Steele, "Review - Religion and the Realist Tradition," *E-International Relations* 35/18 (September 26, 2015), 402-430.

³¹ Kubalkova, Vendulka. "The 'Turn to Religion' in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations* 17/12 (2013), 35-61.

³² Nukhet A. Sandal and Patrick James, "Religion and International Relations Theory: Towards a Mutual Understanding," *European Journal of International Relations* 17/3 (2011), 3-25.

³³ Stella Casola, "Articulate the Missing: The Role of Religion in Political Modernity," *European Journal of Social Theory* 24/4 (2021), 467-484.

³⁴ Vyacheslav Karpov, "Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework," *Journal of Church and State* 52/2 (20 10), 232-270.

³⁵ Somdeep Sen, "Decolonising to Reimagine International Relations: An Introduction," *Review of International Studies* 49/3 (2023), 339-345.

epistemological boundaries to include religious worldviews as legitimate sources of political authority and identity.³⁶

Methodologically, the article uses an interpretive approach to analyze how religion influences key political events, such as the Iranian Revolution and Hindu nationalism, illustrating the gaps in existing IR theories. Rather than proposing a new religious IR theory, the goal is to expose the secular blindness of current paradigms and advocate for the inclusion of religion as a critical analytical variable.

4. The Secular Foundations of Mainstream IR Theories

The academic field of International Relations (IR) developed during a period heavily influenced by Western intellectual traditions, which were marked by a strong commitment to secularism.³⁷ The process of secularization, the deliberate detachment of religion from political authority and state governance, served as a foundational backdrop for the emergence of the major IR theories.³⁸

Consequently, dominant frameworks like Realism, Liberalism, and Neo-Marxism are deeply embedded in secular assumptions that shape their understanding of power, state behavior, and the nature of the international order. Grasping these secular roots is essential to understanding why religion is systematically overlooked as a significant factor in global political analysis within mainstream IR.³⁹

The secularization of Western political thought was part of a broader transformation linked to the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity. This era witnessed the gradual erosion of religious authority, supplanted by the growing influence of scientific rationalism and the establishment of political sovereignty grounded in territorial states.⁴⁰ Prominent political thinkers, including Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Immanuel Kant, played a critical role in this shift, advocating for political order, social contracts, and human rights while confining religious authority to a private or non-political domain. By the time IR emerged as

³⁶ Zeynep Gulsah Capan, "Decolonising International Relations?" *Third World Quarterly* 38/7 (2017), 1–15.

³⁷ Adrian Pabst, "The Secularism of Post-Secularity: Religion, Realism, and the Revival of Grand Theory in IR," *Review of International Studies* 38/5 (2012), 995–1017.

³⁸ Tom Eneji Ogar, Gregory Ajima Onah, Enggar Objantoro, and Afiful Ikhwan, "Debates on Secularisation and Religion in International Politics," *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis* 6/2 (2023), 117–137.

³⁹ Pabst, "The Secularism of Post-Secularity," 1002.

⁴⁰ Ludwig Gelot, "Secularisation as an International Crisis in Legitimacy," *Politics and Religion Journal* 6/1 (2022), 61–86.

a distinct academic discipline, the notion that politics should be studied independently of religious considerations had become firmly established.⁴¹

Realism, considered the oldest and most dominant IR theory, clearly exemplifies this secular foundation. Early realists like Hans Morgenthau focused on the absence of a central authority within the international system and the importance of power politics to ensure state survival.⁴² Morgenthau's political realism was influenced by the scientific rationalism of his era, emphasizing empirical observation and practical calculation rather than normative or ideological factors, including religion.⁴³ In this view, states are rational actors pursuing national interests predominantly defined by material and strategic concerns. Religion, when mentioned, was often reduced to ideological rhetoric or a means of domestic political mobilization, rather than being recognized as a fundamental influence on international relations.⁴⁴

The emergence of Neorealism, also known as structural realism, advocated by Kenneth Waltz, further reinforced the secular framework of IR theory. Waltz's approach abstracted from the internal attributes of states to focus on the limitations enforced by the decentralized nature of the global system.⁴⁵ This structural focus diminished the importance of ideational factors, including religion, which were deemed secondary or irrelevant to the behavior of states at the systemic level. The secular orientation inherent in Neorealism effectively pushed religion to the margins, viewing it either as a strategic tool or an extraneous element to the analysis of international structure.⁴⁶

In a parallel vein, Liberal IR theory, which is rooted in Enlightenment principles, posits that human progress through reason, cooperation, and institutional development can overcome the anarchic tendencies underscored by Realists.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Marcello Pera, "Kant on Politics, Religion, and Secularism," *Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences - Acta* 1 7/15 (2012), 12-24.

⁴² Michael C. Williams, "Why Ideas Matter in International Relations: Hans Morgenthau, Classical Realism, and the Moral Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 58/4 (2004), 633-665.

⁴³ Murielle Cozette, "Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the Ethics of Scholarship," *Review of International Studies* 34/11 (2008), 5-27.

⁴⁴ Brian C. Schmidt and Colin Wight, "Rationalism and the 'Rational Actor Assumption' in Realist International Relations Theory," *International Theory* 19/2 (2023), 1-20.

⁴⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, "Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory," *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (1990): 21-37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Jeffrey W. Meiser, "Introducing Liberalism in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations* 11/10 (February 18, 2018), 88-110.

Prominent liberal thinkers such as John Rawls and Robert Keohane envision a world where democracy, free markets, and international institutions promote peace and collaboration. This hopeful vision is deeply grounded in secular assumptions about human rationality and political order.⁴⁸ Religious beliefs and motivations are generally relegated to the private sphere or considered potential obstacles to rational cooperation. Although Liberalism acknowledges the importance of civil society and cultural diversity, religion remains largely marginalized as a political factor in international affairs.⁴⁹

Even Critical Theories and Neo-Marxism, which emerged as alternatives to dominant paradigms, are characterized by a secular bias. While they emphasize on economic structures, class conflict, and ideological power, these perspectives often adopt a materialist view of history and society that regards religion primarily as an ideological superstructure reflective of underlying economic conditions. Influenced by Marxist thought, religion is frequently seen as a mechanism of social control or false consciousness rather than an independent political force.⁵⁰ Furthermore, post-structuralist and postcolonial critiques, despite challenging Western epistemologies, tend to treat religion as a discursive phenomenon rather than a substantive actor within international politics.⁵¹

The common secular foundation underlying these major IR theories results in a consistent underestimation of religion's role in international affairs. By framing politics primarily in secular, material, and institutional terms, these theories fail to adequately address how religion shapes political identities, legitimizes authority, and drives political behavior.⁵² This secular legacy not only limits the theoretical scope of IR but also restricts the discipline's capacity to interpret and respond

⁴⁸ Nicholas Rengger, "Political Theory and International Relations: Promised Land or Exit from Eden?" *International Affairs* 76/4 (2000), 755-770.

⁴⁹ Modongal, Shameer. "The Resurgence of Religion in International Relations: How Theories Can Accommodate It?" *Cogent Social Sciences* 9/10 (2023), 1-12.

⁵⁰ Samantha May, Erin K. Wilson, Claudia Baumgart-Ochse, and Faiz Sheikh, "The Religious as Political and the Political as Religious: Globalisation, Post Secularism and the Shifting Boundaries of the Sacred," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 15/3 (2014), 331-346.

⁵¹ Maja Zehfuss, "Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, and Postcolonialism," in *Handbook of International Relations* 14/10 (2013), 145-169.

⁵² Jodok Troy, "The Power of the Zealots: Religion, Violence, and International Relations," *Journal of Religion and Violence* 23/18 (2013), 216-233.

effectively to the profound influence of religion, driving political movements in contemporary global politics.⁵³

5. Religion as the Overlooked Factor in International Politics

Building on the earlier discussion of the secular origins of dominant International Relations (IR) theories, it becomes evident why religion has been persistently sidelined within these frameworks. The secular foundation embedded in Realism, Liberalism, and Neo-Marxism inherently restricts their capacity to acknowledge religion as a meaningful and autonomous variable influencing global politics.⁵⁴ This section delves into the reasons behind religion's neglect in IR scholarship, the consequences of this omission, and its significance for understanding contemporary international dynamics.

The sidelining of religion within IR is not simply an academic oversight but reflects broader historical and intellectual patterns. The secularization thesis, which dominated Western social sciences for much of the twentieth century, posited that as societies modernize and embrace scientific rationality, religion's public and political significance would wane.⁵⁵ This belief led many scholars to view religion as an outdated phenomenon or a strictly private concern incompatible with the principles of modern state sovereignty and rational political conduct. As a result, religious motivations and identities were largely excluded from mainstream IR analyses.⁵⁶

This exclusion presents significant analytical shortcomings. Religion wields considerable influence in shaping collective identities, loyalties, and claims to legitimacy that often transcend national borders. Religious communities frequently act as transnational entities, impacting diplomatic relations, conflict developments, and policymaking processes.⁵⁷ Religious allegiances can supersede ethnic or national affiliations, complicating the state-centric focus that dominates much of IR theory. Additionally, religious ideologies offer interpretive frameworks

⁵³ Jonathan Fox, "The Multiple Impacts of Religion on International Relations: Perceptions and Reality," *Politique étrangère* 4/2 (2006), 1059–1071.

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Secularism and International Relations Theory", *paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, 15/18 (2009), 1–10.*

⁵⁵ Kostanca Dhima and Matt Golder, "Secularization Theory and Religion," *Politics and Religion* 14/5 (2021), 37–53.

⁵⁶ Luca Mavelli, "Security and Secularization in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 18/9 (2012), 177–199.

⁵⁷ Jeffery Haynes, "Transnational Religious Actors and International Politics," *Third World Quarterly* 22/2 (2001), 143–158.

that political actors use to make sense of events, legitimize decisions, and mobilize followers.⁵⁸

The inability of mainstream IR theories to account for religion's role has rendered them inadequate for explaining pivotal global occurrences. The 1979 Iranian Revolution is a prime example: a revolution deeply rooted in religious motivation that overthrew a secular regime and dramatically altered regional geopolitics.⁵⁹ Frameworks grounded in Realism and Liberalism, which emphasize material interests, institutions, and secular rationality, failed to fully grasp the theological and ideological core of this upheaval. Likewise, the ascent of political Islam, including organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah, challenges the secularist assumptions of IR by illustrating how religion can serve as a primary political identity and force.⁶⁰

In South Asia, the rise of Hindu nationalism and its impact on India's domestic policies and foreign relations further exemplify religion's centrality in international politics.⁶¹ Religious nationalism often merges with state objectives, erasing clear distinctions between religion and politics, an area where mainstream IR theories struggle to provide adequate explanations. These cases reveal that religion is not a peripheral factor but can fundamentally shape state conduct and international interactions.⁶²

Recognizing this lacuna, scholars have increasingly called for greater integration of religion within IR analysis. Scott Thomas, for example, contends that religion functions as an active political agent rather than a mere cultural artifact.⁶³ His concept of "faith diplomacy" highlights religion's dual potential to both exacerbate conflicts and facilitate peacebuilding. Similarly, research by Monica Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Shah underscores the empirical significance of

⁵⁸ Zikun Yang and Li Li, "Positioning Religion in International Relations: The Performative, Discursive, and Relational Dimension of Religious Soft Power," *Religions* 12/11 (2021), 940.

⁵⁹ Nathan Olsen, "Revolutionary Religion: Shia Islam and the Iranian Revolution," *E-International Relations* 18/16 (2019), 47-62.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Fox and Nukhet A. Sandal, "Toward Integrating Religion into International Relations Theory," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 17/5 (2010), 149-159.

⁶¹ Thorsten Wojczewski, "Populism, Hindu Nationalism, and Foreign Policy in India: The Politics of Representing 'the People,'" *International Studies Review* 22/3 (September 2020), 396-422.

⁶² Anna Grzymala-Busse, "Religious Nationalism and Religious Influence," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* 6/5 (2019), 1-10.

⁶³ Scott Thomas, "Religion and International Conflict," in *Religion and International Relations* 21/9 (2000), 1-18.

religion in civil wars, peacemaking, and foreign policy, urging IR scholars to reconsider their secular assumptions.⁶⁴

Ignoring religion also carries normative and practical risks. Disregarding religious motivations can lead to misunderstandings of the drivers behind conflicts and political movements that are deeply embedded in faith traditions.⁶⁵ This can result in misguided policies that overlook the religious dimensions of insurgencies or peace processes. Furthermore, dismissing religion diminishes IR's capacity to engage with political realities in societies where religion and politics are intertwined.⁶⁶

Several factors contribute to the neglect of religion in IR. Beyond the intellectual legacy of secularism, there is often hesitation among scholars to engage with religious worldviews perceived as irrational or incompatible with secular academic inquiry.⁶⁷ Additionally, the methodological complexities of studying religion, such as its symbolic and intangible elements, pose challenges within the positivist and empirical frameworks prevalent in IR research.⁶⁸

6. Post Secular and Decolonial Perspectives on Religion in IR

Building upon the previous discussions regarding religion's marginalization in mainstream International Relations (IR) theories and the concrete examples of religion-driven political movements, it is essential to consider theoretical frameworks that challenge entrenched secular biases.⁶⁹ The post-secular and decolonial perspectives offer critical insights that reframe the understanding of religion's role in IR, addressing the shortcomings of conventional paradigms and fostering a more comprehensive view of international politics⁷⁰.

⁶⁴ Scott M. Thomas, "A Globalized God: Religion's Growing Influence in International Politics," *Foreign Affairs* 89/6 (2010), 93–101.

⁶⁵ Zeev Maoz and Errol A. Henderson, "Religion and International Conflict," *Scriptures, Shrines, Scapegoats, and World Politics: Religious Sources of Conflict and Cooperation in the Modern Era* 19/15 (2020), 146–223.

⁶⁶ David Smock, "Religion in World Affairs: Its Role in Conflict and Peace. Special Report" *Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace*, 201/103 (2008), 220–243.

⁶⁷ Jalal Derakhsheh and Ruhol Amin Saeedi, "Secularization Theory and Religion," *Politics and Religion* 14/1 (2021), 37–53.

⁶⁸ Shireen T. Hunter, "Religion and International Affairs: From Neglect to Over-Emphasis," *E-International Relations* 8/5 (2010), 1–4.

⁶⁹ Joanna Kulska and Anna M. Solarz, "Post-Secular Identity? Developing a New Approach to Religion in International Relations and IR Studies," *Religions* 12/11 (2021), 982.

⁷⁰ Mavelli, Luca, and Fabio Petito. "The Postsecular in International Relations: An Overview," *Review of International Studies* 38/5 (2012), 931–942.

The post-secular perspective directly questions the long-held Enlightenment assumption that modernization results in the inevitable decline or privatization of religion. While mainstream IR scholarship has generally accepted secularization as a universal and progressive trend, post-secular theorists argue that religion remains a potent and influential factor in public and political spheres around the globe.⁷¹ Thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and José Casanova emphasize that religion is not merely a leftover from the past or a private matter but an active and dynamic force influencing identities, political movements, and international relations. This approach urges IR scholars to move beyond simplistic secular, religious dichotomies and to acknowledge the complex and intertwined relationship between faith and politics.⁷²

Post-secularism emphasizes religion's dual role in both conflict and peacebuilding, an aspect often ignored by secular IR theories. Faith-based diplomacy and interfaith dialogue show religion's potential as a force for cooperation. Thus, post-secular approaches call for a more nuanced understanding of religion's complex influence on global politics.⁷³

In parallel, decolonial theory critiques the dominance of Eurocentric and secularist worldviews within IR scholarship. Decolonial thinkers argue that the secular, religious division, widely regarded as universal in IR, is in fact a culturally specific construct rooted in Western modernity and perpetuated through colonial and imperial histories.⁷⁴ This perspective exposes how Western secularism often marginalizes or silences non-western epistemologies in which religion and politics are deeply interconnected.⁷⁵ By challenging these epistemic biases, decolonial approaches seek to reclaim alternative political frameworks that incorporate religious beliefs and spiritual knowledge as legitimate sources of political authority and identity.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Kodai Kusano and Waleed Ahmad Jami, "Selected Anomalies or Overlooked Variability?" *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology* 3/2 (202), 103.

⁷² Adrian Nicolae Atanasescu, "Jurgen Habermas' Turn to a 'Post-Secular Society': From Sublation of the Sacred to Translation of the Sacred," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11/4 (2019), 113-136

⁷³ Nukhet Sandal, "Post Conflict Processes and Religion: An Overview," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* 23/18 (2019), 180-197.

⁷⁴ Richard Fosu, "Towards a Critical Decolonial Turn/Theory: Beyond the Binary of the West Versus Africa," *Africa Spectrum* 60/18 (2024), 69-83.

⁷⁵ Zeynep Gulsah Capan. "Decolonising International Relations?" *Third World Quarterly* 38/7 (2017), 1-15.

⁷⁶ Sen, Somdeep. "Decolonising to Reimagine International Relations: An Introduction," *Review of International Studies* 49/3 (2023), 339-345.

Together, post-secular and decolonial perspectives provide a powerful critique of the secular assumptions that underpin dominant IR theories. They open new avenues for understanding religion as a vital and varied influence in contemporary international affairs rather than a marginal or obsolete factor.⁷⁷ Integrating these perspectives enriches IR scholarship and better equips it to engage with the diverse and interlinked character of the contemporary global political environment.⁷⁸

7. Reconceptualizing Power and Identity: Integrating Religion into IR Theory

Building on prior discussions about the critical but often overlooked role of religion in international affairs, as well as insights from post-secular and decolonial frameworks, it is imperative to revise key concepts within International Relationship (IR) fundamentally.⁷⁹ In particular, the central ideas of power and identity demand reexamination to effectively incorporate religion as an essential analytical factor. This integration confronts the limitations of traditional secular and materialist IR paradigms and promises a more thorough understanding of contemporary global politics.⁸⁰

Widely recognized IR frameworks such as Realism and Liberalism have typically conceptualized power in terms of military strength, economic assets, and institutional capacities.⁸¹ These approaches tend to emphasize tangible, quantifiable elements of power, focusing on strategic interests and material resources.⁸² Yet, this narrow view overlooks the significant influence that religious beliefs and identities exert in shaping political authority, legitimacy, and social cohesion. Religion often embodies normative power by providing moral

⁷⁷ Debora Spini, "Decolonizing Postsecularization," *Annali di Studi Religiosi* 21/3 (2020), 167–179.

⁷⁸ Ernest Lee, "Overcoming Empire's Seduction: Decolonizing International Relations," *E-International Relations* 15/9 (2020), 44–67.

⁷⁹ Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito, "The Postsecular in International Relations: An Overview," *Review of International Studies* 38/5 (2012), 931–942.

⁸⁰ Kexin Huang, "Rethinking the Role of Secularism in the Discipline of IR and the Chinese Experience," *Proceedings of the 2022 8th International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2022)* 6/4 (2022), 247–253.

⁸¹ Nawid Aria, "The Power of Ideas: A Constructivist Reinterpretation of Security in International Relations," *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 2/3 (2025), 18–36

⁸² Rawa M. Mahmood, "Power in International Relations: Insights from Realist and Liberal Theories," *European Scientific Journal* 21/8 (2025), 27.

frameworks and shared meanings that deeply affect the actions of state and non-state entities alike.⁸³

Religious identity further complicates the conventional state-centric model in IR. It transcends territorial boundaries and fosters transnational communities linked by common faith and values.⁸⁴ Such religious affiliations can act as potent mobilizing forces, altering political alliances, conflicts, and cooperative endeavors in ways that go beyond traditional geopolitical calculations.⁸⁵ Examples include the solidarity evident among Muslim-majority nations and the global influence wielded by the Vatican as a non-state religious actor, demonstrating how religion redefines both identity and power relationships in the international arena.⁸⁶

The inclusion of religion into IR theory also necessitates a broader understanding of security. Many conflicts are driven by religious motives that materialist security frameworks struggle to explain adequately.⁸⁷ Viewing security through a religious lens means recognizing existential threats understood in spiritual or moral terms, which can be as compelling and urgent as territorial or economic concerns. This expanded concept permits more nuanced interpretations of conflict dynamics and peacebuilding processes.⁸⁸

Moreover, acknowledging religion within IR promotes a more pluralistic and contextually aware theoretical approach. It encourages scholars to move beyond Eurocentric, secular biases and engage with a diversity of worldviews that shape political actions worldwide.⁸⁹ This shift advocates for interdisciplinary methodologies that combine insights from political science, theology, sociology,

⁸³ Henrik Larsen, "Normative Power Europe and the Importance of Discursive Context: The European Union and the Politics of Religion," *Cooperation and Conflict* 49/4 (2014), 419-437.

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Haynes, "Religion, Nationalism, and Transnational Actors," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* 5/4 (2018), 1-10.

⁸⁵ M. Lutfullah Karaman, "Religion, Politics, and Mobilisation: A Theoretical Perspective with a Special Note on 'The Indian Khilafat Movement,'" *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 3/1 (2005), 36-55.

⁸⁶ Ângela Leite, Bruno Nobre, and Paulo Dias, "Religious Identity, Religious Practice, and Religious Beliefs Across Countries and World Regions," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 45/2 (2023), 107-132.

⁸⁷ Derek Bolton, "Security, Society, and the Perennial Struggles over the Sacred: Revising the Wars of Religion in International Relations Theory," *International Organization* 78/2 (2024), 224-258.

⁸⁸ Shameer Modongal, "The Resurgence of Religion in International Relations: How Theories Can Accommodate It?" *Cogent Social Sciences* 9/10 (2023), 1-12.

⁸⁹ Aabid Majeed Sheikh and Sayed Hanan Yusofi, "Religion in International Relations Theory," *Journal of Advances and Scholarly Researches in Allied Education* 16/10 (2019), 120-145.

and anthropology to understand more effectively the intricate role of religion in global relations.⁹⁰

8. Implications for Future IR Research and Policy

Building on the prior critical evaluations of mainstream International Relations (IR) theories and the integration of religion into core concepts such as power, identity, and global political dynamics, this concluding section highlights the crucial ramifications for the future of IR scholarship and policymaking.⁹¹ The entrenched secular bias within traditional IR has obscured vital aspects of international affairs, thereby limiting both the depth of theoretical inquiry and the effectiveness of practical policy measures.⁹² To progress the field and enhance global governance, it is imperative to adopt more inclusive frameworks that fully acknowledge the complex and persistent role of religion.⁹³

First, future research in IR must broaden its analytical scope by consistently incorporating religion as a fundamental factor. This necessitates transcending secular assumptions and recognizing the multiple functions religion fulfills, from forming collective identities and legitimizing political power to driving conflicts and supporting peace initiatives.⁹⁴ Researchers should adopt interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from political science, sociology, theology, and anthropology to adequately grasp religion's multifaceted impact on international relations. Embracing post-secular and decolonial viewpoints will further help to dismantle Eurocentric biases and offer more nuanced insights into global political processes.⁹⁵

Second, emphasizing religion's significance compels IR theorists to revisit and expand foundational concepts such as power, security, and identity.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Astha Chadha, "Reclaiming the Critical Dimension of Realism: Hans J. Morgenthau on the Ethics of Scholarship," *Review of International Studies* 34/1 (2008), 5–27.

⁹¹ Vendulka Kubalkova, "The 'Turn to Religion' in International Relations Theory," *E-International Relations* 17/12 (2013), 35–61.

⁹² Katharina McLaren, "Religion as 'Prime Institution' of International Society," *International Studies* 60/38 (2023), 7–28.

⁹³ Katherine Marshall, "Faith at International Policy Tables: The G20 Interfaith Forum," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 23/2 (2024), 96–100.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Fox and Nukhet A. Sandal, "Toward Integrating Religion into International Relations Theory," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 17/5 (2010), 149–159.

⁹⁵ Ursula Daxecker, Annette Freyberg, Inan, Mark Glasius, Geoffrey Underhill, and Darshan Vigneswara n, "Introduction: Interdisciplinarity and the International Relations Event Horizon," *European Journal of International Relations* 26/14 (2020), 3–13.

⁹⁶ Carolyn M. Warner and Stephen G. Walker, "Foreign Policy and Religion: An Overview," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* 8/7(2019), 1–10.

Future studies ought to investigate how religious norms, narratives, and communities influence state actions, non-state actors, alliance formations, and conflict resolution mechanisms.⁹⁷ This broader view allows for more advanced theories that explain global issues where religion is key, from sectarian conflicts to transnational faith movements and religion-based diplomacy.⁹⁸

From a policymaking perspective, neglecting religion risks misunderstanding political motivations and missing vital opportunities for constructive engagement. Decision-makers should craft approaches to diplomacy, conflict prevention, and peacebuilding that are culturally and religiously informed.⁹⁹ This involves recognizing religious leaders and institutions as essential actors in conflict zones and promoting interfaith dialogue as a tool for reconciliation. Enhancing religious literacy within diplomatic training and international organizations can lead to greater cultural sensitivity and more effective interventions in diverse geopolitical environments.¹⁰⁰ Incorporating religion into IR shifts focus from solely militarized responses to broader strategies that address identity and legitimacy. Recognizing religion's role in both conflict and peace enables more innovative and inclusive solutions to global challenges.¹⁰¹

9. Conclusion

This study critically assessed the secular foundations of dominant IR theories and their long-standing marginalization of religion in global affairs. Case studies such as the Iranian Uprising and Hindu nationalism demonstrate how conventional frameworks overlook religion's operational role, revealing structural blind spots in Realism, Liberalism, and Neo-Marxism. By drawing on post-secular and decolonial perspectives, the article proposes a framework that positions religion as a core analytical variable, rethinking power, security, and identity to account for faith-driven political dynamics and transnational religious influence.

⁹⁷ Mona Kanwal Sheikh, "How Does Religion Matter? Pathways to Religion in International Relations," *Review of International Studies* 38/2 (2012), 365-392.

⁹⁸ Pauline Kollontai, "Inter-Religious Work for Peace through Globalised Transnational Civil Society," *E-International Relations* 8/7 (2015), 23-47.

⁹⁹ Amnah Mustafa and Rana Eijaz Ahmad, "Role of Religion in Foreign Policy Decision Making," *Annals of Human and Social Sciences* 3/2 (2022), 30-42.

¹⁰⁰ S. Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana, "Ethno-Religious Conflicts: Exploring the Role of Religion in Conflict Resolution," *The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Resolution* 16/9 (2009), 264-280.

¹⁰¹ Michael Daniel Driessen, "Interreligious Dialogue, Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding: A Review," *Religions* 16/2 (2025), 150.

Integrating religion into IR has important policy implications. It informs diplomacy, conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and alliance formation, where understanding religious motivations is crucial for effective decision-making. Recognizing religious actors and norms allows scholars and practitioners to interpret political behavior more accurately and design culturally and religiously informed strategies. While this study provides a conceptual model, future research should explore additional empirical cases, examine other faith-based political movements, and develop methods to operationalize religion within IR analysis. In conclusion, the article advocates for a reoriented IR theory that fully incorporates religion, offering a theoretically robust and practically relevant framework for interpreting contemporary global politics and addressing the evolving complexities of the international system.

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