This is a repository copy of *How have the Modernization and Secularization Theses Shaped the Study of IR?*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/224371/

How Have the Modernization and Secularization Theses Shaped the Study of IR?

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/12/24/how-have-the-modernization-and-secularization-theses-shaped-the-study-of-ir/

METIN KOCA, DEC 24 2013

Introduction

"Modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion", says John Gray at the very outset of *Black Mass* (2007: 1). Gray's particular claim is that modern teleological ideologies inherited the apocalyptic vision of conventional religious thought. Yet, this claim that modern politics is a chapter in the history of religion might be made to mean many other things. For instance, it may mean that religion survived long before, and will survive long after, modern politics; or that religion discounts itself from being perceived as a pre-modern phenomenon, as its norms began, at some point, to penetrate into those of modern politics. Common to all is the assumption of a "stubborn persistence of religion in the global arena" (Shupe, 1990: 17). Furthermore, like many others, Bech and Snyder (Bech *et. al*, 2011: 208) claim that "religion presents analytical challenges to all […] traditional international relations paradigms". The question must then be asked: why was it neglected in mainstream international relations studies? The answer is hidden in the way that modernization and secularization theses have influenced the discipline.

As is for any scientific objective, the received wisdom of the social sciences is that 'the modern' is he who devalues obsolete superstitious thought of the religious past, and values the compelling scientific thought of the secular present. In order to serve scientific thought in a fruitful way, one is expected to accomplish in one's mind "the replacement of religious consciousness […] by an empirical, rational and instrumental orientation" (Bruce, 2002: 3). The universal historical process that the secularization thesis puts forward, however, is not limited with this very basic meaning of 'secularity' as anti-mythical. The multidimensional presence of secularity rather relates to its variegated meanings, through which the secularization thesis attained a paradigmatic status within the modern social sciences (Casanova, 1994). Having been positioned at the heart of modern science, these meanings have quite deeply established themselves behind International Relations (IR). It is, however, essential to unpack these different, arbitrarily mixed, and not necessarily interlinked definitions of the secularization thesis in order for IR students to examine its mark within studies of IR. This essay initially fleshes out the relationship between secularity and modernity as the social sciences construe it. Then, it examines the repercussions of three challenging definitions of secularization in the discipline. The essay concludes that the sociological, political, and institutional marks of the secularization thesis cannot only be reduced to IR's scientific stance as a branch of the modern social sciences, since they also extend towards the theoretical and historical visions of modern IR.

Secularity and Modernity

Before moving into diverse secularizations and their respective effects on modern IR, the ties between modernization and secularization shall be clarified. It is commonly held that the latter is initially a facilitator of the former and, in return, the former deepens the latter irreversibly. In other words, the secularization process *inter alia* has been deemed a building block of modernity. Casanova uncovers the relationship: "[t]o be secular means to be modern, and therefore by implication, to be religious means not yet fully modern" (2011: 59). Within this context, Meyer (1989) claimed that accelerating religious fundamentalism was nothing more than a fight against modernity. This seemingly inseparable tie between the secular and the modern has led IR studies and the social sciences in general – which claim to be *in* and *of* the modern age – to treat this relationship as an axiomatic truth. After all, "modern international

How Have the Modernization and Secularization Theses Shaped the Study of IR?
Written by Metin Koca

relations theory […] [is] about the modern state system and the means by which its constituent units (sovereign states) regulate their relations" (Holzgrefe, 1989: 11). Therefore, the popularly embraced assumption has been that modern IR shall claim no more to carry medieval elements in its substance. The secularization thesis, in other words, accepted secularity as an indisputable component of modernity.

However, it is necessary to distinguish between the main trends within those different, and not necessarily interconnected, claims of the secularization thesis, which is argued here to have a fundamental impact on the theoretical and historical visions of IR. Casanova (2011) classifies different forms of secularizations under three sub-arguments, which have been fallaciously mixed under one secularization thesis: (1) secularization as "the institutional differentiation" of secular spheres from the religious ones; (2) secularization as "the decline of religious thought concomitant of levels of modernization"; (3) secularization as "the privatization of religion" as a precondition of modern, secular, and democratic politics (Casanova, 2011: 60). Each of these disconnected meanings has its own repercussions in the conventional IR literature. The first is with respect to the scientific stance of IR as a specialized discipline: *knowledge shall prevail over faith*. The second one constitutes a *doxa* behind IR's theoretical framings of international politics: *a modern actor cannot behave with religious motivations*. The third one relates to the starting point of the 'identifiable history' of modern international relations:*the pre-Westphalian religious world is irrelevant to the modern international system*. Whereas the first of those influences reflects an expectable development in accordance with the essential scientific objectivity, the latter come with several drawbacks.

Definition I: Secularization and Scientism

Institutional differentiation set the general parameters of the modern governance. Amongst the consequences of this wide-range institutional differentiation, as the modern world necessitated it, religious and secular spheres were to be de-combined in a manner to set IR studies free from religious and cultural pre-modern elements. Functional differentiation has been regarded as a key to any activity of the modern life, in which the roles of institutions have been defined merely through their specialized functions as parts of a whole. Max Weber strenuously asserted long ago that "a really definitive and good accomplishment is today always a specialized accomplishment" (Weber, 1991: 135).

Functional differentiation of the religious and the secular did not only mean an institutional separation of the church from the state. It also meant for "the autonomization of societal sectors from the domination of religious meaning" (Berger *et. al*, 1966: 74). This paved the way for the dominant positivist thinking that has been determining the confines of the mainstream IR for so long. In line with this thinking, the faculties of the social sciences and the humanities were separated from each other: the former would function with value-freedom and scientific objectivity, as the latter would to continue studying on religion and moral philosophy.

In a sense, this transformation was a desirable one for true scientism, which is expected to deny 'wearing glasses' of mere subjectivity under the shadow of religious or cultural prejudices. Otherwise, it would have forced one to try to justify the scientifically unjustifiable in many circumstances. Within this context, the added value of secularization was apparent in its endeavour to free the social sciences from "the irrationality of belief" (Taylor, 2007: 269), as the secular mind confers the required value-freedom upon the scientist. However, this mind-set eliminates religious prejudices with the cost of bringing prejudices of its own. The following chapters are on the secularization thesis with its own prejudices.

Definition II: Secularization and International Relations Theory

The 'secularization process', as Durkheim, Bentham, Marx, Comte and many others foresaw it, was one of chronological religious decline. The purification of the individual mind from medieval religiosity, or assuming as such for the near future, had deep-rooted and misleading consequences in mainstream IR. These thinkers favoured what they called the human mind against the superstitious. By the time 'knowledge' prevailed over 'belief', it would inevitable that religious dogmatism would disappear according to the future projections. This constituted a core claim of the secularization thesis.

How Have the Modernization and Secularization Theses Shaped the Study of IR?
Written by Metin Koca

It is a popularly embraced narrative that 'the replacement of God by Man' announced the end of the medieval ages and the beginning of modern politics, of which the writings of Machiavelli represent the introduction. Machiavelli was the first challenge presented by 'modern' thinking against ancient mind-sets. Within this context, Machiavelli's non-merciful, pragmatic political morality was to be classified among the primary documents of the international relations theory of classical realism. On the other hand, from an uneasy pre-modern perspective, Machiavelli would be labelled as a "teacher of evil", as was famously described by Strauss (1958: 10). Strauss rejects judging Machiavelli from a modern perspective:

To do justice to Machiavelli requires one to look forward from a pre-modern point of view toward an altogether unexpected and surprising Machiavelli who is new and strange, rather than to look backward from today toward a Machiavelli who has become old and our own, and therewith almost good. (Strauss, 1958: 12)

From this perspective, Machiavelli seems to be a historic newcomer to an ancient street; as seems modernity a short new scene of a long film, of which scientism is unsure whether it is the concluding part. Mainstream IR does not identify this continuity in history.

Religion is not only regarded as an ineffective element, but also as the antithesis of modern politics. Therefore, it would have been odd to expect religion to have any intelligible place in international relations theory. First, indeed, it should be noted that international relations literature is, at its best, depicted in the IR theories, that is, "collection of stories [claiming to be accurate] about the world of international politics" (Weber, 2010: 2). Under the conditions of a top-down removal of religion, it would have been unrealistic to expect the theorists to give religious identities primary importance in explaining what global politics is and with what motivations its actors behave.

By the time 'irrational belief' was eliminated at institutional level, it was taken for granted that political actors would follow the same path. However, this attitude misses the crucial point that "secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness" (Berger, 1999: 3). The misleading theoretical consequence of this assumption has been that neither of the mainstream IR theories ([neo]realism, [neo]liberalism) are able to refrain from assuming that all decisive actors of the international political life are somehow secularized, and that all decisions are made through a process of secular rationality. The very basic illustration of this theoretical position is the mechanistic and materialist assumptions of state behaviour in the international system that dominates the structural theories of neoliberal institutionalism and neorealism. A more specific example might be Morgenthau's classical realism that places "the actual conditions of human action" at the opposite pole of what is advised by the perfectionist ethics (Morgenthau, 1945: 3). The main point in all of them is that the modern IR was designed to ignore possible religious perceptions which may not seem rational at a materialist glance. Hurd crucially remarks that religion has been considered among the irrationalities which fall "outside the range of 'normal' politics, including belief, culture, tradition, mood and emotion" (2011: 170).

This is not, however, the manifestation of a kind of Eurocentrism in IR, as it may well be argued. The label 'Eurocentric' does not catch the difference between two very different arguments: (1) that the study may be a biased one; shaped in accordance with Western narratives and interests; (2) that the study may not be a biased one, but reflects a historical account in which ideas have been transferred from the European thinking outwards. The origins of 'secular rationality' unarguably belong to modern European intellectual thinking; yet the space it was internalized in was much wider than that. Assuming as such is not a Eurocentric bias in IR. If so, Nehru would not have defined secularism as "a pillar of modernity" (Calhoun *et. al*, 2011: 6); Atatürk would not state that his policy derives its inspiration "not from heaven, or from an unseen, but directly from life" ("Turkish Grand", 1937). After all, is not it "the normal condition of human affairs for cultural ideas to flow between areas of civilization" (Buzan, 2010: 10)? The geographical and intellectual scope that secular rationality reaches up to, therefore, does not reflect a Eurocentric tendency in the discipline of IR. An actual Eurocentric bias led by the secularization thesis is touched upon in the following section, which is connected to what Westphalia really meant to the West and the rest.

Definition III: Secularization and History

The third discrete sub-thesis, the privatization of religion, in fact constitutes 'the big bang' of modern international

How Have the Modernization and Secularization Theses Shaped the Study of IR?

Written by Metin Koca

history. The cure for the exhausting Wars of Religion was invented in Westphalia: *cuius regio, eius religio*: 'whose realm, his religion'. It conferred the local princes with the power to establish their particular religions on their territories as sovereigns. This is of historical significance, as it triggered the privatization of religion initially among the sovereign states. Additionally, in Westphalia, religion ceased to be a *casus belli* (Philpott, 2001: 89). Westphalia, the foundational myth of modern international relations, reduced religion down to a domestic issue by removing its existence as a potential source of war and ignoring its transnational presence. Religion has never been an identifiable object in modern international history and its point of origin, constituted by Westphalia, is not capable of dating further back comfortably.

As opposed to the assumed historical illusion that Westphalia brought secularism into modern European politics, it is a subtle distinction to argue that Westphalia instead shifted the hierarchy between the religious and the sovereign, with the upper hand given to the latter. Therefore, the tension between religion and sovereignty was only reversed in the aftermath of Westphalia, not resolved – and it seems theoretically irresolvable for many (Griffiths, 2003). Although the dichotomy has not been at the centre stage of post-18th century Western politics, it remains to be one of the major sources of conflict elsewhere, primarily in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The highly underestimated role of this tension in contemporary Middle Eastern politics is based on a Eurocentric interpretation that religion is an insignificant element in international politics, as though Westphalia had the same effects universally. As of 2013, the governmental consequences of the Arab Revolutions demonstrate a massive support for politico-religious prototypes of governance in Tunisia and Egypt, three decades after the Iranian revolution. These governmental changes do play a role in regional alliances, as well as influencing the behaviour of sub-regional actors. Therefore, religion and the actors who continue politicizing religious doctrines are of higher importance in these regions. However, since, according to the thesis, secularization is a universal historical process, modern IR is not equipped with sufficient capacity to combine geopolitical differences with studies of religion.

If nothing fundamentally challenged the conventional, secularized notion of modern international politics for a very long period of time, the events of 9/11 certainly did. As noted previously, secularization in the form of religious decline was the grandiose prediction of modernization. As first demonstrated with the Iranian Revolution, then with post-Cold War ethnic and religious conflicts, and eventually with the events of 9/11, religion does not survive today solely as a pre-modern phenomenon. It has already been explained that assuming it as thus has been among the remnants of the secularization thesis. This persisted until the post-Cold War crises of identity finally forced new approaches to be embraced; approaches that, in contrast to the mainstream arguments, do not have the analytical tools to revisit this identity crisis. For instance, an analytical distinction between modernity and modernism has been made in relation to religious fundamentalism: religious fundamentalists have been against the ideology of modernism, but this does not make them substantively pre-modern (Lawrence, 1989). In the same vein, Abrahamian (1993) demonstrated through *Khomeinism* that the leading Islamic figures, such as Khomeini and bin Laden, are able to carry characteristics from the modern world alongside a populist reference to Islamic traditions. With this awareness in mind, cross-cultural scholars tried to eliminate the general tendency of black-boxing all religions with respect to their societal and institutional essences (*see* Haynes, 1994). These attempts aimed to bring religion back into the borders of 'normal', so that studies of religion may operate under the discipline.

Conclusions

The secularization thesis has more than one meaning in the ordinary political discourse, which makes it more difficult to assess it as single, falsifiable thesis. This essay has tried to demonstrate how different claims, which are mostly associated with the secularization thesis, have had different, and somewhat crucially deep-rooted, impacts on international relations studies. Modernity has meant many things, from industrialization of work and urbanization, to individualism and egalitarianism; but modernity was rigidly tied to secularity before any other thing. It was secularity which set the norms of modernity. It was modernity which constructed the cosmos that IR studies would recognize as 'real'.

The strongest manifestation of the secularization thesis in IR was that religion – scientifically, sociologically, politically and institutionally – was to be left in the pre-modern ages. This is the leading reason for the inadequacy of IR's

current paradigmatic thinking to identify religion as a part of modern political life. The current developments in the international arena demonstrate that initiating an interdisciplinary reconceptualization of religion as an international entity is required. Nevertheless, students of IR should not underestimate how misleading, discriminative and destructive it would be to reinvent religion in its pre-modern form, which easily invites one into the historic trap of redrawing in-eliminable barriers between imaginary religious borders.

Bibliography

Abrahamian, Ervand. (1993) *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bech, Emily Cochran and Jack Snyder. (2011). Conclusion: Religion's Contribution to International Relations Theory. *In Jack Snyder (ed.) Religion and International Relations Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, 200-210.

Berger, P. L. (1999). The Desecularization of the World. *In P. L. Berger (ed.)the Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Washington D.C.: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1999.

Berger, P. L. and Luckmann T. (1966). Secularization and Pluralism. *International Yearbook for the Sociology of Religion*, 2, 73-84.

Bruce, Steve. (2002) *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.

Buzan, Barry. (2010). Culture and International Society. *International Affairs*, 86 (1), 1-25.

Calhoun, Craig, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jonathan VanAntwerpen. (2011). Introduction. *In Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.) Rethinking Secularism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Casanova, Jose. (1994) *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Casanova, Jose. (2011). The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms. *In Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.) Rethinking Secularism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gray, John. (2007) *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia.* New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux.

Griffiths, Paul J. (2003). Religious Allegiance and Political Sovereignty: An Irreconcilable Tension?. *In John D. Carlson and Erik C. Owens (eds.) the Sacred and the Sovereign: Religion and International Politics*. Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Haynes, Jeff. (1994) *Religion in Third World Politics.* Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Holzgrefe, J. L. (1989). The Origins of the Modern International Relations Theory. *Review of International studies*, 15 (1), 11-26.

Hurd, Elizabeth Shakman. (2011). A Suspension of (Dis)Belief: The Secular-Religious Binary and the Study of International Relations. *In Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.) Rethinking Secularism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lawrence, B. B. (1989) *Defenders of God: The fundamentalist revolt against the modern age*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.

Meyer, Thomas. (1989) *Fundamentalismus: Aufstand gegen die Moderne*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.

Morgenthau, Hans J. (1945). The Evil of Politics and the Ethics of Evil. *Ethics*, 56 (1), 1-18.

How Have the Modernization and Secularization Theses Shaped the Study of IR?
Written by Metin Koca

Philpott, Daniel. (2001) *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How ideas shaped modern international relations* . New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Shupe, Anson. (1990). The Stubborn Persistence of Religion in the Global Arena.*In Emile Sahliyeh (ed.) Religious Resurgence and Politics in the Contemporary World.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 17-27.

Strauss, Leo. (1958) *Thoughts on Machiavelli*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Taylor, Charles. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

"Turkish Grand National Assembly Proceedings: *Opening Speech of the TGNA by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk"* . Turkish Grand National Assembly. 1 November 1937. *Translation*.

Weber, Cynthia. (2010) *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction, 3rd Edition*. New York: Routledge.

Weber, Max. (1991) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge.

—

Written by: Metin Koca Written at: London School of Economics and Political Science Written for: Dr. Katerina Dalacoura Date written: March 2013