

# TOWARD A PLACE AT THE GLOBAL TABLE FOR RELIGION

**Dennis R. Hoover**

• *A Case Study of* •

The Review of Faith & International Affairs

## ABSTRACT

*In this case study, Dennis R. Hoover analyses the context and the role of the quarterly journal The Review of Faith & International Affairs (RFIA) in taking religion both as an analytical factor and as a potential ally in advancing human security and human rights. As Editor of RFIA since its launch in the spring of 2003, Hoover offers an inside perspective on how RFIA became the first scholarly journal to focus exclusively on the roles of religion in world affairs, positioning itself as a forum and catalyst for interdisciplinary intellectual exchange and community, collaborative research, nonpartisan commentary and policy recommendations, and curricular resources for the rising generation of leaders in global engagement. Alongside a growing number of other institutions and initiatives RFIA is working to elevate religion from a “special interest” elective to a core subject in international affairs.*

## KEYWORDS

Human rights | Religion | Academic journals | International affairs

The field of international relations has been notoriously slow to “get religion” – that is, to take religion seriously, both as an analytical factor and as a potential ally in advancing human security and human rights. A survey of 1,600 articles in four leading international relations journals over the period 1980 – 1999 found that only a handful treated religion as a significant variable.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, as Jack Snyder has observed, until recent years religion has not figured prominently in international relations theory.<sup>2</sup> In 1994 Henry Kissinger could publish an influential 912-page book titled *Diplomacy*, and not include the word “religion” in the index.

The relative lack of intellectual investment in religion in the late 20th century is especially curious when contrasted with the contemporaneous record of other social science fields. Consider for example the divergent scholarly responses to two cases of “fundamentalist” mobilization that each started in the late 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

First, in American politics there was the founding of the Moral Majority in 1979. Led by Jerry Falwell, a firebrand pastor in the fundamentalist stream of American evangelical Protestantism, the Moral Majority became the flagship organization of the religious right, focused mostly on so-called “culture war” issues such as abortion and gay rights. The social sciences were not particularly well prepared to study and understand resurgent conservative religion in American politics, but a significant sector of scholars did respond by developing new research initiatives and forums on religion. For instance, the American Political Science Association established a Religion and Politics Section in 1987.

The second case of “fundamentalist” mobilization also dates from 1979 – namely, the Islamic revolution in Iran. A development this significant might have been expected to help inspire a turn toward religious studies within mainstream international relations research and foreign policy discourse. But much of the international relations field continued to largely dismiss religious studies as “mere sociology” through the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Writing in the March 2003 *Atlantic Monthly*, David Brooks astutely surmised that

*Over the past twenty years domestic-policy analysts have thought hard about the roles that religion and character play in public life. Our foreign policy elites are at least two decades behind. They go for months ignoring the force of religion; then, when confronted with something inescapably religious, such as the Iranian revolution or the Taliban, they begin talking of religious zealotry and fanaticism, which suddenly explains everything. After a few days of shaking their heads over the fanatics, they revert to their usual secular analyses.<sup>4</sup>*

Indeed, in some respects the lag was even longer than 2 decades. It took until 2013, for example, for the International Studies Association to establish a Religion and International Relations section.

To be sure, in the 1990s some exceptions to the general pattern of ignoring religion did begin to emerge. The most famous exception, however, is one that proves the rule. This

was Samuel Huntington's 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article "The Clash of Civilizations?" and his book of that same title the following year. Huntington's bold and controversial thesis was that, with the end of the Cold War, differences between civilizations would now be the primary force shaping global conflict. Religion was implicated in the theory because Huntington defined "civilizations" almost entirely along religious lines, drawing particular attention to "Islamic civilization" and the "Christian West."<sup>5</sup>

Today, a quarter century after "The Clash of Civilizations?" was first published, its thesis is still hotly debated.<sup>6</sup> In that sense it has been helpful in catalyzing a revival of scholarship related to religion in international relations. But it also did a disservice in that it framed the relevance of religion largely in negative and reductionist terms, especially vis-à-vis the securitization of Islam, which has been a pervasive tendency since the 9/11 attacks. Moreover the "clash" theory did little to help understand how religion can be a powerfully constructive force for the common good.

Another exception to the general pattern of ignoring religion that emerged in the 1990s was in a specific area of human rights – namely, advocacy for the universal human right to freedom of religion and belief (FoRB). In the U.S., a multi-faith advocacy coalition formed to press Congress to pass legislation requiring U.S. foreign policy to focus more attention and resources on threats to FoRB around the world. The campaign led to passage in 1998 of the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which created an Office of International Religious Freedom within the State Department, a bipartisan independent U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), and a new position of Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

The movement also helped energize private sector efforts to study and promote the conditions necessary for sustainable religious freedom. Prominent among these was the Institute for Global Engagement (IGE).<sup>7</sup> IGE was first established in 1997 as a center within the large relief and development NGO World Vision. Then in 2000 Robert A. Seiple, who had served as the first Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom from 1998 to 2000, incorporated the IGE as an independent nonpartisan think tank.

IGE quickly recognized numerous persistent gaps and biases besetting the international affairs field when it came to religion and global engagement. Among scholars and policy elites there remained stubbornly durable secularist blinders, widespread religious illiteracy, and a tendency to see religion as salient only in respect to security threats, not to broader social wellbeing and human security. And among religious leaders and other faith-based actors IGE frequently encountered a corresponding lack of understanding of the realities of geopolitics, the roles and limits of the state, security dilemmas, and so on. There were also recurring controversies regarding international religious freedom advocacy. Critics of often charged that a large portion of the activists in this field were biased toward the interests of evangelical Christianity and prone to culturally insensitive methodologies.

To help address these issues, in 2003 IGE established an interdisciplinary, multi-faith scholarly arm, the Center on Faith & International Affairs (CFIA). CFIA's mission is to equip scholars, policymakers, journalists, and religious leaders with a balanced understanding of the role of religion in public life worldwide. It sponsors numerous events and publishes a unique quarterly journal, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* (RFIA). I have served as Editor of RFIA since its launch in the spring of 2003.

RFIA is the first scholarly journal to focus exclusively on the roles of religion in world affairs. From the start the journal has aimed to be not just another strictly academic outlet helping to sustain a narrow sub-field intelligible only to specialists. Instead the journal has positioned itself as a forum and catalyst for interdisciplinary intellectual exchange and community, collaborative research, nonpartisan commentary and policy recommendations, and curricular resources for the rising generation of leaders in global engagement.

The journal has helped meet a need that was waiting to be filled. By the mid 2000s the international affairs sector had at last begun to wake up to the need to, as David Brooks implored, “kick the secularist habit” and make new investments in religious understanding. The journal's launch in 2003 was on the early end of a broader trend that has grown and matured over the last decade and a half.<sup>8</sup> From its modest beginnings RFIA is now published and distributed by the global scholarly press Routledge, and Scopus regularly ranks it in the top tier of journals dealing with religion.

Beyond the “regular” business of the journal – publishing rigorous works by widely respected scholars and practitioners – RFIA has used a variety of methodologies to help build bridges and produce resources of practical relevance to contemporary challenges in global human rights and human security. In what follows I give a brief overview of five such methodologies.

First, RFIA frequently sponsors conferences and symposia designed to yield timely articles. For example, in the spring of this year [2019] RFIA co-sponsored multiple panels at the Henry Symposium on Religion and Politics. The panels examined the competing tendencies with evangelical Protestantism between right-wing populism and humanitarian internationalism, and the papers will be published in the September 2019 issue of RFIA.

Second, RFIA regularly publishes theme issues on pressing contemporary issues. Often these special issues are convened in collaboration with other academic and policy institutes. For example, one of RFIA's past issues was a result of a collaboration with a symposium of the US-Islamic World Forum. The issue examined the uses and abuses of the “public order and public morality” exceptions to human rights protections in international human rights law. Another example was a theme issue examining child marriage and family law, produced in collaboration with World Bank researchers.

A third methodology that the journal has used to help catalyze long-term change is sponsorship of edited books. Examples of such books comprised in whole or in part of articles previously published in RFIA include:

- Mariano P. Barbato, Robert J. Joustra, and Dennis R. Hoover, eds., *Popes on the Rise: Modern Papal Diplomacy and Social Teaching in World Affairs* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019).
- Dennis R. Hoover, ed. *Religion and American Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).
- Dennis R. Hoover and Douglas Johnston, eds., *Religion and Foreign Affairs: Essential Readings* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

A fourth methodology, closely related to the third, is foreign language translation of compendia of RFIA articles. For example, a past RFIA theme issue on religion, law, and society in Myanmar was translated into Burmese and included in the syllabus of a certificate training program in Myanmar co-sponsored by IGE. Similar translation packages will be produced in the coming years for IGE-sponsored educational programs in Vietnam and Uzbekistan.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, a fifth example of RFIA methodology is sponsorship of essay contests. For instance, together with the Leimena Institute (Indonesia), in 2015–2016 RFIA sponsored an international essay contest (with both student and professional divisions) on freedom of religion and belief in Southeast Asia and the West. Winning essays were later published in RFIA.

In conclusion, alongside a growing number of other institutions and initiatives<sup>10</sup> RFIA is working to elevate religion from a “special interest” elective to a core subject in international affairs. To be sure, “religion” remains a highly complex and delicate subject, with attendant risks in analysis and engagement. As Bryan Hehir of the Harvard Kennedy School once quipped, bringing religion into international affairs is like brain surgery – necessary, but also risky if not done well. RFIA is a prominent example of the burgeoning trend in scholarship and education aiming to generate more leaders – secular and religious alike – who are prepared to act as deft and knowledgeable “brain surgeons” at the critical intersection of religion, human rights, and human security around the world.

## NOTES

1 • Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001):

9. The journals are *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *World Politics*, and *International Security*.

2 • See Jack Snyder, ed., *Religion and International Relations Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

3 • Portions of this article are adapted from the introductory chapter of Dennis R. Hoover and Douglas

Johnston, eds., *Religion and Foreign Affairs: Essential Readings* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012).

4 • David Brooks, “Kicking the Secularist Habit.” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/03/kicking-the-secularist-habit/302680/>.

5 • Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22–49.

6 • See the Spring 2019 issue of *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, a special theme issue on “A Quarter Century of the ‘Clash of

Civilizations,’” <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rfia20/17/1?nav=toCList>.

7 • IGE’s mission is to catalyze freedom of faith worldwide. IGE cultivates sustainable environments for religious freedom and equips people to exercise that freedom responsibly. See Institute for Global Engagement, homepage, 2019, accessed June 19, 2019, [www.globalengage.org](http://www.globalengage.org).

8 • Just a few of the many examples: Center for World Religions, Diplomacy, & Conflict Resolution, George Mason University, founded in 2003; Center for the Study of Religion and Conflict, Arizona State University, founded in 2003; Religion and International Affairs Initiative, Luce Foundation, launched in 2005; Religion and International Affairs Project, Social Science Research Council, started in 2005; Madeleine Albright’s book, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, published by HarperCollins (New York)

in 2006; Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University, founded in 2006; Religion and Foreign Policy Initiative, Council on Foreign Relations, started in 2006; Center for the Study of Democracy, Toleration, and Religion, Columbia University, founded in 2006; the Certificate Program in Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy at the Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, launched in 2019.

9 • The Myanmar project was supported by the John Templeton Foundation, and the Vietnam and Uzbekistan projects are supported by the Templeton Religion Trust.

10 • Including some religious institutions that have long operated affiliated NGOs and commissions focused on international advocacy for social justice, peace, and human rights (see for example the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, which is part of the World Council of Churches).



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