
AN INTERVIEW WITH J. BRYAN HEHIR

FORUM: Do you see religion becoming a more important force in international affairs, or would you like to see religion become more important in international affairs?

HEHIR: Religion has always been present in international affairs because it's always been part of people's lives, and international affairs is about the lives of individuals and nations and states. It's also true that in the modern conception of international affairs, which dates from the sixteenth century, religion has been viewed as a potentially disruptive force. That has to do with the Thirty Years' War in Europe, which was fought in great part for religious reasons. People were just forming their ideas and their laws about international relations at that time, so there was a concerted effort to take religion out of international politics. I can fully understand why people would want to do that. Religion has served as a reason for intervention in the affairs of other countries; it has been a cause of war between nations, so the idea was, take religion out of international affairs.

The standard conceptual discipline of international relations has been articulated in terms that do not have a role for understanding religion as a public force. It has an understanding of religion as a purely private reality in people's lives, but not something that has public consequences. And if you believe that religion doesn't have public consequences, then I think you can draw the conclusion that it's possible to analyze situations in the world in political, economic, and strategic terms, but that you don't have to have any specific analytic view of how you join religion to those other factors. As one looks around the world over the last 25 years, it's very hard to interpret some of the most complicated and difficult situations if you don't have some understanding of the role of religion.

For example, if you wanted to understand Latin America over the last 25 years, to understand places like Chile, Peru, and Brazil, or to understand the enormous conflict that took place in Central America in the 1980s, it would be impossible to understand what the issues were, who the actors were, without some understanding of the role of the Catholic church in Latin America during that time.

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If one were to look at a very different part of the world, Central and Eastern Europe, over the same period of time, what would you find? In East Germany, the Protestant churches, particularly Lutheranism, and in Poland, the Catholic church . . . became critical factors in sustaining people's lives when their countries were under repression, under occupation. During the transition from oppression to democratic rule, churches were places where people would gather; religious communities were places where ideas about freedom and self-determination were kept alive. There again, it would be hard to interpret what had happened in Eastern Europe without religion.

In South Africa, one could look at the role of the black churches, at the role of Archbishop [Desmond] Tutu, who combined a powerful argument for change with an argument for non-violence. And then of course, the Middle East would be an entirely different example. My point is, if you look around the world at a number of situations, it is hard to understand them if you don't see the role of religion in international affairs.

FORUM: Are religions welcomed as players in international affairs?

HEHIR: People are quite chary, quite apprehensive about it. If you look at the discipline of international relations, I don't think that you would say that analytical treatment of international relations holds much of a constitutional role for religion. There's recognition that religion played a role in this or that case, but so far there has not been a great deal of work in integrating a conception of the role of religion in the world with standard views of international relations in a systematic way.

FORUM: If the international community were to create a place for religion, how would you see that happening? Perhaps by codifying notions of morality in international law?

HEHIR: You don't want to equate religion and morality. The two terms have a certain complementarity, and the ethical reflection that the world uses is rooted in religious traditions. But conceptually, somebody could be interested in the question of ethics in international relations, and not be interested in religion in international relations. Indeed, there's a lesson there to be learned. Over the last 30 years, the role of ethical reflection in international relations has come to be accepted in a more explicit way as standard for understanding international relations, whereas the religious question has not, so I don't think you can identify those two.

If a person agrees that you have to have a role for religious argument and religious forces in understanding the world, there are several steps in the process:

First of all, almost at the level of phenomenology, one needs an assessment of what the major religious traditions are that influence the world.

Secondly, scholars need to be able to draw upon the works of people who can get inside the religious traditions to understand how a religious tradition works from the inside. For example, there's a lot of almost offhand commentary about the role of Islam in international relations, but how much of that commentary is informed with a solid understanding of Islam? If there's going

to be a role for religion in international affairs, just as you're trying to integrate economics and politics in your study of world affairs, you have to understand religious traditions from the inside.

Thirdly, religious traditions have different kinds of impacts on world politics, because the great religious traditions shape the world in different ways. If you look at, for example, the Catholic church, you have a very explicit institutional structure that cuts across a wide range of countries and cultures, yet maintains a central focus because of things such as the papacy and the role of hierarchy. Other great religious traditions are much less institutionally shaped, and sometimes it's harder to grasp exactly what role they play. Institutions are easier to analyze.

So, a descriptive overview of all the major traditions at work would be necessary; secondly, literature that describes the traditions from the inside; thirdly, a comparison of what the role of religion is in different areas, and a comparison of different religious traditions and how they intersect.

FORUM: Do you see religion increasingly becoming an unofficial yet important force, like non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations, which have a strong bearing on the landscape of the international scene?

HEHIR: It's probably best to look at religious organizations in the context of being transnational actors. That is to say, there is a category of institutions in the world today that have similar characteristics: They tend to be based in one place, present in several places, have a trained corps of personnel, a single guiding force, and a sophisticated communications system. That [description] fits multinational corporations, intergovernmental organizations, and at least some of the great religious traditions.

FORUM: Looking at the development of the Westphalian state system, are there dangers in allowing religion to become a more prominent actor in international affairs?

HEHIR: Religion can be a problematic force in world affairs. Historically, religion has been a force that sometimes makes secular conflicts more bitter, more divisive, and more violent. When religious categories get joined with secular categories, they tend to deepen the struggle. But here again, the way to get at that relationship is to understand it, then try to direct it in its positive ways. By ignoring it, you won't get very far. The instinct of the Westphalian tradition was simply to keep an explosive and potentially divisive factor out of world politics. The difficulty is, people are moved by religious visions. They are willing to live and die for religious visions, and that's going to make a difference in the affairs of nations, so we'd better try to understand it.

FORUM: Looking at the other side, is there something that is lost by separating church and state?

HEHIR: No, separating church and state is a good idea. You don't want government in the internal life of religion, and it's not happy for religion to have the arm of government at its disposal. It's a very sound and solid organizational principle in society. But the one thing you don't want to do by separating church

and state is to keep religion out of life. I would advocate the separation of church and state; I would not advocate the separation of religion from the life of society.

FORUM: Are there arguments for creating religious states such as Pakistan, Iran, and Israel, and do you foresee a rise of more religious states in the future?

HEHIR: There can be an argument for a religious state. It grows out of a particular culture, out of a particular history, out of the demography of a situation, so it's conceivable that a given state is going to declare one religion to be the religion of the state. Today, the international community expects that minorities in that country will be given full religious liberty. In other words, it isn't necessary to argue that all states must be secular, or that there's no such thing as a state that could be allied with a given dominant religious tradition, but all states need to be held to basic standards of religious liberties in terms of the rest of the population.

FORUM: Do you see the role of religion increasing in the internal politics of states?

HEHIR: On the whole, the role that religion plays in the internal affairs of states has a lot to do with the constitutional fabric and the culture of the country. Again, you must hold to certain universal standards, like the right to religious liberty. Implicit in the right to religious liberty is the notion that people who form religious communities ought to have some means of expressing their faith, not only personally, but publicly, and they ought to have some ability to draw on their religious tradition to make contributions to the public life of society.

FORUM: What about religion as an internal political force in the United States?

HEHIR: The U.S. system has always had space for religious voices. The separation of church and state was never meant to be the separation of church from the society. Religious voices have been present in the United States throughout history. In recent years, we've seen the rise of what is sometimes called the religious right. What's most notable about that is that many of the churches and groups in the religious right in the past have been the churches that have not wanted much to do with the political order, yet now they have become much more interested in the political order. That's the first characteristic. Secondly, [the groups of the religious right] have become more visible, not only in the political order, but in the cultural order, through the use of television, televangelism, and that sort of thing. Religion has played a constant role in American life and culture from the beginning, but the religious right has added a new dimension to it as a group that previously hasn't dealt with the political order.

FORUM: Looking at the many nationalist conflicts around the world today, religion seems to be a factor in some of them. What dimension does religion add to nationalism?

HEHIR: I think you will find situations where ethnicity, nationalism, and religion are woven together in a very tight fabric, but not all nationalisms are religious, not all religions take on a nationalistic tone. Therefore it's good to keep your eye on all three categories, but it's good to keep them distinct. With each situation, you might want to ask, what's at work here?

FORUM: What about the relationship between religion, leadership, and power?

HEHIR: The dominant way in which religion influences a society is through the community of religious believers. The views they hold, the institutions they create, the way in which they interpret their life in religious terms affect their lives as citizens and professionals. The dominant way that religion influences [a society] is not through the faith of one leader, but through the fabric of faith among people in a community. I don't think the dominant way a religion influences a culture is from the top down. It's usually from the bottom up.

FORUM: Samuel Huntington has written about a clash of cultures, which he sees largely demarcated around the borders of the major world religions. Yet major world events such as the Cairo conference on population a year ago saw the Vatican align its stance with Islamicists. Do religious leaders have something in common that enables them to work together across cultural differences, or do differences in their worldviews prevent them from working together?

HEHIR: Religious leaders can build on a certain kind of common basis: ideas on the church and the nature of the person, ideas about the meaning of history, ideas about the role of religious and moral values in political life. When religious leaders come together, they may come with different understandings, but they have similar kinds of questions. Similar kinds of questions can provide a basis for collaboration and dialogue.

FORUM: What about religion and human rights? Does growing world concern with human rights create new roles for religion in international affairs, or does an increasing role of religion open new opportunities for addressing human rights questions?

HEHIR: Religious leaders need to be particularly sensitive to their role to protect and promote and safeguard the whole range of human rights. One of the things Samuel Huntington has written about is the role of religious organizations as agencies protecting and promoting human rights over the last 25 years. Religious organizations are transnational agencies and institutions—precisely the type of community that can contribute in a very specific way to protecting and promoting human rights. Religions have convictions about human rights, move in various societies, and yet have a bond that ties them together across societies. They can be a great source of information about bringing pressure to bear on certain societies that violate human rights. Religious groups have been very valuable contributors to the wider process of addressing human rights concerns.

FORUM: You've written extensively about notions of a just war. Could you share some of your beliefs?

HEHIR: Essentially, my view is that given the nature of international relations, one has to [accept] that some use of force in extreme cases is necessary to prevent injustice, or to bring about justice in the world as we know it—sovereign states with no central international political authority. There can be a place for the use of force, but not every use of force, and not under all conditions, and not in just any way. If force is to be used, it must be under very specific conditions for it to

be morally acceptable. Those conditions [prompt] questions like, for what purposes can force be used in a morally legitimate way? By what means can legitimate objectives be pursued? Under what conditions should people finally decide they have to go to war?

FORUM: Was the Gulf War just?

HEHIR: There was one specific just cause in the Gulf War, which was to resist aggression across an international boundary. Protecting the principle in the international system that borders are not to be changed by force is very important, or we will open ourselves up to multiple wars. That was a just reason. I thought people gave a lot of other reasons for going to war in the Gulf that were not reasons that I would validate morally.

FORUM: In dealing with Iraq, the international community chose to use economic sanctions as a foreign policy tool. In light of the great amount of suffering endured by the Iraqi people, are sanctions a just foreign policy instrument?

HEHIR: That is a complicated issue, and more complicated today than it has been in the past. During the Cold War, if any way to gain your objective short of war could be found, it seemed like the safer thing to do, lest war escalate. Sanctions were accepted as a useful policy tool short of war, and yet maybe as necessary to accomplish specific objectives in international affairs. It is also true that sanctions very often target civilians before anyone else, because those with power make sure that they [themselves] don't suffer from the sanctions.

I think that sanctions are still a better instrument than war because the civilian population suffers in war, too. But I think we need to have a more detailed understanding of sanctions so that we can see how they can afflict the most vulnerable segment of the population. One has to shape the sanctions in such a way that food and medicine get through. But that still doesn't solve the problem.

FORUM: It has been said that there's a scarcity of scholarly analysis on the relationship between religion and international affairs. Is this true, and if so, can you recommend areas for inquiry?

HEHIR: There is a great deal of writing on religious traditions, and plenty of writing on international relations, but the people who do international relations often have not been terribly acquainted with the theological writings, and vice versa. Just as you need people who can do the politics and strategy of international relations, and others who can analyze politics and economics, you need people who have a solid grasp of the study of international relations politically, as well as a good understanding of the role of religion, to be able to work on both sides of this divide. Not enough work is being done in this manner, and not enough people are doing it.

