

Exegesis in International Relations Theory: Examining faith and politics through a neo-classical realist analysis of South Asia

Doctoral Dissertation
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Abstract

The biggest challenge religion poses in the international relations discipline (IR) and global politics is its unobtrusive presence, its unobservable processes, and its indiscernible effects on global politics. Another challenge posed by the study of religion in international relations discipline is to explain how and why states, as rational actors, make decisions that seem under-explained by the practical theoretical frameworks of the discipline. Also noteworthy is the way IR (theoretical) literature has defined and considered religion: caged in certain dimensions and constrained to specific roles. This research aims to address the challenges and propose a possible way to incorporate religion into international relations theory. The dissertation, after categorizing existing literature into three main trends, critically analyzes seminal works within each of the categories to highlight the gaps in the existing literature on religion as a factor in IR theory and international relations in general. The dissertation mainly raises two broad research questions: How can religion (exegesis) be factored in IR theory and international relations? How has religion impacted and shaped South Asian international relations? To answer these questions, the research proposes the concept of exegesis and defines it as an “interpretation of religion as a historical discourse” instead of a spiritual or supernatural/metaphysical discourse. The dissertation argues that the operationalization of religion through exegesis in the framework of Neoclassical Realism (NCR) not only provides an explanation of what religion (potentially) does in the international system but also demonstrates a way to define, characterize and do history in IR, particularly NCR. Through the case study of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in South Asia, the dissertation attempts to explain how exegesis affects state identity, memory, and official history, that in turn has the potential to alter state behavior as well as characterize inter-state relations. The dissertation conducts three analyses and makes three key conclusions about the impact of religion (exegesis) in state policy and inter-state-relations. First, by examining contested histories and state narratives through school textbooks, the research argues that exegesis has an impact on contested memories and religion-based national identities, that in turn lead to conflicting official histories in South Asia despite shared past. Second, the research examines the religion-secularism dyad and argues that the partitions of British India into India, Pakistan, (and later) Bangladesh provided a fertile ground for seeking ontological security through distinct identities, mainly based on religion. Exegesis revealed that the reason for the religious definition of secularism (distinct from Western secularism) in these nations was an incomplete historical process of establishing post-colonial modern states. Third, the research examines the foreign policies of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It argues that in foreign policy, religion (through exegesis) operates distinctly in two ways: implicitly as ‘religion in foreign policy’ towards peacebuilding and cooperative efforts, and explicitly as ‘religious foreign policy’ to assert religious identity and disagreements with neighbors.

Key words: religion, IR, Neoclassical realism, history, South Asia, foreign policy, secularism, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh