

# Religion in International Relations Theory

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**Abstract – Religion has been an important factor in interstate relations during the ancient civilizations. Friendship, hostility, war and peace between states were always determined by religious values. After the Peace Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, nation-states came into existence, religion was subjected to international relations and was supposed to be removed from internal state politics. With the Peace Treaties of Westphalia, which led to the foundation of nation-states, and international politics, these nation states have moved towards secularism. Even though religion has been exasperated to be theoretically underdeveloped in historical developments, it has always played an important role in international relations in practice. Therefore, to reveal the place and influence of religion in international relations or global politics, it is necessary to talk about the relation of religion and secularism. Religion has begun to manifest itself in international politics with the terrorist acts that started in the last epoch of the Cold War and the transboundary effect of terror. After the events of September 11, 2001, religion has attracted the attention of international relations scholars and statesmen. The perceptions of religion in international relations after 2001 and the academic studies discussed in this field mostly refer to religion as an ideology. The study of the ideologies of terrorist organizations such as the Taliban, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda, as if it had dealt with the religion of Islam, is nothing less than a contempt for Islamism, which is reductionism, against the idea of millions of people who believe in religion. This disdain applies to other religions too. Still, religion has no place in the theory of international relations. It is very difficult to address religion within the framework of current theories of international relations. Because religion and the theories of international relations are in contradiction. In order to deal with the theories of religion in the context of international relations, a scientific revolution is required in the theories of this discipline as expressed by Thomas Kuhn.**

**Key Words: Religion, International Relations, Terrorist Organizations, Realism, Liberalism, Structuralism, Marxism.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Religion has a very long history as the history of mankind. In this respect, when we look at the history of mankind, none of the civilizations that have been living or have lost their existence has not been irreligious. The Greeks, the ancient Egyptians, the Chinese, the Indians, and the civilization of Mesopotamia, the Hittites, the Göktürks, the Mongols and other ancient civilizations were all followers of religion. As a result of the scientific studies on religions, it has been observed that there is no belief in the societies of human history. Primitive religions, polytheistic religions, monotheistic or heavenly religions have shown the diversity of religions that human beings believed.

Religion has played a leading role in promoting relations, states of war, peace, friendship and enmity between states before the peace agreements of Westphalia. The international relations that emerged

after the Westphalia agreements tried to exclude religion in both theory and practice. Even though religion has shown its importance in practice in interstate relations, it has been excluded from the theory. It was observed that religion started to show itself practically in the international relations towards the end of the cold war, especially after the events of September 11. Religion has been misconstrued in the theory of international relations on the basis of the ideology of terrorist organizations. For this, the ideology of terrorists is not religion, religion should not be evaluated in this way. In this sense, ideology is a human product and religion is a divine phenomenon. Since religion has contradictions and differences with international relations theories, it has been very difficult to fit these theories in religious theories of international relations. Given the current theories of international relations, religion is not included in these theories, despite the important role it plays in the history of mankind in individual, social, political relations and interstate relations. To see and

evaluate international relations as a secular order and system is perhaps the basis of this thought, but whether or not an irreligious international relations system is possible is kept free of controversy. Given the current international relations order global, regional and national policies and polarizations, the central role of religion in these polarizations is unacceptable.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF RELATIONS BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND RELIGION**

Religion has an ancient history as extensive as the human history. The state is an institution that has existed since the primitive life of people in order to regulate relations between people. Relations between religion and the state have been in close association since the emergence of both. Because of the emergence of international relations as a discipline in Europe, historically, relations between religion and this discipline are handled according to the historical background of the Western world. State was dominated by religion before the Peace Agreements of Westphalia. Religion was the most influential factor in determining the internal affairs and interstate relations of states in the Middle Ages. Even the sovereigns and states took their legitimacy from religion (Shimko, 1992). In this period, the rulers saw themselves as God's deputy (Thomas, 2001). The religious reform movement, which began under the leadership of Martin Luther in the 16th century, began to shake the church and the Pope's unquestionable power, which led to the discontinuation of the relationship between religion and politics and the removal of religion from politics (Volf, 2010).

After the sectarian and religious wars that emerged in Europe, the state of Westphalia was replaced by the Westphalian order and religion was removed from all areas. In addition, mind and man have replaced God and religion after Westphalia. In short, the international order of relations is based on rationalism, experimentation and secular values. In this order, religion has lost its influence in relations between states (Thomas, 2001). The concept of sovereignty has been institutionalized by the agreements of Westphalia. The boundaries of the states were drawn and the sovereignty was given to the states again, as well as the authority to act within their borders. In all of these circumstances, the right to intervene in religion and church has been terminated. The sovereignty and legitimacy that had previously been held by church and religion were now in the hands of the nation-states. From this point of view, jurists, political scientists and statesmen accept the agreements of Westphalia signed in 1648 as the beginning of the present order that regulates the relations between the modern nation-state and modern states. Although the order of Westphalia was

not in domestic politics, it succeeded in pushing the religion into the foreign policy (Waltz, 1959).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the emergence of the bourgeoisie, industrialization, enlightenment, and the French revolution, as well as religion, were pushed into domestic politics and began to pass from the kingdom and the imperial families to the people. In the 19th century, religion ended the process of being completely free from politics in European states (Volf, 2010). Their philosophical basis lies in the ideas of secularism and positivism. Positivists and scientists with secular thinking decided to separate the principles of religion from politics and state governance, as they perceived religion as a threat. According to them, religion was the source of all wars. Before these historical developments, people acted in denomination and religion based in family, society and politics, and industrialization and urbanization and modernization led people to think in the light of these values. This process created the formation of rationalism. This accelerated the establishment of secular states as an indication that religion lost its place in politics and state affairs (Rapoport, 1984).

The distance of religion from international relations continued at the beginning of the 20th century and during the World War I, where international relations became a discipline, and during the World War II, when it began to develop. This is not the distance of religion from politics in the whole world, but rather refers to the distance from politics in the Western world. In the Middle East and the Islamic Geography, the Islamic State was still influential on the axis of the West where Christianity had lost importance. After the Second World War, the bipolarity system and the period of the cold war have shown the effectiveness of religion in practice. In 1979, as a result of the Islamic revolution of Iran, a regime based on Islamic values emerged. Again in the same year after the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR, the Jihad movements in the country and the military, financial aid from the Islamic world to the Mujahideen, and the Jihadis against the invasion of the USSR alongside the Mujahideen of Afghanistan as well as from the different countries showed that the religion was not successful (Rashid, 2003). After the First World War, secular regimes began to prevail in Islamic states, but Islam was not ineffective as Christianity in Europe became ineffective. Islamic political and spiritual leaders of the secular values of the Ottoman Empire over the world appeared appropriate and the Republic of Turkey tried to move away from religion to politics. In Egypt, in 1950 to 1960, the movement of the Ikhwan-Muslim was banned by the secular government, and its activities continued in secret (Lincoln, 2003). The secularism that has been progressing and spreading began to face obstacles in the 1960s. These barriers have deepened with the separation and death of the founders and defenders of the secular regimes. In

1964, after the death of the Indian leader Jawahar Lal Nehru, religious politics began to be influential in the world's largest democracy. In Indonesia in 1965, Sukarno was overthrown by a coup and the Indonesian Communist Party was shut down. After that, religious politics began to be carried out in this country. In 1967, the defeat of Jamal Nasir against Israel had made Saudi Arabia active in the Arab and Islamic states, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference was established with the initiative of Saudi King Faisal. After that, Saudi Arabia started to export Wahhabi-Salafi thought to the world, especially to Muslim states (Lincoln, 2003).

The origin of the Arab-Israel wars and the present day conditions in plestinian territory are undoubtedly because of religious beliefs. The state of Israel, supported by Western states, from time to time in these wars, also supports religion. The main reason for the resistance of the Palestinian people against Israel since its foundation is religion. Again, the reactions to the war between Israel and Palestine are also related to religious affiliation. According to some states in the international arena, Palestinians are terrorists, while for some, Israel is a terrorist state. Those who claim that Israel is a terrorist state are those who don't see Palestine as a terrorist organization, according to their religious affiliation, and this claim is based on their religious affiliation (Rapoport, 1984).

Again during this period, the religious organizations, which were controlled by the secular regimes, began to enter the political scene again and become active. The Roman Catholic Church won the role in the reign of the second Pope John Paul. Although the ideologies of religion and terrorist organizations were separate, the events of 11th September 2001 were subject to religion. The bloody and fearful event by the al-Qaeda terrorist organization has shown Islam as a cruel religion in the Western world and has directed the states of the world to be opposed to these organizations in common. The former US president Bush, took the vote of 4 million religious people in Central American States, promising to activate religious groups in their second presidential election campaign. It shows the role of Jewish religion in the foreign policy of the country whose numbers vary between 4 and 5 million in America (Rapoport, 1984). The events of September 11, terrorist organizations in Africa, terrorist attacks by organizations such as the unrestrained acts of terrorism as well as the failure of some secular regimes, liberal politics adversely affected people ethically, the policies implemented within the context of capitalism and secular regimes, especially the secular international relations system and the incredible developments in communication thanks to the world as a village thanks to reasons such as religion has created the opportunity to shape the international relations. In spite of all this, religion is still theoretically not covered in any theory of this discipline. It is not right to connect religion to

international states only from the politics perspective. Looking at the theoretical roots of secularism, the ideas of Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Machiavelli can be seen. For example, in the late 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that God died. Nietzsche asserted that the religion and the human beings were in the place of religion and God. According to him, no longer will God intervene in any field of human life. Human God must live in place using his own mind (Asad, 1993).

Again, the relevance of religion to global politics in the secular system implemented due to the capitalist system due to immorality and secular values formed by international organizations and states caused by the failure to prevent wars (Mearsheimer, 2001). Another reason is that in democratic systems, societies have to express their religious beliefs freely and to express their demands for religious freedom and to build religious organizations in order to live their beliefs. Another reason for the influence of religion in international relations was migration. Migration has created new religions and sects in the Western world. The religion which is effective in domestic politics has also shown its effect in international politics (Snyder, 2011). Another reason why religion is effective in international politics is globalization. Globalization and technological developments have made it possible for different religious groups to be aware of each other, to be in solidarity and to be in contact (Philpott, 2007).

While the international relations system has an anti-religious and secular nature, religion has influenced inter-human relations, societies and inter-state relations throughout history. Because religion will be one of the factors causing the formation of international relations system. The peace agreements of Westphalia were signed at the end of the 30-year war between Catholic and Protestantism. Religion was the basis of previous international relations. The friendship and enmity between states was determined according to the orders of religion, and religion was also influenced by peace and war (Philpott, 2007). Although the states and the international relations system are secular today, it is known that most of the polarizations and blockings are practiced according to religious affiliation. Disputes, conflicts and polarizations among civilizations all have religious dimensions.

The People's Republic of China, which banned religion after World War II, continued to open Confucianism branches after 2004. The aim of the Confucianism established and managed by the Chinese state is to improve the friendly relations between China and other states and to spread Chinese language and culture. In other words, the Confucian religion is used as a foreign policy tool by the Chinese state (Appleby, 2000). Christians in South Korea and the United States, especially the

North Korean Immigration Relief Commission, proposed the liberation of Christians in North Korea as the greatest goal of world Christians (Snyder, 2011). Religious factors play an important role in disputes between Japan, North Korea, South Korea and China. The role of Christian missionaries in South Korea's independence has been important. The missionaries were active in order for the people to stand against the Japanese (Snyder, 2011).

## THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

It is possible to reclaim the history of international relations as far back as the ancient civilizations of ancient Greek and Egypt, and to continue with the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Enlightenment. However, in the modern sense, international relations are the product of the Westphalia agreements which took place in the 17th century and caused the emergence of nation-states. International relations became a branch of science after the First World War (Fox & Sandler, 2004) The classical sources and modern theories of this discipline followed a secular order because international relations were the result of a secular thought. Liberalism, Realism, Marxism and different versions which do not include how religion affects international relations and how important it is. It is necessary to examine the place of religion in the above mentioned theories in order to reveal and discuss this claim. For example, in the works of thinkers such as Kenneth Waltz, an important figure in realism, Michael Duelfer and Robert Koehane, the pioneers of liberalism, and Alexander Wendt, one of the pioneers of the structuralism, religion did not play an important role (Snyder, 2011). The secular international order is based on the generalization of the decision on Christianity to all religions. Political scientists and international theorists, who perceived the removal of Christianity from politics as the removal of all religions from politics, kept them away from the work of all religions. To accept religion as the cause of war is nothing but a misunderstanding. In Islam, what is essential is peace. Islam chooses the war as the last way. One proof of religion as a source of wars is the sectarian wars in the Christian world. However, there are big differences between Islam and Christianity, especially in the field of government and politics (Kokoslakis, 1985).

Apart from secularism and modernism, there are other reasons for the removal of religion from international relations. First of all, the security of the Westphalian system about religion and the necessity of the removal of religion from international relations. This system was a religious security threat. Religion was accepted as the cause of war and insecurity in Westphalia. For this reason, religion did not take place in the theories of international relations (Kubalkova, 2000). The fact that scholars of international relations are not aware of religion and have inadequate knowledge about religion is another

reason why religion is not included in the studies in this discipline. The lack of knowledge of the religious men in the modern sciences, especially in the international relations, has caused the international relations scholars to ignore religion as well as it has caused a distance between religion and international relations. Religion was ignored by the thinkers of international relations, and international relations theories were ignored by the clergy (Kubalkova, 2000).

The most important factor that maintains that religion is not involved in international relations and the development of international relations is an irreligious system is the foundation of secularism. At the heart of the main theories of the international relations discipline is an atheistic world. The main theories of discipline such as Realism, Liberalism and Marxism see religion as a phenomenon that concerns ancient times and is not working today (Norris & Inglehart, 2004) To explain this claim, it is not necessary to discuss some of the theories of international relations in relation to religion. Machiavelli, one of the pioneers of the theory of realism, Hobbes, and many of them accept the state as an entity independent of the influence of church and religion. Machiavelli leveled the sovereignty of the sovereigns, not to adhere to morality and religion (Machiavelli, 2008). Hobbes argued that it would be of great benefit to the state to keep the church away from the state. Separating religion from politics means that religion is not effective in international relations. Machiavelli and Hobbes did it. According to the most accepted realist theory of international relations theories, the state and their mutual relations take place at the center of international relations. Realists have not been involved in assessing religion as a trivial phenomenon while dealing with international relations (Thomas, 2005). Realists acknowledge security as an important element in international relations. Security is only provided by power. States will not be subjected to the attack of the counter-state as long as they have power in their hands. The art of understanding power in the first place is the military power and in the second place is the order to take power. The realists accept the politics of religion as deceptive or condemned to defeat (Philpott, 2000).

Liberalism is the basis of freedom. According to the liberals, religion restricts freedom. Again, according to them, religion prevents modernization movements and development. There is no religion in the work of the pioneers of the liberal theory. According to Liberals, religion restricts freedom and they also see religion as the source of violence (Posen, 1993). Michael Duelfer, a prominent figure in the liberal movement, does not speak of religion in his writings on international peace and liberalism. When viewed as a secular order to liberalism, it would not be meaningful to exclude religion from this theory. However, when liberalism is considered

as a product of Protestantism movements, it will be revealed that the effect of religion is ignored in liberalism consciously and unjustly. According to Snyder, Liberalism emerged from Protestantism. The reason why liberals do not include religion in their theories is that in a modern and liberal world, religion is to be retreated. But nowadays, the role of religion in global politics has shown that this claim is not true (Snyder, 2011). Robert Koehane, one of the pioneers of neoliberalism, mentions the role of other institutions in interstate relations in his book *Hegemony*, while he does not mention religion. Although some international organizations, such as the International Red Cross, are of religious origin, there is no religion in corporate liberalism (Snyder, 2011). Although religion is not considered important in liberal theory and secular identity is not a priority, religion can contribute to the liberal theory.

In the theories of Marxism, one of the theories of international relations, religion is not included. Historical materialism, in keeping with Marx, excluded religion from its work as non-realistic knowledge. Marxists refer to the opium of religious societies because it is used to find solace in the struggle against the persecution of the employers and powerful people, arguing that religion is not scientific, and it limits the combat mentality state (Appleby, 2000). According to them, the important element in politics or international relations are the material elements. One of the most prominent figures of Marxist theory, Antonio Gramsci regards religion, as to exploit the workers and to prevent their revolutionary movements. Because of these theories, Communism and Marxism were the defenders and watchdogs of the idea of the USSR (Asad, 1993).

Although the theories of international relations can be considered within the scope of structuralism as a religious value, the pioneers of structuralist theory have avoided mentioning the effect of religion on international relations. In this approach, the ideologies of fundamentalist religious groups and terrorist organizations are considered as religion. It is evident that religion is treated as an ideology and it is not correct to consider fundamentalist and terrorist organizations as a religious thought (Laustsen, Carsten & Waever, 2008). As the religious organization of the ideological organizations such as the al-Qaeda terrorist organization and their ideology as religion, it will bring about conflicts between religions and civilizations in the world as proposed by Samuel Huntington. Religion will create a competitive and confrontational environment rather than a unifying (Huntington, 1993).

Why religion is not included in international relations theories? Jack Snyder from Columbia University, gives the following answer. According to him, there is a difference and contrast between the theories of religion and international relations. For instance, the difference of the realism theory of religion is that religion is global and the subject of international

relations is the state. Again, a contradiction is the difference of the logic and power between realism and religion. Liberalism and religion are separated from one another by holiness and beneficiary logic. For this reason, the thinkers of liberalism did not mention the effect of religion on international relations. The conflict of religion with the structuralist approach is that all social and cultural structures are treated with a secular approach. But it is forgotten by the structuralist that religion plays an important role in the formation of all social structures (Snyder, 2011).

In the same book, according to Timothy Samuel Shah and Daniel Philpott, the most important reason why international religious organizations or religion cannot enter into international relations theories is that religion and religious organizations are not aware of the boundaries, and are differentiated from other international and national organizations. ISIS Organizations such as Al Qaeda, Catholic and Protestant churches, World Council of Churches and International Council of Hindus do not know any boundaries. Their aim is to establish the caliphate throughout the world and to help all Christians and Hindus in the world. According to Shah and Philpott, theoretical theories such as Thomas Kuhn's paradigm (a set of values) are needed in these theories to place religion in international theories. They are convinced that religion is difficult to fit in the existing theories of international relations (Philpott, 2000).

According to Snyder, although religion has the ability to be included in each of the theories in international relations, it is not mentioned by theorists of this discipline. Alexander Wendt, one of the important names of structuralist thought, did not include religion and sect in any part of his *Theory of International Politics*. Wendt considers the principles of mutual dependence, common fate, similarity and mutual respect as variables that can change international anarchy. The cultural affinity and commitment of societies has led to the formation of international religious organizations and unity such as Protestantism. The feeling of common destiny will also help to unite the common unification of communities and common threats. Similarity may also arise as religious similarity. And mutual respect can be the respect that religions offer. Nevertheless, in Wendt's book, none of the variable factors mentioned above have been evaluated in terms of religion or sect. According to Snyder, when religion is added to the structuralist approach, it will make the approach more powerful and rich (Snyder, 2011). According to Snyder, the inclusion of religion in these theories of international relations will help these theories to be powerful and correct. For this reason, international relations should take into account the rebirth of religion, the development of politics and international relations thinkers. The most important benefit of the rise of religion to this area is the

increase in demand for political participation. The influence of religion on politics will increase demand in domestic politics. This will make an important contribution to international relations (Snyder, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

Before Westphalia's peace treaties, religion played a primary role in the determination of friendship, enmity, war and peace in both theory and practice in interstate relations. After the peace agreements of Westphalia, religious order and systems were replaced by secular and anti-religious orders. According to this order, religion should be kept away from politics. Because, according to the ideas of those who wanted the secular order to come, religion was the source of wars, and reason was more beneficial than religion, and every task had to be done in mind. Religion was the source of distrust and the basis of wars, according to politicians and actors who signed the Westphalia agreements. Thus, religion was tried to be removed from politics and international relations in practice and theory. Although religion has succeeded in removing itself from international relations in theory, religion has always shown its effectiveness in practice. The Peace Treaties of Westphalia preserved religion even in the period of the Vienna Congress, and some of the states belonging to Western Christian religion before World War I established the Holy Alliance to obtain land from the Muslim Ottoman Empire. Religion has also been a factor in Nazi policies against the Jews in World War II. During the Cold War, there was religion at the heart of the Islamic Jihad movements and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the deterioration of the occupation of Afghanistan by the USSR. With the globalization of the 11th September incidents and the terrorist organizations after the Cold War, religion once again began to attract attention and revel in international relations.

Although religion began to manifest itself in practice in international relations, it still did not have the position it deserved in international relations theories. It is concluded that the chances of fitting international relations into existing theories are very low because religion is in contradiction with the theories of international relations. Because religion is a sacred, eternal purpose and a borderless phenomenon. The theories of international relations are secular, state, interest and power centered. In order to fit religion in the theories of international relations, a revolutionary change is needed in existing theories, such as Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift. Religion will remain outside the theories of international relations unless the principles of the theories change. Placing religion in theories of international relations will make these theories strong, rich and logical. This is only possible by changing the secular and religious excluded theories of the discipline of international relations.

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