

Rethinking the Role of Religion in International Relations:

Ontological Security Theory and Its Limitations

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Abstract

This paper explores how religious belief affects political action through a critique of Kinvall's ontological security framework. Whilst Kinvall suggests that religious beliefs become salient in politics in response to uncertainty, I argue that her theory treats religion as epiphenomenal. Drawing on Asad, Scott, and MacIntyre, I argue that religion cannot be separated from the interpretative frameworks through which individuals understand the world. By examining the case of Haredi Jews and their opposition to Zionism, I assert that religion is the framework through which uncertainty itself is understood and through which legitimate political action is defined. This paper contributes to the study of politics by showing that, despite positive progress, existing scholarship on the role of religion in IR is constrained by conceptual limitations.

Introduction

Prior to the 1990s, religion was largely ignored by scholars of international relations (IR) (Mandaville 2019, p. 173), partly due to the belief that religion's importance would decline with global modernisation and secularisation (Scott 2005, p. 2). Yet, following events such as the Iranian Revolution and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, which had clear religious dimensions, attention to religion's role in global politics has increased.

In this essay I critically examine one influential theory that offers a reappraisal of religion's role in IR, namely Kinvall's (2004) ontological security approach. Kinvall suggests that globalisation increases ontological insecurity, which leads individuals to mobilise behind politicised religious groups that provide identity, meaning and continuity.

In this essay, I argue that, whilst Kinvall's theory takes a step in the right direction in acknowledging the importance of religion, the theory treats religion as instrumental and reactionary. It thus perpetuates the same Western assumptions about linear modernisation and a clear separation between religion and politics that limited understandings of religion within traditional IR theories. Through the case study of Haredi Judaism and its opposition to Zionism, I show the limitations of Kinvall's theory in explaining how religion becomes politicised for actors that already hold beliefs. I argue that for these types of actors, religious belief does not just enter politics as a reaction to existential anxiety, rather it fundamentally defines how they perceive the world and what political

action is legitimate. I contend that religion cannot be instrumentalised to counter an independent, universal sense of ontological insecurity, as religion dictates how these individuals interpret and feel that insecurity in the first place.

To make this argument, the essay will be structured as follows: In Section I, I outline the concept of ontological security and its relevance to Kinvall's theory. In Section II, I build on the work of Asad (1993), Scott (2005) and MacIntyre (in Scott 2005) to develop a theoretical critique of Kinvall, highlighting the Western assumptions embedded in her theory. In Section III, using the case study of Haredi Judaism and Zionism, I offer an empirical example that demonstrates how the theory's implicit assumptions limit its explanatory power of how religion affects politics for actors with pre-existing beliefs. I suggest religion is more fundamentally constitutive of political action than Kinvall suggests.

Section I: Ontological Security and Religion

This section will expand on the concept of ontological security and Kinvall's theory of the influence of religion on politics.

Ontological security is a sense of security in one's identity: a sense that one's life has continuity, and that one's actions align with a coherent set of inner values. It is fostered by factors such as routines, a clear place in a community, and predictability in day-to-day life. Ontological insecurity, by contrast, arises when this stability is interrupted. It leaves individuals unsure of their identity,

unsure of what actions are meaningful, and unable to make predictions about the world around them (Mitzen 2006, pp. 342-345).

Kinval (2004, p. 743) argues that globalisation increasingly undermines ontological security for many individuals worldwide by removing a sense of stability and predictability from their lives. For example, it spreads foreign ideas, such as democracy and neoliberalism, which disrupt deeply entrenched traditions and social practices worldwide. Similarly, it creates an increasingly interconnected world, which enables greater migration. However, many migrants can experience a sense of homelessness and unfamiliarity, which can also increase feelings of ontological insecurity.

As insecurity increases, Kinval asserts that individuals 'search for one stable identity' (2004, p. 749) to provide meaning and an end towards which they can act. She argues that religious identities are one identity signifier that people are drawn to as they provide simple answers in an increasingly complex world, and since they promulgate clear, divinely ordained rules that provide individuals with a sense of order and meaning (2004, p. 759). For those that already follow a faith, Kinval suggests religion is 'reinvented and reconceptualised' (2004, p. 760). Thus, for Kinval, religious beliefs affect politics in that believers mobilise them in the face of psychological adversity.

Section II: Conceptual Critique

In this section, drawing on Asad, Scott and MacIntyre, I will offer a conceptual critique of Kinvall's theory.

Various scholars reject the idea of religion being an objective, analytically identifiable category, arguing that this distinction is a product of Eurocentric worldviews. In Western social science, theorisation about religion was largely based on Christianity, which, in comparison to other traditions, very explicitly differentiates between religion and politics. Over time, this distinction has come to be regarded as a universal feature of religion (Mandaville 2019, p. 173). Similarly, the rise of positivism in Western social science, an approach that assumes the existence of an objective social world, enabled the creation of distinct social categories, such as religion (Scott 2005, pp. 60-62). From this perspective, religion can be treated as an entity that is analysable independently of the moral and cultural frameworks in which it exists. For this reason, Asad (1993, pp. 17-18) argues that there is no such thing as religion as a separate category from politics and science. Similarly, Fitzgerald (2011, p. 6) argues that the category of religion does not describe the world but rather constitutes it. Kinvall reproduces this distinction between religion and other domains, as by suggesting that religion becomes politicised and salient after individuals experience ontological insecurity, she assumes religion can be analysed and experienced independently of the interpretive frameworks through which individuals perceive the world. She thus fails to recognise that religion cannot be divorced from feelings of insecurity, and that it frames what is even understood as uncertain from the offset.

Similarly, Scott (2005, pp. 51-52) argues that IR's attitude towards religion partly reflects the enduring influence of modernisation theory in Western social sciences. This theory suggests that all societies follow a linear pathway from backwards to modern, with secularisation being a central feature of this progress. Secularisation holds that as a society modernises, the importance of religion will inevitably decline. As a result of the theory's influence, any presence of religion in contemporary politics is often regarded as something that needs to be explained, as something that must be a result of other 'social, political, economic or psychological' forces (Bellah 1991, p. 241). Whilst Kinvall does not endorse modernisation theory, her effort to explain politicised religion with reference to other psychological deprivations reflects how her ideas are formed within an academic tradition heavily influenced by the theory. Her theory thus overlooks how religious beliefs can act as independent drivers of political action and thought in and of themselves.

My final critique of Kinvall's argument builds on MacIntyre. MacIntyre argues that, whilst constructivist positions do give greater recognition to religion in politics, their conception of how this occurs is still grounded in Western assumptions regarding individualism (in Scott 2005, p. 96). Constructivist theories suggest that people construct religious identities through symbols and discourse. Similarly, Kinvall (2004, p. 748), suggests that religious identities are constructed in response to ontological insecurity through symbols like historical trauma. This assumes that individuals are highly autonomous agents who can step outside of their spiritual heritage to choose their religious identity, an idea that reflects Western assumptions about the self-reliance and primacy of the individual. As Scott (2005, p. 75) puts it, religion becomes like a menu that actors appropriate when needed. Yet, as the case study of Haredi Judaism will show, individuals are

inextricably anchored to and bound by their own belief systems. This means that they do not just calculatingly appropriate religion in light of psychological issues, rather religion fundamentally determines how they perceive those issues and what political action they take to alleviate them.

By treating religion as separable from other domains, reactionary, and contingent on individual choice, Kinvall takes a narrow view of how religion becomes politicised for already religious actors – viewing it as a secondary force that is reinvented in the face of anxiety. Yet religion does not just respond to anxiety – it determines what issues cause anxiety in the first place. It dictates what events matter, how those events should be interpreted, and what political action can be taken in response. Haredi Judaism's rejection of Zionism illustrates this idea.

Section III: Haredi Jews and Zionism

For Haredi Jews, conditions and events that might generate ontological uncertainty – diasporic existence and the Holocaust – are interpreted through their religious framework. Thus, despite Zionism representing an ideology that Kinvall's framework suggests would be an attractive source of stability, this group vehemently opposes it.

Various Haredi groups, such as Satmar and Neturei Karta, oppose the state of Israel (Klein 2023), despite living in conditions that seem highly conducive to ontological insecurity. One factor that might create insecurity is the fact that they are a diasporic population, with Jews belonging to these

groups being spread as far and wide as the USA, Hungary and France (Keren-Kratz 2023, pp. 58-59). As noted earlier, Kinvall (2004, p. 743) suggests that a sense of rootlessness and homelessness makes it difficult for one's life to feel stable and predictable and thus suggests that these feelings are likely to cause ontological uncertainty. Undoubtedly, diasporic existence is likely to involve these feelings, in that these are populations living as minorities, ruled by leaders that are not of their own tribe, and surrounded by a range of very different cultures to their own. Indeed, Innes (2017, p. 357) asserts that diasporic populations do not have the simple nationalist narrative about their identity that comes with living in an indigenous state and thus suffer from ontological uncertainty. Another factor that is conducive to ontological uncertainty is traditional community ties (Giddens 1991, p. 33). Traditional communities present individuals with predictability and offer them the opportunity to construct their identity around membership of the group. Kinvall (2004, p. 743) notes that globalisation's destructive potential in part derives from how it destroys traditional community ties. Living through the Holocaust, the earliest members of the official Haredi anti-Zionist movement had their communities not just undermined, but systematically eradicated. For instance, Rabbi Yoel Tietelbaum, the eventual founder of the Central Rabbinical Congress, an early American anti-Zionist organisation, was the only Hungarian Ultra-Orthodox leader to survive the Holocaust (Keren-Kratz 2023, p. 59).

From the perspective of ontological security theory, Zionism would be an extremely attractive ideology for these Haredi Jews. As a form of religious nationalism, it provides a coherent connection between identity, territory and a stable home. The ideology is also closely connected to the 'othering' of Palestinian Arabs (Grassiani 2015), which would allow these Jews to

intersubjectively construct their identity by distinguishing themselves from this unfamiliar group (Kinnvall 2004, p. 749). Yet instead of being drawn to Zionism, Haredi Jews are staunchly opposed to the ideology, which is in large part due to their theological beliefs. According to the Talmudic verse ‘The Three Oaths’, Jews are not meant to ‘hasten the redemption’ and bring about Jewish sovereignty before the Messianic age. This means that Jews are to remain in exile from Israel, even under harsh conditions (Keren Kratz 2023, pp. 54-5).

This example highlights the limitations of Kinnvall’s theory in understanding how religion affects politics for already-religious actors. The Haredi Jews are not individuals who, free from the constraints of their religious beliefs, feel an abstract, universal sense of ontological uncertainty, and then calculatingly appropriate Zionist ideology in response to their conditions. Rather, any uncertainty they feel is understood with reference to their religious worldview. Religion is not a distinct category for them, separate from their emotional and interpretive frameworks; it is the framework. For example, diasporic existence does not cause existential anxiety for the Haredi Jews, because it is viewed as divinely ordained. Similarly, Rabbi Tietelbaum saw the Holocaust not as a source of existential anxiety, but rather as a divine punishment for the Zionist movement’s disobedience of God’s commands (Keren Kratz 2023, p. 61). This shows that religious beliefs do not just affect politics by entering in response to external pressures and deprivations, rather that they provide the entire framework within which political judgement and activity take place.

Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that religion does not become politicised when existing believers reinvent their faith in response to external issues. Instead, beliefs affect politics in that they offer comprehensive guidelines for political judgement and behaviour. I made this argument using the case study of Haredi Judaism's opposition to Zionism. Despite facing ostensibly uncertain conditions (from the perspective of Kinvall's theory) this religious group does not appropriate the convenient and stabilising Zionist ideology. Rather, religion structures how they perceive the anxiety in the first place and thus informs their subsequent oppositional political position.

In making this argument, I critiqued Kinvall's ontological security theory, which looks to explain how religion gains significance in politics. The aim of this critique is not to suggest her theory is devoid of any utility. It has, for instance, proven useful in explaining why Western born youths with more secular identities are drawn to ISIS (Ben Labidi 2016). But in theorising based on a Western conception of religion, the theory's explanatory power is limited when asking why religion becomes politicised for individuals for whom faith is already an important part of their lives.

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