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Book Talk:  
*Religious Appeals in Power Politics*  
by Peter Henne  
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Response by Ariel Zellman\*  
Bar-Ilan University

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\* Correspondence should be directed to [peter.henne@uvm.edu](mailto:peter.henne@uvm.edu) (Peter Henne) or [ariel.zellman@biu.ac.il](mailto:ariel.zellman@biu.ac.il) (Ariel Zellman).

Peter Henne's new book is an important, impactful, and welcome contribution to the expanding and increasingly nuanced study of the role of religion in international politics. In it, he explores the conditions under which states employ religious appeals—references to religious standards and symbols—to justify foreign policy decisions or critique their rivals, as well as the variable conditions under which such appeals are likely to impact power politics for better or worse.

On the one hand, Henne discusses "religion skeptics" who reject the significance of religious appeals in power politics out-of-hand as mere fig leaves for states' true motivations. On the other are "religion triumphalists" who view religion as fundamentally transformative, potentially replacing concerns with material gain and even power politics, wherein religious appeals should themselves produce dramatic changes in state behavior on the international stage. Henne challenges both as follows: "Those who believe religion is important need to better understand what impact these appeals have, if any. Skeptics of religion's importance need to explain their frequency" (p. 5). He then thoughtfully charts a middle course, recognizing religious appeals as one of many potential strategic tools states employ in international diplomacy. Yet, owing to the deep cultural and moral authority of religious appeals, they may also have implications for important patterns of international relations distinct from those expected from "conventional" military or economic statecraft.

Henne argues that "wielder" states are most likely to employ such appeals when they exercise high religious moral authority and face ideologically-charged international crises. In turn, these appeals are most likely to succeed when they are seen as credible and culturally appropriate by "target" states to whom the appeals are addressed, and when the target states have material incentives to cooperate. Lacking sufficient credibility, wielders are at best able to form shallow coalitions with self-interested targets who are likely to use such appeals to advance their own narrow goals and interests. Lacking material incentives, high-credibility wielders are likely to increase rather than diminish ideological tensions in a crisis.

To support these arguments, he qualitatively analyzes a diverse set of cases: Saudi Arabia's failed initiative to build an "Islamic Pact" in opposition to Nasserist Egypt in the 1960s; American attempts to engage with the Muslim world in the context of the Global War on Terrorism; Russian efforts to undermine Western opposition to its efforts to exert control over its Russian coethnics populated "near abroad"; as well as several micro-cases in his penultimate chapter. Within, he employs careful process tracing and comparative historical analysis to demonstrate how potential wielders came to select religious appeals as a preferred strategy, potentially among many, to advance state security interests amidst international crises, and how such appeals translated to failure (Saudi Arabia), shallow coalition-building (United States), and perverse gains and backlash (Russia). These analyses are further laudable for their humility, including recognition of potential data

limitations and respectful engagement with alternative explanations. Altogether, it is a highly convincing work that offers an ambitious research agenda for scholars of religion and international relations, and religion and conflict in particular.

Now some pointed questions:

### **1. To what extent is the study of religion and international politics stuck between religion skeptics and triumphalists?**

One limiting aspect of this volume was its frequent return to this dichotomy as the defining feature of current debates on politics and religion. Today, few international relations scholars advance the epistemological (or perhaps ontological?) view that religion does not matter. The loudest contemporary realists, with some notable exceptions, are generally not those who entirely reject beliefs and ideologies as having *an* influence on international affairs. Rather, they cluster among the "instrumentalists," formally separated by Henne from the outright "skeptics."

To Henne's credit, he gives both their due by exploring alternative explanations in each substantive chapter. I also empathize with his frustrated contention that instrumentalist claims that religious appeals are "merely" a cynical political tool constitute "shifting the goalposts rather than undermining an argument" (p. 29). Yet, in my reading, most instrumentalists would agree that it matters less what policymakers truly believe, and more whether religious appeals have a recognizable impact. How we engage with religion, from this *specific* perspective, may therefore be more a matter of style than substance.

I also do not believe religious "triumphalism" accurately captures the theoretical perspectives and commitments of most *academic* researchers in religion and politics, in contrast to, say, ideological think tanks, foundations, and NGOs. As a theoretical foil, the idea that religion must explain everything, or that religious appeals when employed must have the *greatest* influence on any given crisis outcome, is useful. However, most in this field agree with Henne that religion is one among many foreign policy tools that *can* have a meaningful and distinct impact. Our challenge has been convincing non-religion scholars that religion's influence is notable and worth consideration along with other more "conventional" approaches.

### **2. Has the dialogue between these perspectives really, as argued in the Forward (p. viii), gone "dormant"?**

I think Henne agrees that this is not for lack of trying. New and innovative studies on religion's influences on civil war processes, post-conflict reconstruction, democratization, international development, and interstate dispute militarization

and resolution have, to date, generated little response from non-religion scholars. When they do engage, it is largely to dismiss this work as merely expressing what we already know (ideology, etc., matters sometimes under particular conditions) or as niche research without broad appeal, unlike, say, ethnolinguistic fractionalization.

Snark aside, I am hopeful that further headway can be made, as is Henne, regarding analysis of religious appeals' potential impact as it differs from instrumental appeals to other ideological justifications. Appeals to religious ideals, beliefs, and collective claims may have mobilizational and disruptive potentials that are *distinct* from appeals to ethnic, national, and other cultural, ideological, and ascriptive identity concerns. Henne's development of an explanatory framework to anticipate when states will turn to religious appeals and when such appeals will result in particular outcomes on the international stage is a big step in the right direction. A logical further extension could therefore be comparative: demonstrating how conditions conducive to cross-border ethnic and/or national appeals (or perhaps transnational ones in the form of pan-Arabism or pan-Africanism) and factors determining their success and/or failure relate to those theorized for religious appeals.

### **3. Does the contemporary study of politics and religion lack an appreciation of religion's dynamic and relational aspects?**

In his conclusion (p. 132), Henne argues that the study of religion in international relations has been limited by treating religion as a set of fixed identities, beliefs, and motivations rather than in more dynamic terms. The remedy is for scholars to treat religion as (well as) a set of tools or interactions, in which relational dynamics and temporal change can be better appreciated. This degree of complexity is well captured by *good* qualitative research, of which this volume is an excellent example. Henne also proposes a move toward network analysis to locate and spatialize relationships between state and non-state actors, determine and examine hierarchies, and understand how interactions between actors on the edges of different networks influence religion's appeal and effect. This is an excellent proposal, and one that closely aligns with the Henne's newest exciting research agenda.

Yet this call for innovation underplays how much relational approaches are already the norm in religion and international relations. Research published before the volume's 2023 release is cited, but their relational contributions are underplayed. Here, I feel like Henne has shortchanged his own 2012 article in *The Journal of Peace Research*, which examines how religious-secular state dyads experience more severe interstate conflicts than those that are both secular or both religious. Fox and Sandal (2010), Ozdamar and Akbaba (2014), and Zellman and

Fox (2020) all demonstrate the elevated propensity of states that more exclusively support their majority religion or engage in higher levels of religious discrimination to be involved in international crises or to militarize interstate disputes. Alexander (2017) further advances these innovations by examining how domestic levels of religiosity, measured via public opinion polling, are tied to interstate conflict. So too, Henne, Saiya, and Hand (2020) demonstrate how growing state favoritism for majority religions can actually encourage radicalization and violence by said majority. In these studies, conflict involving religion is not fixed, but relational, dependent upon variable ideological alignments between and within states.

Released while *Religious Appeals...* was nearing publication, Huang and Tababar's (2021) work on Iran's careful and strategic selection of religious, ethnic, and politically-aligned engagement and intervention strategies in neighboring states demonstrates the substantial extent to which even highly-religious states rely upon relational, context-specific foreign policymaking. In turn, Zellman and Brown (2022) demonstrate quantitatively and via substantive case studies how conflict dynamics substantially vary between different pairings of states; whereas mixed religion dyads tend to fight when co-religionists are oppressed, and shared religion dyads fight when their domestic religious legitimacy is threatened by a rival's rising religious commitments. In research I have published since with Jonathan Fox (2023) and Florian Justwan (2024), we aim to take this relationality a step further, examining how variable religious salience of territorial disputes presents different incentives for more-religious versus more-religious states to militarize and attempt to resolve said disputes.

Recognizing these recent developments hardly diminishes Henne's call for innovation. Rather, it demonstrates the considerable extent to which scholars of politics and religion are already on board and eager to continue the conversation. Henne's (2023) subsequent review essay on this subject and Tababar et al.'s (2023) forum on religious conflicts, both in *International Studies Review*, are only more encouraging in their further push in the same nuanced, relational direction.

In sum, *Religious Appeals...* has tapped into a critical subject area, offered a remarkably clear-sighted analysis of a challenging and complex topic, and provided us with a clear roadmap to make this fruitful research agenda even more so. If this subject area is of interest to you, whether as a religion skeptic, triumphalist, somewhere in-between, or as a scholar or reader who has not until this point considered the role of religion in international politics, I cannot recommend enough that you pick up this volume now. I have no doubt you will find it as insightful and thought-provoking as I have.

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### Author’s Reply by Peter S. Henne

University of Vermont

I appreciate Dr. Zellman’s close reading and useful critique of my book, as well as the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* for providing this venue for debate and engagement. Zellman provides a useful summary of the book’s

argument, and raises some tough but fair questions. I especially appreciate that he raised questions about the book's broader theoretical significance for research on religion and international relations (I will henceforth refer to this research program as RIR), as one goal of the book was to provoke debate and progress in this important research program.

Overall, Zellman questions whether the broader theoretical stakes I claim my book engages in exist; he suggests that RIR is already addressing these issues. My general response is similar to recent theoretical work arguing for a relational approach to RIR; it is true that resources exist to address these issues, but RIR has not done so in a systematic manner, which limits its impact and development (Henne, 2023).

I will address each of his points in turn.

First, Zellman questions my *dichotomy between religion skeptics and religion triumphalists*, wondering if anyone is really skeptical that religion matters or if RIR scholars are really triumphalists about religion's importance.

He is correct that much research touching on religious issues, especially Middle East Studies on Islamism, tends to be more instrumentalist than skeptical; they accept that religion matters, but argue it is often a cover for other more "real" motivations. I would disagree that instrumentalists still think religion has an impact. For example, some studies on Islamist political parties claim their supporters view Islamic law in terms of good governance rather than as a religious platform (Fair et al., 2018). Others have argued that because supposedly religious states base foreign policies on material security concerns, religion is unimportant (Shaffer, 2006). That is, the instrumentalist nature of religious politics means that religion is secondary to other factors. Anecdotally, a common informal pushback RIR scholars receive—from peer reviewers or at academic conferences—is that this "is not really about religion." I would argue, then, that the instrumentalist approach often takes the form of a critique of the significance of religion in international relations.

Beyond that, Zellman is right that few scholars explicitly question whether religion matters to the extent that realists questioned the significance of ideology and identity during the "paradigm wars" between realism, liberalism, and constructivism (Mearsheimer, 1994/1995). Yet, I would argue there is an implicit skepticism in how international relations scholars deal with (or fail to deal with) religion. How many rationalist studies of alliance politics, for example, raise religion as an alternative explanation? Even when rationalist studies do find a role for religion—as Simmons and Elkins did in their 2004 study on the spread of neoliberal economic policies—how often does it go on to become an important part of the research program? Moreover, the book's case studies include examples of debates on these countries—Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States—that completely ignore the religious element of their politics. So, while few scholars outside of RIR explicitly argue that religion does not matter, equally few directly

engage with it as a possible explanation. Perhaps I should describe them as ignoring religion rather than skeptical of it.

Zellman's critique of my use of the term "triumphalist" to explain contemporary RIR is well-taken. It is true that very few RIR scholars claim that religion is the only thing that drives state behavior. Many of the examples I gave claiming religion is transforming international relations are foundational works that are now several decades old. But that is the issue; we have not moved on to new foundational works. Most studies in practice look at religion's interactions with non-religious factors. But if religion matters through rationalist regime calculations or the necessities of regime survival, what is really "doing the work" (Grim & Finke, 2011; Sarkissian, 2015)? That is, is religion really the causal factor? We do not have a good, systematic theory for this that drives current research. Absent that, scholars of RIR—including, to be fair, me—are left asserting religion's importance in line with triumphalism as I've described it. Additionally, the unsystematized addition of new variables to an initially-parsimonious theory leaves RIR open to critiques similar to those faced by neorealism as it attempted to elaborate on Waltz's structural realism with a variety of state-level and ideological variables (Vasquez, 1997).

Second, he questions whether the subfield of international relations is really *lacking a dialogue between these perspectives*. I believe I addressed some of this concern in my above response regarding "religion skeptics." I certainly agree that RIR has engaged in a dialogue with mainstream international relations, but it is one-sided and we should reflect on why that is. I believe the issues with the study of RIR I raised in my book are part of the reason.

Finally, Zellman argues that, contrary to what I claim in the book, there is *already a strong relational element* to the study of RIR. This is an underdeveloped part of the book, and something I expanded on in my theoretical essay (Henne, 2023). I agree with Zellman that there are many examples of relational approaches in RIR. Yet, while many examples of RIR work hint at relational dynamics (including studies of mine that he cited), they rarely raise them explicitly and instead present religion as an independent if interactive force. Thus, the issue is similar to the above point on the "triumphalist" category; this approach is rarely systematized, so RIR often argues religious beliefs are a force that drives behavior but their studies reveal the dynamic and interactive nature of religion. What I would hope is that more scholars would follow Zellman's lead and recognize that much of the study of RIR is relational, incorporating this into their work.

Zellman is also correct that some RIR studies do explicitly point to relational approaches. I would add numerous examples to the work he cites (Nexon, 2009; Stamatov, 2013; Te Brake, 2017; Townsell et al., 2022). Yet, much of this is presented as a postpositivist critique of neo-positivist RIR. Rather than completely rejecting positivist methods, however, we could adapt relational approaches for all



of RIR. Zellman's positivist examples are encouraging, but as with my above point, they do not seem to be cohering into a clear program within RIR.

Generally, I think Zellman's critiques are valid. I could have adopted more precise terminology of alternative explanations or been more charitable towards existing trends in international relations. But part of the issue with RIR is that we *could* describe religion's impact on the world in terms other than triumphalist, and we *could* consider our research overwhelmingly relational. But we do not. So, my intention with this book was first to study religion's impact on power politics. But the broader hope was to push RIR towards settling on non-triumphalist language and relational approaches. If, as Zellman argues, we are most of the way there, then that is good news.

Beyond that, however, I admit some of this comes down to what scholars of RIR want our research program to look like. I envision a research program with agreed-upon definitions and standards for measuring progress, as exists in other areas of international relations. Others, however, may prefer RIR to be a loose collection of scholarly works united by some interest in religion. Even if the rest of the field does not see RIR as a key research area, they at least accept religion as mattering. That would—as Zellman suggests—indicate a general acceptance in the subfield that religion matters, and an integration into existing research areas.

I do not know that I can resolve this here, but it is a useful debate. Again, I appreciate the chance to have this debate and for Zellman's close reading and commentary. I hope my book can at least ensure this debate continues. To borrow a metaphor from the book, it is meant to be the holy hand grenade tossed into RIR, forcing a reaction from those who read it.

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