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# **Do We Need a ‘Political Science of Religion’?**

## **Introduction**

Issues involving religion are intrinsically political, but religion has yet to establish itself as a mainstream political science concern. Much of this is due to the secular underpinnings of the discipline, as well as to its increasingly fragmented nature. While scholarly interest in religion has increased in recent years, the omission remains one that warrants redress. One possibility might be the establishment of a ‘political science of religion’, comparable to sub-fields within other disciplines, as a means of promoting a clear and distinctive research program. Certainly such an approach would not be without its attractions, and some may consider it long overdue. The argument presented here, however, is that such an enterprise would create more difficulties than benefits. As such, two key points are made: first, that political scientists should do more to engage with religious issues; but second, that, in so doing, the tools of political science should be committed to a broader, more interdisciplinary and holistic approach to the academic study of religion in general.

## **Religion overlooked**

To say that religion provides one of the world’s most powerful and enduring political forces is to risk stating the obvious to the point of banality. Recent and on-going debates around faith schools, end-of-life issues, same-sex marriage, religious violence and social cohesion (to name but few) highlight just some of the ways in which religious forces can shape political events. And with most people in the world continuing to profess some form of religious allegiance, the political salience of religion is likely to remain significant for a very long time to come.

Not surprisingly, the academic study of religion is extensive. Traversing a wide variety of disciplines in both the natural and social sciences, this contains a multiplicity of well-crafted research agendas, represented by a diverse range of journals, associations and institutions in fields such as sociology, psychology, history, anthropology, philosophy, economics, geography, cognitive science and medicine. In most cases, the principal branch of research is accompanied by the disciplinary suffix 'of religion' (such as the 'sociology of religion') as a marker of the specialism (e.g. see Hinnells, 2005).

Political science, though, remains notably absent from such lists. Although political scientists have produced a number of significant works in this area (e.g. Fetzer and Soper, 2005; Haynes, 2009; Kalyvas, 1996; Putnam, 2000), the numbers involved are relatively few, and most work involving religious issues remains concentrated within specific sub-disciplines; primarily, comparative politics and international relations. Here too research tends to cluster within a number of specific thematic areas, such as nationalism, violence, collective identities, social capital, voting behaviour and political engagement.

Mainstream political science, however, has thus far yet to fully include religion as one of its core issues of concern. Writing in the mid-point of the last decade, Wald et al (2005: 122-23) noted, for example, that: 'Even today, it is difficult to find a distinctively "political science" perspective on religion'. By the close of the decade the situation remained unchanged. As Philpott (2009: 184) wrote, 'works on religion still form only a small niche of scholarship in comparative politics and international relations', and 'religion's place in political science scholarship is vastly underproportioned to its place in headlines around the globe'. More recently, Grzymala-Busse (2012: 412), has highlighted the relative lack of attention paid to religious issues, calling on practitioners of comparative politics in particular 'to take religion more seriously'.

The neglect of religion by mainstream political science has also been empirically demonstrated. According to a recent study of leading political science journals, just 97 papers from a total of 7,245 published by the top 20 periodicals between 2000 and 2010 took religion as a primary focus of analysis: an average of 1.34%. In contrast, the proportion of publications primarily engaging with religion in leading sociology journals was more than two-and-a-half times higher, amounting to 242 papers from a total of 6,896 (an average of 3.51%), and the gap between the two disciplines was shown to be widening.

The subject of religion also fared poorly in comparison to traditional political science themes. An analysis of one of the leading political science journals, the *American Political Science Review*, showed that 8% of papers published between 2000 and 2010 were on the subject of 'political parties', 9.6% focused on 'political institutions', 12.2% dealt with the theme of 'democracy' and 12.8% concerned 'voting and elections'. Conversely, for the sample as a whole, the relatively small number of political science papers involving religious issues were themselves highly concentrated in specific subject areas, centring, in particular, on issues of violence, conflict and terrorism (21.7%), Islam (20.6%) and U.S politics and society (17.5%) (see Kettell, 2012).

The failure of religious issues to penetrate the political science mainstream is further reflected in a lack of specialist groups and outlets. A web-based survey of national, regional and international political science associations conducted in October 2013 (using organisation lists provided by the American Political Science Association and the International Political Science Association) reveals a clear lack of specialist/working groups, research committees or comparable sections dedicated to the study of religious issues.<sup>1</sup>

The survey covered a total of 41 organisations. Of these, 24 provided no detailed information about their research groups or sub-sections. For these cases, the survey examined whether the

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<sup>1</sup> Some national associations (e.g. Chile, China, Japan) did not have a functioning website and so were omitted from the survey.

organisation provided a panel or section on religious issues at the most recent annual conference for which information was available. Conference details here were available either for 10 organisations, leaving a total of 14 organisations where no detailed information about their sub-group or conference activities could be obtained.

The survey found that of the total sample of 41 organisations, just 8 had a specialist research group (or comparable) on the subject of religion. This amounts to just 19.5% of the total sample, and 30% of the sample for which either sub-group or conference information was available. The figure rose to 10 (24% of the total sample) when associations providing conference but not sub-group information were included. The contemporaneous nature of these groups was also striking. Out of the 8 associations with identifiable research groups, just 2 had been founded before the turn of the century: the International Political Science Association (1986), and the American Political Science Association (1987). Four of the remaining six groups were formed in the last seven years: the European Consortium for Political Research (2006), the Italian Society of Political Science (2009), the Latin American Political Science Association (2011) and the UK Political Studies Association (2013).<sup>2</sup> Details of the survey are set out in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Research groups on religion in political science associations**

Organisation	Group	Details
African Association of Political Science (AAPS)	-	No information.

<sup>2</sup> The German Association of Political Science established a religion and politics working group in 2001. The Mexican Association of Political Science has a religion and politics research group, although the formation date is unknown.

<sup>3</sup> A similar pattern may be found for sub-sections within political science. The International Studies Association (ISA), for example, established a ‘Religion and International Relations’ section in 2013, but the British International Studies Association currently has no working group on the subject, from a total of 26 groups, and just one, ‘International Relations and Security’ (established in 2007) makes any mention of religious issues.

American Political Science Association (APSA)	Yes	Religion and politics sub-group formed in 1987.
Argentine Society of Political Analysis (SAAP)	Yes *	No information on groups, but 'religion and politics' forms a small part of a sub-area within 'Area Theory and Political Philosophy' for 2013 conference.
Australian Political Studies Association (APSA)	No *	No information on groups but no panels on religion for 2013 conference.
Austrian Political Science Association (AuPSA)	No	Has 6 sub-sections: the study of democracy, comparative European politics, European research, international relations, interpretive policy analysis, political leadership.
Brazilian Association of Political Science (ABCP)	No	Has 12 thematic areas, including: political communication and public opinion, elections and political representation, state and public policy, politics and economics, political theory.
Canadian Political Science Association (CPSA)	No *	No information on groups but no sessions at 2013 conference.
Central European Political Science Association (CEPSA)	No *	No information on groups but no sessions at 2012 conference.
Croatian Political Science Association (CPSA)	-	No information.
Czech Association of Political Science (CSPV)	-	No information.
Danish Political Science Association (DPSA)	No *	No information on groups but no panels on religion for 2012 conference.
European Confederation of Political Science Associations (ECPSA)	-	No information.
European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR)	Yes	Standing group on religion and politics founded in 2006.
European Political Science Association (EPSA)	No	No information on groups but no sections on religion for 2013 conference.

Finnish Political Science Association	-	No information.
French Political Science Association (AFSP)	No	Contained fourteen working groups and study sections before reorganisation in 2012. Now has three project groups: political representation, international action, and public opinion and action.
German Association of Political Science (DVPW)	Yes	Politics and religion working group since 2001.
Hungarian Political Science Association (MPTT)	No	Contains five sections: discourse theory, political behaviour, political theory, international and European policy, public policy.
Icelandic Political Science Association	-	No information.
Indian Political Science Association (IPSA)	-	No information.
International Political Science Association (IPSA)	Yes	Religion and politics study group formed in 1986. Became a research committee in 1999.
Political Studies Association of Ireland (PSAI)	No	Ten specialist groups, including: voters, parties and elections, European studies, local government, peace and conflict studies, political theory.
Italian Society of Political Science (ISP)	Yes	Religion and politics standing committee established in 2009.
Korean Political Science Association (KPSA)	No *	No information on groups but no sessions relating to religion at 2011 conference.
Latin American Political Science Association (ALACIP)	Yes	Politics and religion in Latin America research group established in 2011.
Mexican Association of Political Science (AMECIP)	Yes	Religion and politics research group (formation date unknown).
Dutch Political Science Association (NKWP)	-	No information.
New Zealand Political Studies Association (NZPSA)	No	Five research networks: interpretative policy analysis, media and political communication, political theory, environmental policy and politics, gender and politics.

Nordic Political Science Association (NoPSA)	-	No information.
Norwegian Political Science Association (NSF)	No *	No information on groups but no sessions involving religion at 2013 conference.
Polish Political Science Association (PTNP)	-	No information.
Portuguese Association of Political Science (APCP)	Yes *	No information on groups, but 2012 conference contained panels on 'religion and political parties in comparative perspective', and 'religion and politics'.
Russian Association of Political Science (RPMA)	No	25 research structures (including: gender politics, institutional research, comparative politics, political sociology, public policy and management, geopolitics and security, political identity).
Association of Political Science of Serbia (UPNS)	-	No information.
South African Association of Political Studies (SAAPS)	-	No information.
Spanish Association of Political Science and Administration (AECPA)	No	No information on groups but no working groups on religion for 2013 Annual Congress.
Swedish Political Science Association (SWEPSA)	-	No information.
Swiss Association of Political Science (SVPW)	No	Twelve working groups, including: federalism and territorial politics, international relations, European studies, security policy, public policy, representation and political behaviour, political theory, gender politics, political economy.
Turkish Political Science Association (TPSA)	-	No information.
Political Studies Association [United Kingdom] (PSA)	Yes	Politics and religion specialist group, established in 2013.
Uruguayan Association of Political Science (AUCiP)	No	No information on groups but no division panel on religion at 2013 annual congress.



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NOTE: Asterisks denote cases where no information on groups is available, and where the categorisation of 'yes/no' for the study of religious issues is instead based on the presence or absence of panels or sessions at the most recent national conference.

Broader attempts to develop a coherent sub-field of religious studies within political science are also notable for their recent character. The most significant outlet at the present time, *Politics and Religion* (published on behalf of the APSA specialist section on religion and politics) did not publish its first issue until 2008. Another, less prominent, journal (based in Eastern Europe), also called *Politics and Religion*, began in 2007. An older periodical, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, began in 2000 (changing its name to *Politics, Religion and Ideology* in 2010) but is focused specifically on 'the politics of illiberal ideologies'.

## **Disciplinary trends**

How can this relative neglect of religion by mainstream political science be explained? In a useful review, Wald and Wilcox (2006) identify four primary causal factors: the disciplinary origins of political science (grounded in secular assumptions and categories); the social backgrounds of scholars (mostly non-religious); the complexity of the subject and measurement (such as a lack of comprehensive and reliable empirical data); and the issue-attention cycle in political science (with religion being of low concern for most of the post-war period). In similar fashion, Philpott (2009) and Stark (1999) also highlight the developmental and institutional dynamics of the discipline as being particularly influential.

Although a full account of these developments is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth briefly outlining some of the main explanatory themes relating to the development of the discipline, as well as to the broader study of religion. The intellectual and institutional

specialisation of modern religious studies emerged in Western Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. Its foundations were based on a number of nascent disciplines within the humanities and social sciences – principally anthropology, history, psychology, philosophy and sociology – most of which subsequently took religion to be one of their primary subjects of analysis (Beckford, 2000). In this, the central focus fell on the origins of religion, along with its dynamics and its functional relationship to society. Religion was typically understood as a system of meaning and experience (with scholars tending to focus on its various rituals and symbols), and as a primitive and irrational aspect of human life; as a problem to be ‘solved’ in the service of societal modernisation (Krech 2000; Strausberg, 2007, 2008).

In contrast, the institutionalisation of political science as an academic discipline began sometime later, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, and was largely driven by social conditions in the United States. Based on a normative conception of the progressive values of U.S liberal democracy, the primary interests of the freshly developing discipline coalesced around a number of concerns. Alongside issues of political thought and philosophy, these involved a variety of formal-legal subjects and themes, including: sovereignty, government institutions, constitutional and administrative law and policy-making (Gunnell, 1991).

As much as these issues and concerns were of obvious value to the study of political life, their delineation was also driven, at least in part, by a need to establish intellectual boundaries and to distinguish the study of politics from other social scientific disciplines. Concurrently, they also reflected the contours of a distinctly Westphalian political landscape; a world forged by historical processes based on conflict between 'political' and 'religious' actors and forces, and one in which a growing differentiation between religious and secular forms of authority had led to the progressive subordination of the former to the latter (at least in the

western world). As a result, the parameters and contents of political science began life with what Philpott (2009: 185) describes as a ‘pervasive secularism in assumptions and methods’. From the outset, these conceptions of religion, and of the appropriate subject matter for political science, precluded consideration of religious issues as a core area of concern. The situation changed little during the post-war period, despite large and significant developments both in political science and the academic study of religion generally. In the former, the behavioural and subsequent post-behavioural revolutions transformed the contents and methods of the discipline, helping to produce a greater degree of professionalisation replete with a shift to the use of more scientific methods, a new emphasis on empiricism and a growing interest in political activities based around issues such as voting, parties and interest groups. This was later followed by the development of more critical analyses around issues of systemic or structural factors, such as the inequalities and cleavages produced by ethnicity, race, gender and class (see Boston, 1991; Beckford, 2000). All the same, issues of religion tended to remain extraneous to the political science mainstream, and were generally regarded as the preserve of other academic disciplines.

Developments in the wider academic study of religion added to this sense of exclusion. Most notably, the rise to predominance from the 1960s and 1970s of narratives based around secularisation and the seemingly irrevocable privatisation and decline of religion (at least in its institutionalised forms), led many scholars to view religion as a force of diminishing importance in the organisation of social, cultural and (perhaps more importantly) political life. A continuing move away from grand theories and totalising projects of knowledge production, as well as a growing suspicion of any such schemes, added to the prevailing sense of decline surrounding religious explanations and frameworks (e.g. Wald and Wilcox, 2006).

Subsequent developments proved no more amenable to fostering a closer engagement between political science and religion. A steady expansion into new fields of exploration

since the 1980s has seen traditional political science concerns accompanied by a host of new research themes, replete with growing methodological sophistication and theoretical rigour. Amongst these have included: the changing dynamics of (multi-layered) governance, area and regional (comparative) studies, post-structuralist and feminist analyses, historical institutionalism and rational choice (Trent, 2011). This expansion has turned political science into an increasingly eclectic and diverse field of endeavour, embracing a wide range of approaches, methods and research areas, the boundaries and parameters of which can no longer be so clearly differentiated from those of other social science disciplines.

During the same period a series of international developments (starting, most notably, with the Iranian revolution and the emergence of a New Christian Right in the United States) thrust religious issues to the foreground of the political agenda. Nevertheless, despite attracting greater attention from the political science fold, the lack of any clear tradition of political science engagement with religious issues, along with the absence of a specialised sub-field of religious research within the discipline, meant that closer relations remained impeded (Beckford, 2000; Wald et al, 2005).

Developments within the broader field of religious studies remained unpropitious too. Increasing diversity here was accompanied by disputes between intellectual disciplines attempting to retain their own distinctive approaches and sub-fields, ensuring that the prospects of multi- and inter-disciplinary movements remained weak (Strausberg, 2008).

### **A ‘political science of religion’?**

The lack of attention given to religious issues by mainstream political science stands out as a clear lacuna within the discipline. This raises a number of important questions around the theme of what, if anything, should be done to address the imbalance? Put succinctly: do we need a ‘political science of religion’?

Certainly, such an approach might appear attractive as a means of fostering greater sub-disciplinary coherence and of promoting more research into religious issues. These sentiments can be seen in the goals and mission statements of numerous international associations designed to further their own particular sub-fields within the area of religious studies. The International Philosophy of Religion Association, for example, aims ‘to encourage, publicize and circulate scholarly work within the field of philosophy of religion’ and ‘to foster greater ties between scholars and groups working in the field’ (<http://www.csu.edu.au/research/ipra/>). The expressed aim of the International Association for the History of Religions is ‘to promote the activities of all scholars, member and affiliate associations and societies contributing to the historical, social, and comparative study of religion’ (<http://www.iahr.dk/about.php>). The International Association for the Psychology of Religion has the aim of ‘promoting the scientific research and exchange within the field of the psychology of religion’ (<http://psychology-of-religion.com/>).

For some scholars the idea of developing a ‘political science of religion’ might not be an unwelcome one. Calls for closer engagement from specific sections of the discipline, such as comparative politics (e.g. Gill, 2001; Grzymala-Busse, 2012) or international relations (e.g. Fox, 2001) might be read as leaning towards this direction, as might claims, made by Jevtic (2007: 67-68), that the ‘politology of religion’ contains the potential to become ‘the most important social science of religion’.

Before assuming that such a project would in fact be desirable, however, it is necessary to consider what a ‘political science of religion’ might actually look like, both in terms of the intellectual terrain that it would cover as well as the aims and objectives that it would seek to achieve.

This raises an immediate conceptual problem; which is that there is no consensus over the parameters and meaning (or even the validity) of the term ‘religion’ itself. Beyond a number

of common features (or ‘family resemblances’) between social categories or belief-systems that are often regarded as being ‘religious’ – such as the worshipping of deities, institutional affiliations, doctrines and beliefs, the use of rituals, meanings, identities and so forth (on which, for instance, see Boyer, 2001) – ‘religion’ has historically and persistently avoided attempts at rigorous, systematic definition. The very nature of the term is such that it remains an inherently unstable concept, and it is one that has continually shifted in response to broader social, cultural, political and economic developments. Indeed (and somewhat ironically given the subject at hand), the very process of defining ‘religion’ is an intrinsically *political* act – one enmeshed within and reflecting deeper dynamics of social power relations, and one helping to reinforce and reproduce the spectrum of what are deemed to be acceptable or legitimate forms of beliefs and practices, while conversely excluding those that are deemed to fall outside of these boundaries (on these points, for example, see Griffiths, 2005; Ivakhiv, 2006).

The difficulties of establishing clear and meaningful parameters for ‘religion’ have led some scholars to suggest jettisoning the term altogether (e.g. Fitzgerald, 1997). But the dilemma need not be so fatal. After all, the problem is one with which all sub-fields ‘of-religion’ have had to contend, and with no noticeable inhibitory effects. Yet circumstances may still make a virtue of necessity. While no single definition of ‘religion’ exists that is capable of producing universal satisfaction, a conventional (or at least relatively uncontroversial) definition of the term that encompasses most of what many would consider to be its primary elements – such as Bellah’s (2011: 1) ‘system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community’, or Stark’s ‘socially organized pattern of beliefs and practices concerning ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural’ (in Hexham, 1993) – is likely to prove sufficient (or at least sufficiently workable) for most.

The idea of developing a political science of religion also requires definitional clarity on the disciplinary boundaries of ‘political science’. Here too a similar theme is evident. Common features are clear, even if variations endure. The descriptor ‘political studies’, for example, is still preferred to ‘political science’ by 6 out of the 41 organisations outlined in Table 1 above, and national and regional differences persist as well (Marsh and Savigny, 2004). The relatively un-contentious (if somewhat tautological) definition used by the American Political Science Association describes the discipline as ‘the study of governments, public policies and political processes, systems, and political behavior’ ([http://www.apsanet.org/content\\_9181.cfm?navID=727](http://www.apsanet.org/content_9181.cfm?navID=727)), a broad outline which encompasses a range of diverse subfields, including political theory, political philosophy, political economy, policy studies, area studies, international relations, and others.

How, then, might ‘religion’ be operationalized with specific reference to these areas of study and concern? An important point to note is that this exercise does not necessitate the formulation of a rigorous, clearly described, over-arching and prescriptive research agenda. Indeed, it is not unusual for other disciplinary sub-fields ‘of-religion’ to operate without correspondingly high levels of detail concerning their intellectual parameters, and nor is it atypical for many of the primary outlets involved (periodicals, associations and institutions) to specify (for instance, in the relevant ‘about’ and ‘aims and objectives’ sections) what the central features and agendas of the sub-field are beyond generic descriptions linking the study of religious issues to the particular discipline at hand.<sup>4</sup>

In like fashion a ‘political science of religion’ might potentially (if ambiguously) be described as the study of how the beliefs, codes and behaviours associated with ‘religion’ are

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<sup>4</sup> To add just one further example to the points made earlier, the periodical *Sociology of Religion* (the official periodical for the Association for the Sociology of Religion [ASR]) describes its remit as being ‘for the purpose of advancing scholarship in the sociological study of religion’ ([http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our\\_journals/socrel/about.html](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/socrel/about.html)), while the ASR itself says only that it ‘encourages and communicates research that ranges widely across the multiple themes and approaches in the study of religion’ (<http://www.sociologyofreligion.com/about/>).

manifest and developed in explicitly *political* ways. Clearly, around the central core of political science (namely, the study of *power*), what is meant here by the ‘political’ can itself embrace a multitude of approaches and definitions, ranging from the realm of formal politics (such as the sphere of government and policy-making) to wider social (including global) processes and interpersonal relations. Certainly, too, within this there are some areas of the discipline to which religion may have more direct relevance than others – international relations or electoral studies, say, more than public administration or political communication – but even in areas with less overt relevance there exists clear scope for the inclusion of religious factors. Indeed, by virtue of the wide and diverse array of subjects and interests with which political science is now involved, as well as the extensive manner in which ‘religion’ might intersect with many of them, any programmatic sub-discipline of this kind would necessarily traverse a large variety of issues, research methodologies and conceptual and theoretical approaches.

Mapping these issues onto the various dimensions and sub-fields of political science, then, would result in a wide range of research questions and agendas.<sup>5</sup> The study of ‘public policy analysis’, for example, might usefully engage with the influence of religious groups in policy-making processes (e.g. including issues such as abortion, medical research technologies or the legalisation of same-sex marriage), while sub-fields relating to ‘political processes and systems’ might, in contrast, examine the impact of religion in regime types and political authority structures (such as sustaining or challenging democratic or authoritarian systems, or the effects of variable church-state relations), as well as the internal dynamics of religious groups themselves (e.g. the decision-making systems and power structures of an organisation such as the Vatican, or the internal dynamics of a broader religious movement, such as the Christian Right or the Muslim Brotherhood). The study of ‘political behaviour’

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<sup>5</sup> The categories used in this section are composite forms derived from the sub-groups of the American Political Science Association and the Political Studies Association.



might relate to issues around electoral processes and voting behaviour, including the impact of religion on party systems (e.g. Christian or Muslim Democracy), social activism and political engagement, while ‘political theory’ might consider the normative merits of religion in public life, questions of morality or the nature and effects of religious ideas and values. Beyond this, ‘area studies’ might consider the political influence of religion in a specific country or region (such the United States or South-East Asia), or within supra-national organisations (such as the European Union or the United Nations), ‘political communication’ might examine the role of religious public discourse or the influence of the information technologies on religious messaging, ‘women and politics’ might examine issues around gender relations, sexuality and reproductive politics, and ‘international relations’ might analyse the role of religion in violent conflicts, peace-building, processes of colonialism and the character and impact of transnational sources of identity.

A necessarily brief outline such as this is of course indicative and far from exhaustive. The themes and issues posed are also not mutually exclusive – ‘area studies’ might engage with the influence of religion in party systems, ‘women and politics’ might include debates around abortion policy, and so on. Moreover, although religion has yet to fully permeate the political science mainstream, scholars working in various areas of the discipline have (to some degree at least) addressed many of these issues. To a significant extent, then, the absence of a distinct ‘political science’ of religion is not merely due to a failure to apply specifically ‘political science’ concerns to questions involving religion, but signifies the failure to develop a sense of programmatic unity among scholars themselves. Framed in this way, the lack of a political science of religion becomes a question not of the interoperability of ‘political science’ and ‘religion’, but of sub-disciplinary identity and cohesion.

But this is not to say that efforts to establish such an identity would necessarily be positive. While promoting a distinct political science of religion might encourage political scientists to

become more involved with religious issues (assuming that such a sense of sub-disciplinary unity could be inculcated), various downsides remain apparent. In particular, while it is not inevitable, such a move would run the risk of fostering insularity and scholasticism. Encouraging the development of narrow and 'localised' projects, each with their own parochial objectives, methodological techniques, concepts and concerns, would serve to isolate political science from developments in other disciplines and foster greater competitiveness over intellectual boundaries, along with their respective sub-fields and research agendas. By adding still further to the specialisation and fragmentation that already characterises the study of religion, the result would be to undermine a more holistic understanding of the subject, to hamper interdisciplinary communication in terms of the cross-fertilisation of ideas and debates, and to damage the prospects for establishing wider public relevance and engagement (on these points see Wald et al 2001; Mead, 2010; Trent, 2011).

A fuller understanding of the diverse and multitudinous ways in which religion impacts upon the political world requires consideration of all its aspects. Understanding the doctrinal and institutional forms taken by religion, for instance, requires a critical appreciation of their historical development. To understand the way in which religious beliefs operate at the level of ideas and to motivate political and social action requires engagement in debates involving psychology and cognitive science. To properly understand the ways in which religious beliefs spread and diminish entails awareness of research in sociology and anthropology. In this respect, given the intimately interdisciplinary nature of the subject matter, it would seem perverse to suggest that scholars should direct their attentions towards the creation of new demarcations and divisions, and to the claiming of any distinct patch of intellectual territory as belonging peculiarly to 'political science'. On the contrary, it might be suggested that in order to more fully advance the understanding of religion (including its political character

and influence) social scientists should be aiming, inasmuch as is practically possible, for the *dissolution*, or at least the permeation, of existing partitions and boundaries and for the construction of a more holistic, interdisciplinary approach.

By the same token, however, care must be taken not to overstate the claim. A call for interdisciplinarity does not imply that specialised research produced in separate sub-fields is of little value, or that all distinctions between disciplines are meaningless (even if many are artificial and anachronistic). The (more limited) point being made here is, rather, that what is needed is less the development of yet another disciplinary specialism, and more the promotion of a broader academic study of religion that aims to foster greater understanding and cross-fertilisation of ideas and insights across disciplinary boundaries and divides (on these themes see Wildman et al, 2012).

## **Conclusion**

Religious issues are intrinsically political but have been largely overlooked by mainstream political science. To a large extent this omission can be accounted for by the developmental trajectory of the discipline, the secular origins and increasingly fragmented nature of which have served to shape its intellectual parameters in such a way as to preclude engagement with religion as a core area of concern. Although interest in the subject has increased in recent years, religion continues to fare poorly both in comparison to more traditional political science matters, as well as to other branches of the social sciences, many of which possess distinct, extensive and long-standing sub-fields of research into religious affairs.

While these shortcomings clearly warrant attention, political scientists would do well to avoid any temptation to try and forge a distinctive ‘political science of religion’ akin to that found in other social science disciplines. Moves in this direction would run the risk of promoting greater parochialism and specialisation when efforts to establish greater interdisciplinary

purpose and co-operation are likely to prove more productive. To this end, while political scientists should pay more attention to religious issues, their efforts should be directed less towards the creation of new and exclusive intellectual boundaries, and more towards supplementing and infusing the broader field of religious studies with their own disciplinary tools, methods and concerns.

None of this is to suggest that political scientists should not have their own specific areas of interest (such as the impact of religion on public policy, international relations, and so on), and nor is it to claim that they should remain wary of engaging with religious issues until they develop appropriate expertise in other fields such as philosophy, sociology or cognitive science. It does, however, mean that all those involved in the study of religion should at least make the effort to become reasonably well acquainted with the central issues at stake in these fields insofar as they concern religious affairs, even if (and if only for reasons of time and inclination), this proceeds little beyond a lay measure. The argument of this paper, in short, is that political scientists need to commit to an eclectic, inclusive and multi-disciplinary approach to religious issues; one that infuses the broader academic study of religion with methods and insights drawn from political science, but eschews the temptation to construct a distinct 'political science of religion'. With the political influence of religion showing no signs of abating in the years to come, a more extensive involvement from political science is imperative. By avoiding a more insular turn, the unique absence of a distinctive 'political science of religion' may well turn out to be an advantage.

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