

Griffin Bassett  
Professor Nelly Wamaita  
Ethics, Religion, and International Politics  
5/9/24

### The Theology of Capitalism: The Agency of the Field of International Relations

During my sophomore year as a student of International Studies at Boston College, I took a required course – Introduction to International Relations – that served as a comprehensive review of the “classics” of International Relations theory. Among the moments I recall most prominently was an exercise in which we each role-played as different member states of the United Nations during a mock council on the then-ongoing Tigray War in Ethiopia. After several cumulative hours of discussion, the “punchline” of the exercise occurred in the last five minutes of class, when the Russian delegate used their veto status to revoke the “humanitarian aid package” upon which the rest of the class had agreed. I left feeling disturbed for a number of reasons, both because I had just conducted a mock trial about a war in which hundreds of thousands of people were actively dying as well as because, despite the exercise having “proven” to us that the UN was ineffective, many of my classmates, and perhaps I myself, were ostensibly bound to a career path centered around perpetuating exactly what we had just discussed. In an attempt to digest this emotional weight within my supposedly “rational,” “critical,” and “impersonal” field of study, I have found that the most productive and honest option is to deconstruct the field entirely. In this paper, I argue that the field of international relations (IR) fallaciously frames capitalism as a “secular,” “rational,” and “natural” system in order to obscure the underlying theodicy through which it justifies its inherent violence and manufactures public consent for its perpetration.

This framing of capitalism rests upon a series of bold and unsubstantiated assumptions, beginning with the construction of “religion” and the “secular” as two separate, distinct, autonomously identifiable things. Author Erin K. Wilson chronicles how “religion” has gone from being, for the most part, either ignored or castigated in IR scholarship as a “dangerous, irrational and dogmatic influence” on the otherwise secular “political sphere,” but has in recent years become the object of reinterpretation and scrutiny – in other words, IR scholars have “found religion” (Wilson 2019). This idea that religion is a singular, “findable” thing is purported by religion textbooks and IR syllabi alike, but it is misleading. As Timothy W. Reardon describes, “religion” was constructed in Europe during the emergence of the sovereign nation-state as a means of deeming “irrational” and “primitive” any actors who would challenge its interests; furthermore, the conceptual framework of “religion” was framed around Christianity, the “model religion,” around which other belief systems were measured (Reardon 2022). This construction was intentional, in that it delineated a fundamental cleavage of time and space between European nations and their “pre-Enlightened” pasts as well as the “religious” (and, thereby, supposedly “primitive”) non-European world they sought to exploit.

This construction of “religion” entailed a similar construction of the “secular,” which should be easy to define, in theory, as an exclusionary concept: “the absence of religion,” or “that which religion is not,” etc. However, because of the fluidity and imprecision of the idea of “religion” itself, secularism, too, had to be independently constructed. The idea of secularism was created, just as “religion,” within an Enlightenment-era European discursive space that sought to expand and justify the power of the emerging nation-state. If the Church could be imagined as presiding over the “religious sphere” – that is to say, matters of “inner, moral, voluntary, [and] spiritual” consideration – the state could take charge as the authority of the

“secular” sphere, “characterized by the flattening of hierarchies and individuals as distinct rights bearers connected (atomistically) to a single sovereign head” unconcerned with moral virtue or belief (Reardon 2022). In defining the “secular” as the opposite of the “religious,” “primitive,” “historical,” and “personal,” the state elevates itself to a position of ultimate authority and power (*over* religion) as the distributor of rights. This essentialization of religion as a distinct, transhistorical category, in inherent opposition to an Enlightened “secular,” thereby construes the nation-states of Europe as indisputable bastions of rationality.

Not coincidentally, it was within this same Enlightenment setting that the ideology of capitalism began to coalesce. Adam Smith formulated his ideas of political economy and the “free market” within the broader eighteenth-century European conception of the natural world as “perfect” and humans as “the source of moral evil.” Crucially, Smith makes expansive and unrelenting presuppositions about what “the laws of natural order” *were*, which have since been codified into modern capitalism. Smith describes an ideal *market society* in which humans are, within “reason,” allowed to indulge their supposedly natural desires of self-betterment and frugality, thereby allowing “nature [to turn] great inequality to partial advantage as the very basis of social stability and justice” and leading to “the natural progress of opulence.” Crucially, however, Smith’s market society also requires that workers must “provide their own subsistence;” thereby, Smith postulates that, as the population of his ideal society expands, the “great machine of nature” must kill off people who are no longer useful through starvation, thereby producing “an equilibrium or harmony productive of life” (Blaney 2018). Herein lies what author David L. Blaney terms to be Smith’s “theodicy:” he puts absolute faith in “the will of nature” (or, as Smith puts it, the *invisible hand*) to work towards the “greater good,” which he defends as a rational and natural process despite the “moral failing” of millions of people being

killed for the sake of its perpetuation. Smith's market economy thereby "ration[s]" some lives as inherently expendable, an authority which he feels entirely comfortable placing in the hands of the nation-state.

Smith's ideas have since been expanded, exported, and violently enforced far beyond the European time and place within which they were originally conceived. His elevation of the *market economy* and the broader Enlightenment evaluation of the *nation-state* as the paragons of rationality and moral virtue persist into modern capitalism. Ironically, yet tellingly, this system requires individual states, organizations, and scholars to do the rhetorical work of "naturalizing" it. Among them is world-renowned economist Jeffrey Sachs, who, in his 2005 book "The End of Poverty," claims that "we can realistically envision a world without extreme poverty as soon as 2025," citing the fact that "approximately 4.9 billion people live in countries where average income—measured by GDP per person—increased" (Sachs 2005). Sachs's claim echoes institutional initiatives of a similar bent, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, yet it seems painfully clear now, in 2024, that it was completely unsubstantiated. Nevertheless, Sachs remains a world-renowned economist. How can this be the case?

Let us assume, for a moment, that Sachs made his prediction in good faith, and that he is an otherwise competent economist who happened, just this once, to make a mistake. It is a mistake, I would imagine, that many would not fault him for making, simply in that it feels good to hear. Sachs's prediction is accompanied by a flurry of grand, hollow, blink-if-you-miss-it assertions (e.g. "economic development is real and widespread") that comprise the introduction of the third chapter of his book, "Why Some Countries Fail to Thrive." The title of this chapter exposes perhaps the most damning unanswered question of the capitalist development model that Sachs goes on to support – and, ironically, evades directly answering. Sachs describes a variety

of reasons why some countries are “rich” and others “poor,” such as difficult physical geographies, corrupt governments, cultural barriers, trade barriers, and a so-called “lack of innovation” (Sachs 2005). Curiously, and crucially, all of Sachs’s reasonings are natural and dehistoricized – that is to say, they would appear to be somehow inherent to the places and people he refers to as “poor.” In doing so, Sachs tacitly answers a less comfortable framing of his original question: if people must be killed for the system to survive, who deserves to die?

It is a question that capitalism itself has never evaded answering. The system necessitates that some people should own, some people should work, and some people should be killed, as Smith himself admits; it is for this reason that the division of *race* was constructed to perpetuate it. Capitalism upholds the lives of white Europeans – and more broadly people of white European descent as a whole, as the perpetrators of slavery and settler colonialism – as intrinsically more valuable than those of non-white, non-European people. Like capitalism itself, this hierarchy of race is at once both fluid and malleable, yet purported to be entirely natural. This “system of domination” by which white people subjugate non-white people, as philosopher Charles W. Mills explains, “is not seen as a political system at all. It is just taken for granted; it is the background against which other systems, which we are to see as political, are highlighted” (Mills 1997). It is for this reason that Sachs eludes any mention of slavery, genocide, or colonialism in his comprehensive analysis of “poverty,” instead attributing the conditions of people in poverty as a moral failing of those people themselves: African people, Indigenous American people, and South Asian people all supposedly foster “corrupt governments,” “cultural barriers,” and a lack of “human capital,” but never white people, whose proximity to economic resources goes entirely uninterrogated (Sachs 2005).

The field of IR has consistently eschewed the concept of race. Just as with religion, this stems from the idea that the nation-state, in its strict concern with the realm of the “secular,” is somehow elevated beyond “personal” matters like religion and race. Clearly, race extends far beyond the “personal,” and indeed far beyond any one country; why, then, has it seen so little analysis in IR? In describing this “norm against noticing,” Freeman et al. explain how race has, in fact, guided the supposedly “rational” field of IR since its inception. Namely, many scholars, just like Sachs, assign racialized personifications of incompetence and/or aggression to individual nation-states, while paradoxically asserting an anarchic and monadic world system in which colonial hierarchies of power are obscured from view (Freeman, Kim, and Lake 2022). This monadism is essential to IR’s naturalization of capitalism, and despite the persistent understanding of IR as a “rational,” “secular” field, its understanding of the world, too, is theological in nature, drawn from a medieval Christian understanding of the “artificiality of social arrangements” within an “originally anarchic” universe (Paipais 2019). The field of IR has weaponized a European-derived theological framework in order to erase culpability for the perpetual hierarchical violence of capitalism.

I have argued in this paper that the field of IR finds its roots, and justification for existing, in Enlightenment-era European constructs of secularism, race, and the nation-state, all of which are in fact theological in nature. Furthermore, the field as a whole – through individual actors like Jeffrey Sachs and institutional inherencies like the “norm against noticing” race – uses its supposed authority as a “rational” and “secular” scientificization of humanity in order to naturalize and justify the inherently violent racialized hierarchy of capitalism. This would suggest that the very existence of the field of international relations has been manufactured since its inception to support this hierarchy. If that is the case – and I am convinced that it is – I see no

retribution of IR from within the field itself. It is only through a complete restructuring of the state system – and perhaps beyond it – that IR may end its complicity.

## Bibliography

- Blaney, David L. 2018. "Adam Smith's Ambiguous Theodicy and the Ethics of International Political Economy." In *Routledge Handbook of Ethics and International Relations*. Routledge.
- Freeman, Bianca, D. G. Kim, and David A. Lake. 2022. "Race in International Relations: Beyond the 'Norm Against Noticing.'" *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (Volume 25, 2022): 175–96. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-051820-120746>.
- Mills, Charles Wade. 1997. *The Racial Contract*. Cornell University Press.
- Paipais, Vassilios. 2019. "Introduction: Political Theologies of the International: The Continued Relevance of Theology in International Relations." *Journal of International Relations and Development*, January. [https://www.academia.edu/36120382/Introduction\\_Political\\_Theologies\\_of\\_the\\_International\\_The\\_Continued\\_Relevance\\_of\\_Theology\\_in\\_International\\_Relations](https://www.academia.edu/36120382/Introduction_Political_Theologies_of_the_International_The_Continued_Relevance_of_Theology_in_International_Relations).
- Reardon, Timothy W. 2022. "Religion, Politics, and New Testament Theology: Contesting Relevance and a Constructed Category." *Religions* 13 (7): 579. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13070579>.
- Sachs, Jeffrey. 2005. *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Time*. Penguin Press.
- Wilson, Erin K. 2019. "Being 'Critical' of/about/on 'Religion' in International Relations." In *Routledge Handbook of Critical International Relations*. Routledge.