My encounter with Daniel Philpott’s (Dan) seminal scholarship on religion in comparative and global politics can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase was during my beginnings as a PhD student in International Relations (IR) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in the late 2000s. I joined the program filled with a burning curiosity, nebulous research ideas, and unexamined assumptions about a subject I had scarcely thought about in scholarly and social scientific terms: religion. The events of 9/11 had only a few years earlier brought, against all expectations, faith and the sacred to the center of 21st-century global politics. As I sought to make sense of a rapidly changing world around me, Dan’s work—which was appearing on leading political scientific journals and university presses—was an indispensable introduction to what by then was the relatively new and budding field of religion and IR.

From the perches of secular, intellectual, elite, liberal, European academy I was sitting on, and had come to embrace, religion was largely perceived as a pre-modern, atavistic, irrational problem. Dan’s scholarship on the secular biases on which the discipline of political science rested and (mis)interpreted religion (Philpott 2002, 2009), contributed to shifting my entire perspective on these issues. His seminal book *Revolutions in Sovereignty* (Philpott 2001; see also Philpott 2000), still a reference point for understanding how revolutions in late Medieval theology and Europe’s Wars of Religion were central to the creation of the modern system of sovereign states we inhabit today, was especially important at the time. As I labored intellectually from a broadly Constructivist and

**Abstract:** In this essay, I reflect on my encounter with Daniel Philpott (Dan) across three distinct phases of my academic journey so far. First was my encounter with “Dan the scholar.” When I was a PhD student, Dan’s work introduced me to the field and profoundly shaped my thinking about religion and global politics. My second encounter was with “Dan the mentor,” a generous scholar who supports early career researchers. The third encounter was with “Dan the intellectual giant.” The unparalleled breadth and depth of Dan’s thinking became fully apparent once I began to lecture on religion and global politics myself.

**Keywords:** religion, international relations, U.S. foreign policy, human rights, religious freedom, sovereignty.
Historical Sociological orientation, Dan’s theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich monograph was one of the few—and deeply inspiring—major pieces of scholarship approaching the study of religion from similar theoretical vantage points. I instantly felt less lonely in my intellectual pursuits.

My amorphous research interests in everything under the sun religious and IR theory-related, started to acquire a discernable form into a project on American foreign policy. Much was being written at the time about the influence of Evangelicals—Bush Jr. included—on American national security. In the context of the War on Terror, Huntington’s (in)famous “clash of civilizations’ thesis seemed, to many, prescient. Political Islam was the hot topic du jour.

Other parallel interesting developments began to catch my attention. By the late 2000s and early 2010s, the operationalization of religion in US foreign policy was in full swing. The Bush administration had a few years earlier launched its faith-based initiatives. Obama became the first American president to give a speech to the “Muslim world” in 2009. A concern with international religious freedom had already been institutionalized in the late 1990s, but advocacy and critical debates on these issues were becoming ever more pressing and animated. The religious engagement agenda was gaining momentum with special committees and working groups being created in the Obama White House and State Department.

The second phase of my encounter with Dan’s scholarship loosely began at this moment. I started to connect the dots on the influence that scholarship and scholars on religion in world politics were having, as I would come to argue in my thesis (Bettiza 2012), in “desecularizing” US foreign policy. The publication in 2011 of God’s Century (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011) was a landmark moment for a couple of reasons. First, because it brought and weaved together in one place the reflections of three leading American contributors to debates about religion and global politics. Second, because the book’s final chapter titled “Ten Rules for Surviving God’s Century,” which was explicitly addressed to practitioners, made it especially clear that there was also a policy agenda coming out of this research. While important, God’s Century was not alone I soon realized. It was in fact part of a wider epistemic community comprised of experts, scholars, and policy analysis across secular and faith-based universities, think tanks, and research institutes, intent on producing knowledge about religion in world affairs as well as shaping American foreign policymaking along the way (see also Bettiza 2015).

The moment had come for my PhD to be examined. I discovered from a doctoral colleague that Dan was passing by London to present another of his path-defining books, Just and Unjust Peace (Philpott 2012). With my supervisor we reached out to him. Although Dan likely had no idea who I was, he graciously accepted our invitation to act as the external examiner in the middle of what must have been an extremely busy trip. Having such a giant in the field, from a major American university, examine this European’s thesis on the operationalization of religion in US foreign policy was both exhilarating and intimidating at the same time.

I will never forget Dan’s first words—which I somewhat paraphrase here—once the examination got under way: “In this PhD there are so many of my friends and colleagues!” My mind started rushing. “Great, I’m really on to something here!” I thought. It immediately dawned on me, though, that few people in the world could see as clearly all the limits and problems—empirical, conceptual, and normative (after all, as it goes, I’m a secular European and he’s a religious American)—of my project, as the professor from Notre Dame sitting right there in front of me could. We proceeded to have an engaging conversation and exchange. Dan provided a wealth, as he always does, of insightful feedback and constructive comments. Although I am sure there were important areas he disagreed with then in my analysis, and in what thereafter became my book Finding Faith in Foreign Policy (2019), he spurred and encouraged me towards publication.

The third phase of my relationship to Dan’s scholarship began when I transitioned from the PhD into a full-time academic position. Upon
joining the University of Exeter, I designed a new course that had never been taught in the politics department before: *The International Politics of Religion*. The course is structured in three parts starting with “concepts and theories,” moving onto “challenges and issues,” and ending with “policies and practices.” Dan’s contributions pepper the entire syllabus, and his scholarship is often required reading for my students. Whether we are discussing early on the role of secularism and the global resurgence of religion in IR (Philpott 2002; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011); when we explore the complex relationship between religions, nationalism, and the sovereign-states system (Philpott 2001); when we debate whether and how faith-based actors, ideas, and practices may contribute to peace or violence (Philpott 2007, 2012); and when we approach some of the more contemporary and contentious debates about human rights, religious freedom, and foreign policy (Philpott and Shah 2016; Philpott 2019). Once one gains a wider view of this field of study and research, which teaching also allows to acquire, it is impossible not to remain astounded by the unparalleled breadth and depth of Dan’s scholarship.

Dan’s extraordinary career has not only indelibly shaped my own thinking and teaching and, as this collection of essays shows, also that of so many others. The contributions that he has made to our understanding of the role of religion in, and what a religious sensibility can bring to, world politics are seminal. Although one may not always agree with his arguments, it is certainly impossible to ignore them. What is most remarkable about Dan’s scholarship is that investigations into religion are not just an end in itself. They constitute, in the tradition of the great luminaries of the social sciences, a window for exploring wider questions about humanity and politics. In other words, Dan’s writings do not speak uniquely to a specific sub-field of research, but rather provide timeless reflections also on how world orders breakdown and emerge, what are and how do we achieve justice and peace, why do human beings turn to violence, or what are the conditions for the flourishing of human rights and freedom. It is this ability to transcend boundaries and ask big and important questions which make Dan a true intellectual giant.

About the Author

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