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To cite this article: Ahmet T. Kuru (2021) Bringing Ideas and Religions Back in Political Science: Contributions of Daniel Philpott, *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 19:4, 5-9, DOI: [10.1080/15570274.2021.1989822](https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1989822)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2021.1989822>



Published online: 02 Dec 2021.



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BRINGING IDEAS AND RELIGIONS BACK IN POLITICAL SCIENCE: CONTRIBUTIONS OF DANIEL PHILPOTT

By Ahmet T. Kuru

For a long time, political science, at least in the United States, has been dominated by those who advocate quantitative methods and formal theory.¹ If a scholar does not use statistics and/or formal theory, she is generally regarded as an “area specialist” who fails to be a true political scientist (Hopf et al. 2006). Over a decade ago, a leading critic of this domination, Giovanni Sartori (2004, 786) asked, “Where is political science going?” And he answered: “American-type political science is going nowhere . . . [R]ead, to believe, the illegible and/or massively irrelevant *American Political Science Review* [APSR].” For him, the solution is “to resist the quantification of the discipline. Briefly put, *think before counting*.”² Recently, even the editorial board of APSR implicitly admitted the problem. Without explicitly mentioning the methodological domination, they note that political science “risks becoming irrelevant” and “our discipline operates with an overly narrow view of what counts as political science” (APSR 2020).

One of the main problems of this domination is that quantitative research has certain characteristics, such as being probabilistic and variable-oriented, which prevent it from asking “big questions.” Hence, most books

asking big questions have been written by scholars who employ qualitative, particularly comparative historical, methods (Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979; Anderson 1998; Munck and Snyder 2007).

Over the last two decades, Prof. Daniel Philpott, the winner of the 2020 Distinguished Scholar Award from the International Studies Association’s Religion and International Relations Section, has produced books and articles that primarily employ qualitative methods and analyze the impact of ideas on political processes. His work stands as a challenge to the domination of quantitative methods and

Abstract: Political Science has been dominated by quantitative methods and formal theory. Recently, even the editorial board of the *American Political Science Review* implicitly admitted the domination of statistics and rational choice in the discipline. Yet most books asking big questions have been written by scholars who employ qualitative, particularly comparative historical, methods. Over the last two decades, Daniel Philpott has produced books and articles that primarily employ qualitative methods and examine the causal relationship between ideas and international politics. He has explored such relevant and diverse issues as ideational revolutions and sovereignty, religions and democratization, peace and reconciliation, and religious freedom in the world.

Keywords: Daniel Philpott, ideas, religion, rational choice, statistics, quantitative methods, qualitative methods

rational choice theory. Throughout his long and productive career, Philpott has examined the causal relationship between ideas and international politics, by exploring such relevant and diverse issues as ideational revolutions and sovereignty, religions and democratization, peace and reconciliation, and religious freedom in the world.

Ideas, Revolutions, and Sovereignty

In the early 2000s, Philpott's path-breaking research on the roles of ideas in world politics produced two *World Politics* articles (2000, 2002), and a widely cited book: *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (2001). His publications were a challenge to the hegemony of rational choice theory in the political science discipline, which undermined ideas as epiphenomenal factors.

Analyzing how the world became organized into sovereign states, Philpott's book focuses on two historical revolutions in ideas. The first one is the Protestant Reformation, which transformed the Western Christian world and created a new system of sovereign states in Western Europe, which culminated in the Peace of Westphalia (1648). The second revolution, according to Philpott, occurred about the ideas of equality and post-colonial nationalism; it brought an end to colonial empires around the year 1960, as well as spreading the sovereign states system to the rest of the globe. In short, Philpott's seminal book reveals how religious and political ideas about legitimate political authority substantially transformed the international system at certain critical junctures, such as the post-Westphalia and post-World War II periods.

Philpott's early writings showed that a qualitative analysis of ideas could be as scientifically rigorous as a quantitative analysis of material factors. They systematically examined cause and effect relations. These publications were also timely in their overall criticism of secularization theory, which was effective in social sciences in the second half of the 20th century. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a global resurgence of religious actors in politics, including the rise of Islamists in the Middle East,

religious politicians in Israel, and evangelicals in American politics, weakened this theory's ability to explain world politics (Haynes 1998; Hefner 2011; Soper and Fetzer 2018). Philpott's writings, including his co-authored book, *God's Century* (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011), helped readers understand the increasing importance of public religions—in other words, de-secularization—in world politics.

Religious Ideas: Toward Democracy, Peace, and Freedom

Alfred Stepan (1936–2017) was another pioneering scholar who emphasized qualitative methods and the role of religious ideas in world politics, as reflected, for example, in the volume he and I co-edited, *Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey* (2012).³ Stepan repeatedly referred to Philpott's 2007 *APSR* article "Explaining the Political Ambivalence of Religion" as the best follow-up to his own famous "Twin Tolerations" article (2001), in terms of analyzing the complex relationship between religion and democratization in a comparative perspective.

Philpott's *APSR* article covers various important dimensions of this relationship, including not only democratization vs. authoritarianism, but also peace vs. violence. Its analysis has both institutional and ideological dimensions. Institutionally, the article assesses the political engagement of religious actors with their different degrees of autonomy from political authority. Ideologically, the article examines political theologies, or the set of ideas of religious actors about political authority and justice. Analyzing these institutional and ideological dimensions, the article conducts a global comparison of religions and their political consequences.

In 2012, Philpott wrote an award-winning book on peace-building, ethics, and reconciliation: *Just and Unjust Peace: An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*. The book offers alternative ways of reconciliation that are deeply rooted in the traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. On the one hand, it emphasizes the religious roots of justice, mercy, and peace; on the other hand, it links these concepts to such

political institutions as democracy, constitutions, and international norms. With this dual emphasis on religious values and political institutions, the book tries to craft an ethic of justice as a basis for reconciliation (See also Philpott 2013).

More recently, Philpott focused on religious freedom as a universal human right, particularly in the Muslim world, in his book *Religious Freedom in Islam: The Fate of a Universal Human Right in the Muslim World Today* (2019), which received the 2020 book award from the International Studies Association's Religion and International Relations Section. I want to stress two of the book's various major contributions. The first one is about the particular case of the Muslim world: Philpott indicates that among Muslim-majority countries, the restrictions over religious freedom are not an exclusive result of Islamist ideologies and regimes. In fact, many secularist ideologies and regimes have also imposed such restrictions. Moreover, he also documents that in certain cases, particularly in West Africa, expanding religious freedom and robust Islamic activism are compatible. The second contribution is about the book's critique of the postmodern agenda: Philpott challenges cultural relativism of several postmodernist scholars who have defined activism to promote international religious freedom as "imposing a Western agenda to non-Western countries." Philpott convincingly refutes the depiction of religious freedom as an exclusively Western value and shows how it is as a universal value shared by all non-Western traditions, including Islam (see also Philpott and Shah 2017).

Conclusion

The defenders of statistics/rational choice domination in political science generally criticize qualitative works for being atheoretical

and providing some narratives in a journalistic manner. The large number and high quality of publications Philpott has produced over the last two decades are a strong case against this criticism. Analyzing the causal mechanisms between ideas, institutions, and political processes, Philpott has produced methodologically and theoretically sound scientific inferences.

Moreover, Philpott has contributed to the long-lasting tradition of asking "big questions." He has analyzed the role of the Reformation in the emergence of the modern international system of nation-states; the end of the Western colonial system; the recent rise of religious movements worldwide; the connections between religions, violence, and peace; the associations between religions, authoritarianism, and democracy; religious roots of justice and reconciliation; religious freedom as a universal value; the degree of restrictions over freedom in Muslim-majority countries. He has accomplished publications on such a wide and deep research agenda, while using qualitative methods and emphasizing the roles of ideas.

We live in a rapidly changing world. Old and well-established institutions, such as newspapers, have tried to adapt to the change. Political science as a discipline should not and cannot resist it. Insisting to keep the domination of quantitative methods and rational choice theory has not made the discipline more scientific; instead, it has made it more irrelevant and uninteresting. We need more scholars like Philpott, who can ask big questions without being limited by methodological and theoretical hierarchies. ❖

About the Author

Ahmet T. Kuru is Porteous Professor of Political Science at San Diego State University. He is the author of the award-winning *Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). His 2019 book, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge University Press) received APSA's International History and Politics Section Award. His works have been translated into Arabic, Bosnian, Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Malay, Persian, and Turkish.

Notes

1. For a methodology textbook that played a crucial role in the consolidation of the quantitative domination, see King, Keohane, and Verba (1994). For works that criticized the quantitative domination and offered alternative qualitative methods, see Brady and Collier (2004); Mahoney and Rueschemeyer (2003); George and Bennett (2005).
2. See also Sartori (1970).
3. For my analyses of the impacts of secular ideologies on state policies, see Kuru (2009), and for my examination of the role of Islamic ideas on socio-economic and political processes, see Kuru (2019).

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