Chapter 3

Toward an International Political Theology

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Enlightenment publicists and philosophers wielded none of the torture instruments of the Catholic inquisitions, nor did they burn dissenters under some Protestant dispensation. But when it came to religion in all its aspects, they strangled free inquiry just as effectively by the commanding force of the fashion they imposed.¹

—Edward Luttwak

Can International Relations (IR) as a discipline contribute to the study of the worldwide resurgence of religion? This is not an idle question, because the international context within which this resurgence is taking place is the primary domain of IR expertise.

I answer this question in the affirmative. In this paper I outline the foundation of what I call International Political Theology (IPT). Its acronym, IPT, quite consciously rhymes with IPE (International Political Economy), the earlier subfield of IR, at first also difficult to imagine or conceive. IPE was intended at the time of its conception to respond to the neglect of economic factors in the IR discipline. IPT similarly seeks to correct another systematic omission in IR: the neglect of the role of religions, culture, ideas, or ideologies in “social scientific” accounts of world affairs.²
The parallel with the earlier creation of IPE is very apposite. In the case of IPE it was the fact that suddenly, to paraphrase Robert Gilpin’s famous dictum, it was not possible to separate the pursuit of power (as studied in the discipline of IR) and the pursuit of wealth (left out of the IR discipline to the students of economics). Similarly now, as Mark Juergensmeyer put it,

What appeared to be an anomaly when the Islamic revolution in Iran challenged the supremacy of Western culture and its secular politics in 1979 has become a major theme in international politics in the 1990s. The new world order that is replacing the bipolar powers of the old Cold War is characterized not only by the rise of new economic forces, a crumbling of old empires, and the discrediting of communism, but also by the resurgence of parochial identities based on ethnic and religious allegiances.³

I use the term “theology” in the name of the framework deliberately to shock and also to indicate the need to bring to an end what Luttwak has called

a learned repugnance to contend intellectually with all that is religion . . . [based on the] mistaken Enlightenment prediction that the progress of knowledge and the influence of religion were mutually exclusive.⁴

My use of the term “theology” does not go as far as political theologians’ claim that political theorizing should have its ultimate ground in religious revelations, although their position is compatible with my framework. Nonetheless I have no qualms about using the term. Theology was once synonymous with philosophy and science. Following the understanding of sociologists of religion, I take theos not in its common secular meaning as erroneous beliefs in supernatural extraterrestrial existence, but I take “theology” and theos to refer to the systematic study of discourses and the relations among them concerning world affairs that search for—or claim to have found—a response, transcendental or secular, to the human need for meaning. My purpose is to find a way of bringing the study of religion and IR together—possibly for the first time—in a manner that would minimize their distortion and facilitate their understanding. IPT can accommodate in one framework the pioneering but so far fragmented micro and macro attempts to come to grips with the significance of religion in IR.⁵

I vividly recall the late Susan Strange’s exhortation that IPE must be constructed from first principles rather than concepts fit together from