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## *Religion as an element of geopolitical research*

**Abstract:** This article assumes that a growing group of researchers dealing with geopolitics considers it relevant to analyse the role of religion in geopolitical processes. However, research on the relationships of religion and geopolitics is poorly advanced. Culture and religion have always been connected with areas of human life, including geography. Thus, the most extensive contemporary research is concerned with the influence of culture, including religion, on geopolitics, within the geocivilisational framework, which states that the basic contradictions of the world are cultural or civilisational, when civilisation is treated as the broadest entity with which people identify. As a result, only relatively few academic researchers write about the need for the creation of geopolitics that is independent of religion, believing that the religious revival in the modern world has varied and, above all, independent geopolitical consequences. Considering studies on the influence of religion is a new and necessary quality in geopolitical research.

**Keywords:** critical geopolitics, geopolitics, religion, religion and geopolitics, religious geopolitics

**Abstrakt:** Ten artykuł wychodzi z założenia, że coraz większa grupa naukowców, zajmujących się geopolityką, uznaje za istotną analizę roli religii w procesach geopolitycznych. Jednak badania nad relacjami religii i geopolityki są słabo zaawansowane. Kultura i religia wiążą się stale ze środowiskiem życia człowieka, w tym również geograficznym. Stąd największa ilość współczesnych badań dotyczy wpływu kultury, w tym religii, na geopolitykę, w ramach spojrzenia geocywilizacyjnego, który głosi, iż podstawowe sprzeczności świata mają charakter kulturowy, czyli cywilizacyjny, kiedy cywilizację traktujemy jako najszerszą całość, z którą identyfikują się ludzie. W efekcie tylko stosunkowo nieliczni badacze akademicy piszą o potrzebie powstania samodzielnej geopolityki religii, opierając się na przekonaniu, iż odrodzenie religijne we współczesnym świecie posiada wielorakie, a przede wszystkim samodzielne konsekwencje geopolityczne.

Tym samym uważając studia nad wpływem religii za nową i niezbędną jakość w badaniach geopolitycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** geopolityka, geopolityka krytyczna, geopolityka religii, religia, religia i geopolityka

## Introduction

At the outset, it should be noted that the relationship between religion and geopolitics is an issue that is complex and not easy to analyse, and one which has not yet been thoroughly studied [Pickering 2017: 115]. There are many reasons for this. Some of them are associated with an underestimation of the role of religion in the modern world, assessed from the perspective of the secular West, or with a unilateral display of its dysfunctional role in political processes. Others result from the complexity and weakness of research instruments. A thorough analysis of the coupling of religion and geopolitics discourage many scientists due to their degree of complexity, because it requires interdisciplinary research, and since religion is not usually an independent or sovereign factor. After all, it must be considered in relation to its cultural, political, economic or geopolitical context [Agnew 2003: 603-606; Ó Thuathail 2000: 187-188].

However, numerous assessments signal a clear increase in the importance of culture and religion in research in the humanities and social sciences. That is why today in Western civilisation it is recognised on the one hand that we live in a post-secular world, and on the other that there are opinions that “God’s return” to public life is taking place, and modernisation, technology and rationalism have not led to the decline of religion [Ó Thuathail 2000: 207; Micklethwait, Wooldridge 2011: 22-25]. The growing role of religion was influenced by the process of mental changes, in which, against the background of Western prosperity, disputes about post-material values became more and more important: cultural and social patterns, e.g. accenting one’s identity, freedom of choice of lifestyle, views, values, etc. This is why in the lives of many people, it can be seen that the increasingly globalised world, apart from the areas of certainty and security, exacerbated doubt or anxiety, which in turn intensified the search for the moral sense of existence. Religion gives a kind of stability when modernity mainly offers uncertainty. In other words, religions still offer answers to fundamental questions about human existence that arise regardless of changes in social, economic or political systems [Anderson 1997: 23-24].

It is also worth pointing out a wider phenomenon: seeking support in religions is in many regions of the world and civilisations a response to the global crisis of values, to the pressure of modernisation processes strengthened by globalisation. Often identified with the cultural, economic and political westernisation and homogenisation, often deviating from the existing codes and cultural symbols of many societies.

This sketch attempts to address selected issues related to research on the interaction of religion and geopolitics, because their broad penetration exceeds the capabilities of this article and individual author. First of all, my aim is to indicate when and in which contexts religions can influence geopolitical analyses to open new research perspectives in geopolitics which, in turn, will make it possible to find regularities regarding the influence of religion on contemporary geopolitics that is very difficult today.

### **1. Are religion and geopolitics connected by worldview?**

In answer to the above question, two approaches to contemporary geopolitical research can be simplified. The first influential position is grounded in the traditional view of geopolitics. Its basis is the assessment that religion is a secondary phenomenon in geopolitics. Usually treated separately, because both spheres (religion and geopolitics) belong to the other worlds of the sacred and the profane, although the borders between them are dynamic and in practice only in the West are they treated as separate spheres. In this understanding, geopolitics on the basis of purely earthly, rational, as it was believed, scientific assessment, looked for universal regularities, the process of creation, development and collapse of centres of force, mainly countries, in defined and permanently and permanently recognised geographical, even territorial, frameworks. The sphere of ideas, culture or religion were at the same time insignificant, irrational phenomena that escaped analysis, because the legitimacy of the state, its sovereignty, external and internal policy lost their religious legitimacy in the West, because “the disenchantment of the world” had taken place [Burgoński, Gierycz 2014: 19- 20]. This also resulted from Western influential theories of secularisation and modernisation, created in opposition to religion and its institutional forms and assuming their gradual incarceration [Dawson 2015: 23-25; Luke 2006: 219-220]. To a large extent, a similar position, minimising the influence of religion, was adopted by a realistic and neorealistic school in international relations, most similar to the views of classical geopolitics.

This view has changed in recent decades and is associated with a wider so-called cultural turn in social sciences, as well as in geography, focusing the attention of researchers on how people imagine space and what conditions such a social practice. On this basis, the second trend in geopolitical research, which treats religions as a permanent geopolitical factor, is gaining strength. Firstly, spatial thinking and religion belong to the permanent, basic and eternal components of human thinking about the world, and therefore also about space, the state, the nation, etc. Secondly, man is *homo politicus* and *homo religiosus* and the two dimensions are integrally embedded in them and cannot be artificially separated, although they may conflict with each other. Thirdly, religions generally have their own territorial dimension, since their followers live in specific areas, functioning within specific, territorial state structures. The two identities, religious as well as state and national, remain in a constant relationship with each other. Fourthly, for followers of a particular religion in a specific place, it is religion, along with other factors, that valorises the significance of space, shaping the associated identity and emotions, e.g. equipping people with a mythological or symbolic imagination. Thus, by influencing, for example, symbols that build community cohesion, a vision of the world, creating the basis for collective and state identification. Fifthly, religions also influence social behavioural patterns, and the motivation to act in public and political space, even through their mission message [Danacica 2005].

## **2. To what extent did religion influence and affect the roots of geopolitics?**

Studies on the relationship between religion and geopolitics are a relatively young area in scientific research. In classical and neoclassical geopolitics, as mentioned above, the role of religion was marginal since classical geopolitical thought was steeped in positivism, eurocentrism, nationalism, imperialism and statism. The search for normative relations between space and politics was dominated by the analysis of classical, durable, measurable power factors, among which there was no special place for changing cultural factors, including religion, as a justification for political considerations and actions. All the more so because in Western countries where it arose, the influence of religion on politics was already small at that time [Heffernan 2000: 27-28, 47]. Paradoxically, on the other hand, its most prominent representatives were usually connected by a conservative worldview, a dream of a return to stability and harmony, based on traditional values, derived at least indirectly from Christianity, opposed to turbulence, instability, and conflicts resulting from modernisation [Ó Thuathail 2000: 192-193].

Looking for an exemplification of the above assessment, it is worth noting that in the case of the German Geopolitik, the most prominent representatives considered geographical factors more important than cultural ones. Moreover, they emphasised the impact of the space occupied by the nation on the shaping of its culture. For the creator of political geography Friedrich Ratzla, external, natural, scientifically possible, and not internal, psychological and cultural factors were much more important in human history. Hence the clearly anti-religious blade of his thoughts: he opposed the religious teleology of history, because nature was of decisive importance, while the positivistic development of science depreciated the importance of religion in the lives of nations and states.

In turn, in the case of a Swedish political scientist and lawyer, the author of the term “geopolitics” and the Germanophile, Rudolf Kjellén, his attitude towards religion is poorly penetrated in research, but it is believed that geographical factors also played a much greater role than cultural. The state considered a living organism that required adequate space for its development. Among the five analytical categories of the state, geopolitics was paramount, and religion was within ethnopolitics. He noticed that the state had measurable features (e.g. the territory, demographic potential or the number and equipment of the armed forces), as well as ones less measurable, qualitative – for example, culture, language, religion, tradition, the nation’s mentality. He definitely preferred the former.

The most prominent German geopolitician Karl Haushofer also considered the influence of religion primarily from the perspective of geopolitical factors, i.e. the strength of the state and the nation in a given territory. On the one hand, it should be strong and rooted to preserve the identity of its followers, defend them against hostile spiritual and ideological influences from outside and relying on a foreign “genius loci”, which was one of the conditions for the successful defence of its own territory and borders. On the other hand, they should form missionary capabilities among the faithful, as an element of the ability to expand towards other geopolitical entities. In other words, religion was instrumental in the service of classical factors of power.

In the case of the Anglo-Saxon Classical Geopolitics School, its most famous representative Halford Mackinder in many of his works focused far more on the study of the relationship between the geographical environment and power centres in a global perspective, as well as the concepts of peace and order after both world wars. This does not mean, however, that he ignored the role of religion,

but treated it as a secondary factor in human activities [Macała 2015: 9-11]. In turn, Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan was again more interested in power politics, especially in the dimension of maritime competition. However, religion played a certain, if negative, role in his thinking. First of all, he negatively assessed blindness and religious fanaticism, which led to the pursuit of spreading one's faith and, as a result, led to conflicts and religious wars. It overshadowed the ability to rationally analyse classical geopolitical factors in the name of *raison d'état* and implementation of political interests by European countries [Mahan 2013: 74]. This only changed the findings of the Westphalian system, gradually freeing politics from the dominant influence of religion. On the other hand, according to Tomasz Klin, the American admiral "in some publications mentioned the divine will as the transcendent driving force of American expansion – but he never developed this argument in dozens of geopolitical publications." [Klin 2014: 176].

During the Cold War, the conflict between the two superpowers and related political and military blocs became most important for geopolitical research. For some, it was conditioned by ideological factors: on the one hand, in simplification, communism and totalitarianism, with liberalism and democracy on the other. In the analysis of this opposition, for others (e.g. Zbigniew Brzezinski) geopolitical factors – i.e. the strategic confrontation of the two powers of land and sea and two imperial systems – were more important. No clear connections between religion and power politics were noticed, because religions were treated from both sides as a competing socially and politically declining factor. In the communist world, religion was a false "opium for the masses", and so should disappear from human life and be replaced by Marxism-Leninism. In the capitalist world, however, according to many researchers, the religious factor had not played a great role for a long time, and the secularisation processes had pushed religion into the private sphere [ibid: 178].

This state has been changing for several decades. In many geopolitical studies, the dominant role of physical space and traditional power factors, which is also associated with social and technological changes, is weakening what is typical for classical and neoclassical geopolitics. It is worth noting the loud demand for the extension of the geopolitics research field to include "Soft factors" – cultural, religious, ethical etc. – best expressed in the term "soft power" coined by Joseph Nye [see Nye 2007]. In the post-Cold War world, along with the weakening role of "naked power" in international relations, Nye aptly noticed the growing importance of the intangible factors of power, culture system, values, politics, and

therefore also religion, that build the image of the attractiveness of individual countries or alliances on the international arena, especially in the West, which often have the ability to attract other states, persuade and influence their actions without having to resort to “hard power” and thereby strengthening its position in the world. This can be called a kind of ideological hegemony, referring to the thoughts of Antonio Gramsci.

Hence, more and more geopolitical analyses appeared, in which the assumption is that culture and religion are constantly associated with the environment of human life, including the geographical one. However, the scale can be different. In this, the largest amount of contemporary research concerns the impact of culture, civilisation, including religion, on geopolitics and international relations, as part of a geo-civilisation view, which states that the basic contradictions of the world are of a cultural or civilisational nature, when we treat civilisation as the broadest entity with which people identify. Paradoxically, however, this type of approach is combined with classical and neoclassical geopolitics, because this method of analysis does not attach special importance or independent significance. The civilisation divisions or intertwining ethnic, national, religious and material factors affecting the possibilities of using the geographical environment are more important.

### **3. Is religion a part of geopolitical ideas and to what extent?**

Undoubtedly, geographical and geopolitical images appeared in the perception of space by people centuries earlier, before Rudolf Kjellen defined the concept of “geopolitics” and before the end of the 20th century when the category of “imaginations” began to be used for research in geography and geopolitics. Research on them was based on the assumption that they are based on cultural background, and not mainly on the physical shape of the space in which people lived. In this way, every society creates its own space, defines it, tames it, adapts to it and adapts the space for itself and its vision of the world, values and needs. In this sense, geography is a form of power, not natural, objective, but produced, subjective knowledge, providing one way of thinking and describing reality over others.

Nowadays, postmodern geopolitics, especially critical geopolitics, refers to geographical and geopolitical imaginations, treating them as cultural constructions of space and analysing them through discourse research, because they are most fully realised in the language we use to describe the world. Critical geopolitics creators themselves consider the concept of “imaginative geography” coined by the

outstanding literary scholar Edward Said in the late 1970s to be the basis of their view on geopolitics. He defined them as the common practice of designating in our minds particular spaces that are “ours” and others that are “alien”, and one of the basic divisions can be a value distinction, sometimes completely arbitrary, between “our land” which is mentally, territorially and close to us and alien “barbarian land”. This imagination is therefore not innocent or apolitical, but is a cognitive construct, strongly associated with the phenomenon of power and identity. The influence of religion seems obvious in terms of the creation of the spaces, because one of the oldest and deepest divisions in this respect was the religious division along the lines of the imagined Orient – for example, West and East, Christianity and Islam [Said 2005: 96- 97, 102-107; Routledge 2006: 237].

In critical geopolitics, on the basis of the term coined by Said, the entire structure of geopolitical ideas with its various elements, such as geopolitical codes or geopolitical visions, based on the understanding of geopolitics as a culture, was created. Geopolitical images are becoming a system of visualising the world, indispensable in foreign policy. However, their basis is self-identification, and hence they are associated with the location of the national identity in a specific place, in a given territory, divided into allies and enemies, and thus dichotomously define “their own and strangers”, outline the mission of the nation, the scope of its borders, etc. emotional attitude to their own territory. In this division, cultural factors, including religious ones, determining individual and collective identity, and therefore a look at one’s own and foreign space, play a very important role [Ó Thuathail 2004: 83, 98; Sack 1983: 58-59]. It seems to be an accurate assessment that geopolitics understood in this way is an ideological way of seeing the world is a “geopolitical imagination” which can be affected by religion [Potulski 2010: 260].

Through geopolitical imagery, researchers ask how geopolitics is produced: how certain beliefs about the spatial organisation of the world arise and how they become dominant, how they shape and justify the practice of political institutions and other social actors, and how the actors reflect particular beliefs while expounding justification for their own actions. Religion, as one of the most lasting components of human thinking about the world, plays a large role in creating images based on the division between our own and strangers. Therefore, among academic researchers from the critical geopolitics circle there is a belief that geopolitics is consistently connected with religion [Ó Thuathail, Agnew 1998: 79-80].



In most studies, religion is an important, but not decisive, factor in the production of geopolitical images. In one view, the common elements of the theoretical models presented above is the connection between them and the nation and nationalism, a relational and exclusionary phenomenon, considered in the dichotomous opposition enemy-friend. This has consequences also in the political sphere, because cultural and ethnic differences, along with religious ones, are one of the most common causes of conflict in the modern world. Hence, it is necessary to study such categories as: shared historical territory, myths, identity, history, religion, economy, etc., which affects relations with the outside world in which “strangers” play a significant role [Zenderowski 2014: 305-315; Blacksell 2008: 80-86].

In the second trend, the susceptibility of geopolitical ideas to mythology, to the symbols of thinking, emotions, formed, confirmed and modified by religions and ideologies deeply anchored in the experiences of a given group or archetype community, the school system, media and social elites seems to be particularly important for these considerations that affect the image of the world. For centuries, the creators of states and ethnic communities, and today many ideologists of nationalism have tried to use religious relations in this aspect and capture their essence to create and consolidate the identity and cohesion of the nation as a community [Smith 2009: 91-96, 173-180].

In the third trend, which seems to overstate the importance of religion in geopolitics, it is assumed that although religion and geopolitics belong to different spheres, they share many analogies. First of all, this is because religion, in my opinion exaggeratedly, is treated as geopolitics, because both are a way of seeing the world, expressed in images and ideas. Religions strongly influence social processes of cohesion and identification, mainly in terms of their own and strangers, and shape an understanding of the world and its processes, expressed in the geopolitical imagination. They are the canvas for great narratives and myths that transcend the horizon of any individual’s life, generation or nation. Thus, they become worldviews, ideologies that generally become politicised. In other words, they show how to interpret the world that surrounds us and how to act within it. They are certainly divided by the kind of faith they require for their visions of the world [Sturm 2013: 139].

It is worth noting that it situates religions as an element immanently inherent in geopolitics, as part of geopolitical thinking, externalised in discursive practices. Religious language is an integral part of discourse, including secular. Religion

influences the geopolitical discourse of the elite, for example by using religious and theological vocabulary, myths, symbolism and purposes. What is characteristic in this first instance is the adaptation of Carl Schmitt's famous statement that political concepts are secularised theological concepts [Schmitt 2000: 60-61; Sturm 2013: 137].

The above three highly schematic views on the relationship between geopolitics and religion used in critical geopolitics offer some general conclusions:

- a) geopolitics cannot be completely "secular" as it used to be in classical and neoclassical geopolitics,
- b) the above outlined understanding of the interaction between religion and geopolitics paradoxically depreciates the role of religion, reducing it practically to ideology, while valorising geopolitics,
- c) it requires the analysis of certain geopolitical processes to take into account the specificity of a given religion and its impact at a specific time and place, so you cannot focus on merely analysing the text within the discourse, but also, and to a large extent, the context,
- d) hence the role of religion is different in the case of secularised Western societies, where religions are often treated as part of the "tradition" to a small extent affecting the ideas of secular elites, and others – e.g. among followers of Islam or Hinduism, whose geopolitical ideas cannot be understood without a religious context,
- e) almost never is religion the only factor affecting ideas about space; it must be considered in a complicated relationship, especially with intangible geopolitical factors [Agnew 2014: 333-335],
- f) that is why we can talk about geopolitics in various religious variants in this current of research, e.g. "Christian", "Catholic", "Islamic" or even "Buddhist" [Agnew 2010: 39-61; McConnell 2013: 162-169],
- g) studies of geopolitical imaginations often focus unilaterally on the ideological role of religion as a factor of violence and oppression, as a conflicting factor, referring to dominion and hegemony, justifying aggression, imperialism and war, often combined with fundamentalism or nationalism [Armstrong 2017: 9-10]
- h) the positive, peaceful message of religion is disregarded, its teaching about love and respect for each person, contribution to dispute resolution and conflicts; the harmonious coexistence of followers of different religions in a certain area or in one country are disregarded [Megoran 2004: 43-45; Kulska 2014: 576-577].

#### 4. How does religion affect geopolitical analysis?

The number of publications on the impact of religion on geopolitics is limited, although it has been discernibly growing for several years. However, it is difficult to find in them some established or most influential way to study the relationship between geopolitics and religion, which also illustrates the scale of the difficulty. At least several theoretical and methodological studies of academic geopolitics have appeared, attempting to show the relationships on a complex interdisciplinary basis. They assume that the study of the interactions of religion and geopolitics should take into account the complexity of contemporary geopolitical processes in which religion almost never appears as the only or most important factor. Hence, the authors of methodological studies do not agree not only on plotting the research field, but also on research methods or workshops as well as in assessing the scale and structure of the interaction of geopolitical phenomena with religions in the past and present, and in clearly showing the boundaries of how religion is a phenomenon external to geopolitics, and how much it resides within it. Therefore at least a few research directions are involved, which agree that religion is playing an increasingly important role in contemporary politics and geopolitics. This shows the scale of the difficulties facing religion's geopolitics. Each of them tries to develop their own research against this background, firstly dealing with the complex methodological issues [see Sturm 2013; Agnew 2014; Dijkink 2006; Klin 2014; Macała 2015].

Many more publications can be described as case studies, and their thematic and methodological palette is extensive yet not coherent. They also show a clear dominance of empirical research over theoretical. They refer more or less to practical geopolitics. They are characterised in the case of Western publishing houses by the quite obvious dominance of some problems and limitation to the analysis of some religions or regions of the world. Rarely is the influence of Christianity on geopolitics of Western countries, e.g. the United States, the subject of research, which results from a further well-established belief in the effectiveness of secularisation processes [Pickering 2017: 121-133]. More often, the subject of research concerns threats resulting from the conflict-generating impact of religion on geopolitics. The consequence of Al-Qaeda's attacks on the USA from 11.09.2001 is that most of the studies on the discursive relationship between religion and geopolitics understood in this way concern Islam, fundamentalism (mainly Islamic) and nationalism, not only examining the impact of religion on their geopolitical imaginations, identity, but also on foreign policy. The mechanism by which religion can be instrumented for geopolitics is often

analysed in discursive practices. Hence, research often refers to the current exclusion, oppression and violence against others, conflicts and wars conducted in the name of ideologically understood religion [Sturm 2015: 819-840; Zenderowski 2014: 303-315].

However, it is worth paying special attention to publications which show the significant role of religion in the various dimensions of geopolitical actors from civilisations other than Western, probing deeper than the generally shallow analyses focusing on the problems of fundamentalism or Islamic terrorism. One can cite here, for example, a study by Sanjay Chaturverdi on postcolonial geopolitics of India or David Newman on the most important threads of geopolitical discourse in Israel [Chaturverdi 2000: 211-232; Newman 2000: 302-327].

In the case of publications from popular geopolitics, there is clearly a huge lack of research that would analyse the relationship between religion, pop culture and geopolitics. From the Western perspective, one can mention publications exposing the conflict-generating role of religion, mainly Islam, as the basis for a threat to Western civilisation. For example, one can recall here the great book by Marcin F. Gawrycki, *Entangled Images*, in which many pages deal with the stereotypical and negative perception of other civilisations and religions in American films, mainly focusing on Islam and Arabs [see Gawrycki 2011]. At least in part, a similar grid of problems operates the publication of one of the greatest representatives of Klaus Dodds' critical geopolitics about the role of Hollywood in the war on terror, in which the film becomes a tool to support and legitimise the hegemonic narrative of the US political elite [Dodds 2008: 1621-1637].

### **Conclusion**

One of the reasons for the weakness of research on the interaction of religion and geopolitics is the belief among many Western scientists that the influence of religion on the international situation is low, which was confirmed by classical and neoclassical geopolitics in its studies. However, this view has changed in recent decades, and religion is increasingly becoming one of the important factors influencing contemporary geopolitics. However, a specific study of this impact raises a number of doubts, fears and discussions. First of all, due to significant methodological problems, starting with elementary issues with the definition of basic concepts and their components. Then, religion almost never occurs to be as the only or most important factor. Therefore, as a rule, it must be studied in a specific combination of time, place and religion with geographical, economic,

political and cultural factors. So, one can find numerous attempts to scale them in the literature and determine the scope of mutual interactions.

Hence, perhaps, despite the fact one might try to use the so-called “Geopolitics of religion” as a new trend of geopolitical research within critical geopolitics, it is not particularly popular among researchers, and only to a limited extent among critical geopolitics and the “Herodote” school. Even there, there are tendencies to reduce the role of religion to one of the ideological factors influencing the creation of the image of a given group or nation. So a lot of work still lies ahead of researchers who recognise the important or key role of religion in some geopolitical analyses.

Many more publications involve a broader, cultural view of geopolitical processes. Among them, there are works on the dynamics of civilisational divisions and their role in international politics, in which religion is one of the criteria of diversity. It is just that they often lead to blurring and a disregard for the importance of religion in contemporary geopolitics. All the more so because for most researchers the current geopolitical divisions of the world are very complex and dynamic, and to a small extent reflect religious problems, while economic ones are definitely more prominent, e.g. the rich North vs the poor South.

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