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BOOK REVIEW

Bringing the Middle Ages Back In

REVIEW BY JULIA COSTA LOPEZ

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William Bain, ed. 2017. *Medieval Foundations of International Relations*. Abingdon: Routledge. 196 pp. £75.00 hardback (ISBN: 978-1-138-79579-2).

International Relations (IR) scholars have long taken the Middle Ages for granted. *Medieval Foundations of International Relations* challenges them to stop doing so and to reexamine the place and role of “the medieval” in both the history and the theory of international relations, thus opening up a variety of thought-provoking and productive avenues for rethinking the core concepts and histories of the discipline. This ten-chapter volume is a tour-de-force in debunking core disciplinary myths about the Middle Ages and modernity alike, and as such, it is a must read for scholars interested in historical international relations and in international political thought.

In the introduction to the volume, William Bain shows that IR thinks of the Middle Ages as a backward moment, marked by violence and religious fanaticism. The result is particularly damaging: with few exceptions, the Middle Ages have fallen out of the purview of IR scholarly engagement, remaining an ever-present backdrop in the disciplinary imagination, against which we build an erroneous picture of modern international relations. Specifically, Bain argues, this has led to three core myths: first, that the religious Middle Ages stand in contrast to secular modernity; second, that there is a sharp divide between medieval and modern that makes them fundamentally different; and third, as a consequence, that medieval thought is irrelevant to modern theorizing. The book sets out to challenge these myths by examining the ways in which “medieval” and “modern” are intertwined in international relations.

In addition to the introduction, the volume has nine chapters written by ten authors. The chapters are organized thematically, covering a range of areas of thought from theology to law or metaphysics. Altogether, they make three core contributions. A first one is bringing to the fore topics, problems, and areas of thought—both medieval and modern—that have hitherto been overlooked by most IR scholars. Among these, theology plays a central role in a number of the chapters. Thus, Nicholas Rengger persuasively argues that while medieval nominalist theology constitutes the condition of possibility for modern international order, current international relations are characterized by the tension between this and realist theological commitments still present in areas such as human rights. The implications for IR are clear: engagement with the medieval, and particularly with this medieval theological substrate, is vital if we are to understand the nature of modern international relations. C. J. K. Pickstock takes this idea further by unpacking how this tension is based on a particular shift in metaphysics developed by Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. These authors articulated a new way of understanding the units of reality,

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the consequence of which was that an autonomous human will was put at the center of order, hence setting the basis for what has hitherto been understood as modern rationalism.

By eliminating the assumption of a medieval/modern divide, this grounding in medieval theology allows Francis Oakley and Joshua Mitchell to reexamine two central figures in the IR canon: Grotius and Hobbes. Oakley questions the myth of Grotius as the founder of a secular tradition of thought. Instead, the apparently secular remarks in the so-called impious hypothesis need to be understood in the context of ongoing and longstanding debates about the metaphysical grounding of natural law between rationalist and nominalist positions. As a result, Grotius emerges not as a radical secularist innovator but rather as the latest in a longstanding medieval debate. Similarly, against secularist readings of Hobbes, Mitchell shows that Hobbes' political thought is deeply tied to a rejection of both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology, specifically in relation to the separation of rule between spiritual and temporal. It is against these that Hobbes' exhortation for the unified power of the sovereign in both spiritual and civil matters needs to be understood. The theological theme is also picked up by Adrian Pabst in the concluding chapter of the volume. Pabst argues that Franciscan theological writings constitute the basis for notions as central to modern international order as sovereignty and markets. At the same time, however, he invites IR scholars to not simplify the historical record and to recover a sense of rival traditions of thought. The importance of this is crucial: Franciscan theology stood in tension with contemporaneous Dominican approaches, and, if Pabst sees the former as the basis of the current order, he argues it is then only the latter that can provide an alternative basis upon which to base a different neomedieval understanding.

The second core contribution of the book is to challenge the standard narrative in IR that posits a sharp break between medieval and modern, manifesting for example in the long-debunked yet still strangely pervasive myth of Westphalia. Bain's introduction argues not only that this narrative is historically unwarranted but that it has important effects for how we understand modernity. Thus, when "the medieval" in IR serves as either merely a benchmark in a developmental narrative about modernity or is (mis)used to explore future possible scenarios, the Middle Ages becomes a mere idealized place-holder that serves to reinforce the myths about modernity and thus prevents its questioning. Reinforcing this, the chapters in this volume do an excellent job of not only challenging these temporal narratives but also showing that interrogating the standard periodization provides a fertile ground for new historical and theoretical insights. Indeed, departing from established notions of break and difference allows several of the chapters to highlight new avenues of research, alternative periodizations, and possibilities for contemporary theorizing.

First, the chapters by James Muldoon and by Camilla Boisen and David Boucher show clear continuities between medieval and modern forms of political theorizing. Muldoon develops a long-durée view of some core normative dilemmas of contemporary international relations. For him, humanitarian intervention is not a modern invention but is rather the secularized heir to the salvation mission of the medieval Church. Similarly, Boisen and Boucher trace connections between medieval and modern theorizations of rights, particularly the right to punish and the right to property. Recovering these, they claim, is essential not only to our understanding of the current embedding of these rights and the role they play in contemporary international relations but also to recovering a different sense of possibility that might help us transcend some of our current problems.

A second possibility that opens up when questioning temporal narratives is the challenging of assumed continuities. James Turner Johnson does precisely that: taking Just War theory—one of the few elements of current IR that claim to draw back on medieval authors—he argues that in fact the theorization of Just War is

marked by a sharp break between modern authors and their medieval counterparts. Acknowledging this, however, opens up opportunities for new theorizing in ways that might be better suited for the problems of today. Thirdly, Joseph Canning asks whether the origins of international law can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Arguing against the conventional idea that the state—and thus international relations—is exclusively a modern phenomenon, he examines how medieval lawyers dealt with the emergent state structures of their time within a universalist framework. In doing so, his challenge to the break between medieval and modern goes in a different direction to some of the other chapters: instead of seeing how the medieval influences the modern, he asks what would happen if we employ the category “international” as a research question for the Middle Ages. Doing so, he argues, opens a new range of possibilities for medieval historians.

And therein lies a third core contribution of the book: with chapters by IR scholars, historians, political theorists, and philosophers, this volume should be commended as a landmark in cross-disciplinary engagement. Cross-disciplinarity of course has its challenges, and not all chapters are equally accessible to scholars without previous knowledge of the period. And yet, all chapters explicitly strive to address core IR concerns and do so without falling short of disciplinary standards. This not only contributes to the effectiveness of the overall IR argument but also, as Canning notes in his chapter, sets an example of how productive this type of dialogue can be for all involved. In sum, this volume is essential for all scholars interested in historical and contemporary international relations alike.