

# Introduction: Forum on Nicholas J Rengger

International Relations  
1–5

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0047117820968869

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ire](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/ire)



**Anthony F Lang Jr**

University of St Andrews, UK

## Abstract

This piece introduces the Forum on Nicholas J Rengger by focusing on Rengger's humanist approach to the study of International Relations. It reviews his understanding of theory, tradition, order and war. It locates the contributors' work in relation to these themes.

## Keywords

Nicholas J Rengger, order, theory, tradition, war

The thought and scholarship of Nicholas J Rengger is difficult to categorise. Upon his death in September 2018, the Principal of the University of St Andrews, Professor Sally Mapstone, wrote the following to the university community:

Nick was a respected academic not only in the fields of Political Theory and International Relations, but across the expansive domains of History, Theology, Philosophy, Politics, and Human Sciences. Though his work ranged far and wide, its central theme was that truth, historically-informed reason, and a deep understanding of human community provide the key to critiquing the nature of international systems and a world gripped by increasing violence. Nick helped many in the field of International Relations see their work in this wider context rather than through narrowly defined disciplinary boundaries.

This quote captures Rengger's wide (and deep) knowledge of different fields and how scholars from those diverse fields helped him to understand his own work. In this short introduction, I want to focus on the last sentence of Professor Mapstone's comment – that is, Nick's<sup>1</sup> ability to allow so many in the field of International Relations (IR) to see themselves in this wider context; indeed, he himself resisted the idea that IR constituted

---

## Corresponding author:

Anthony F Lang, Jr, School of International Relations, University of St Andrews, Arts Building, The Scores, St Andrews, Fife KY169AX, UK.

Email: [al51@st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:al51@st-andrews.ac.uk)

a 'discipline', preferring to describe it as a 'field'. This subtle, but important, distinction reflected not only his own ability to think widely but his opposition to the ways in which the contemporary university enterprise has siloed and, undoubtedly, diminished our capacity for thinking critically and carefully about global politics.

In part because of this spirit of diversity and capacity, this Forum is not a panegyric to Nick as a scholar, colleague, supervisor, teacher and friend. Admittedly, to many, he was all of these, and we recognise that his influence resulted not just from his scholarship but from his friendship and mentorship. Since his death, numerous people have reminded me how Nick approached them at conferences, meetings or workshops, offering a kindly and supportive word to those working at what seemed to be marginal areas of scholarship. His ability to see connections, to find relevance and to support young aspiring scholars helped many now shaping the field of International Relations.

Nick chose some of the biggest and most important themes for his research, from his early work on traditions of political theory and modernity to his later work on global order and the use of force. It is precisely because he chose these themes that his work remains so relevant. And, it is because of the way that he approached these themes – through an engagement with an incredibly wide range of political traditions – that he was able to welcome and encourage the diversity of approaches that came to define his oeuvre. This Forum should be read as an invitation to pursue his work and as an inspiration to future research in the field.

One of his earliest books, *Political Theory, Modernity and Postmodernity*, introduces us to one of his longstanding concerns, the intersection and sometimes clash of different theoretical traditions. In this case, those are traditions of political theory, specifically the Anglo-American, Continental and Historical. These are, as he admitted, shorthand for approaches that cross several different boundaries. He drew from the past an approach that asked not just 'how should we act' but 'what should we become'<sup>2</sup> These same concerns reappear in his last book, *The Anti-Pelagian Imagination in Political Theory and International Relations: Dealing in Darkness*. This book sets out Nick's longstanding interest in the modern imagination as it relates to international politics. Based largely on previously published essays and reviews, the book argues that there remains a troubling tendency across much of political theory and international relations to assume that the world is going to improve and that we can (as Pelagius argued) help that process by the sheer force of our wills and the goodness of our intentions. As Chris Brown notes in this Forum, using a fourth century Christian theologian to make this point may not be the most accessible way to present this core idea (though many do still use a fifth century Christian theologian – Augustine – to make other points). Brown pushes back against Nick (as he did in personal conversations between the two of them), arguing that the pessimism that underlies his anti-Pelagianism obscures the potential for improving the human condition that can be found across the modern social sciences and humanities.

Nevertheless, Nick drew out the implications of these assumptions across issues as diverse as human rights, the use of force and world order. In so doing, he brought forth a kind of realism that animated many classical realists, such as Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr and Raymond Aron (all of whom inspired Nick's work). Yet, Nick's realism was more nuanced than some of these others, perhaps because he chose to look to resources from pre-modernity for his foundations. Because he could draw on these resources, Nick

was able to speak not just of the post-modern thought of William Connolly,<sup>3</sup> but also to the complexities of medieval thought.<sup>4</sup> And, as Vassilios Paipais demonstrates in this Forum, this capacity to draw on such a broad range of issues allowed him to contribute in important ways to debates in political theology. For Paipais, Nick's conversation with political and theological thought prevented him from falling into the traditional realist pessimism but to embrace the contingency and uncertainty of contemporary global political life.

Nick's focus on these traditions of thought draws, I would argue, on a particular way of seeing a tradition. In a contribution to the textbook he edited with John Baylis, Nick wrote a chapter on culture and international relations. Published in 1992, the chapter makes the case that while cultural clashes will continue to dominate the news cycle, a different way of seeing those clashes comes through the idea of a tradition. This idea draws on Alasdair MacIntyre's work, particularly his 1990 work, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry*.<sup>5</sup> In that work, MacIntyre argued that traditions can relate to each other, but how they relate depends on understanding them as traditions as opposed to rival worldviews. MacIntyre argued that the Thomistic appropriation of Aristotle for Christianity demonstrated how such a task should be undertaken. Nick was neither a Thomist nor an Aristotelian; rather, he appreciated how MacIntyre understood what a tradition might be able to do. As he noted in that chapter:

I would suggest we introduce the idea of traditions of thought within cultures. . . . It also enables us to emphasize the links between traditions of thought that may be important or relevant cross-culturally and so build in a sense on the fact that while 'cultures' may be incommensurable, traditions are always interpenetrative in their own time and place.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the Aristotle that Thomas Aquinas used was an inheritance of the Arab world, demonstrating precisely the way in which such traditions might intersect productively with each other. Whether or not some of the traditions of thought which currently animate political theory and international relations can interpenetrate in the way Nick suggests is open to question. One hope that such traditions of thought can indeed work together can be found in the diversity of students he supervised over the years and his role in creating the programme in International Political Theory at the University of St Andrews. Along with his colleagues, Gabriella Slomp and Ian Hall, Nick helped to create a programme that combined an attention to historical traditions with contemporary theories and issues. For instance, one such former student, Amanda Beattie, moved from writing on the natural law tradition in IR to an engagement with narrative and autoethnography.<sup>7</sup> While Nick should not be credited with the success or intellectual trajectory of his students, his efforts to bring together traditions of thought is perhaps reflected in this diversity of scholarship produced by his students.

Another theme that Nick addressed throughout his career is that of order. His 2000 book explores the question of order as it has been deployed by different traditions of thought within IR Theory.<sup>8</sup> That book puts those theories into dialogue with political theory but also seeks to meet its theorists on their own terms. In using the idea of order and demonstrating a familiarity with a range of theorists from different perspectives, Nick provided anyone working in IR theory with resources for how to understand the deeper assumptions they are making about order. He also understood how order was

linked to war, which he articulated through his engagement with the Just War tradition, culminating in his 2012 book.<sup>9</sup> Bringing together order with the use of force allowed him to open up a focus on the ways in which the use of force does not just accomplish particular strategic objectives but simultaneously (and more importantly) constructs a particular kind of international order, one where violence is the norm. He worried that the increasing use of humanitarian intervention and counter terrorism operations were enabled by well-meaning just war theorists. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe's contribution to this Forum addresses the centrality of order through her focus on Nick's reflections on the Cold War and the War on Terror. As she notes, Nick could encompass the end of the Cold War and understand the sources of the War on Terror in ways that other theorists could not, precisely because his learning and erudition enabled him to see war through the lens of the human condition. Admittedly, ideas of what constitutes the human condition vary, but Nick's move to locate them within this humanist tradition reflects his ability to combine international politics with political theory. And, as Nicholas Wheeler demonstrates in his contribution, Nick (Rengger's) insights on trust (found in both his 1996 book on modernity and his 1997 article on trust in international relations) allow us to see not just the dilemmas of war but of security more broadly defined. As Wheeler highlights, Nick's critical perspective on the possibility of trust partially undermines the potential for security communities to work, though Wheeler himself provides an alternative to this more pessimistic conclusion.

It is difficult to categorise the thought of Nicholas Rengger. His breadth of knowledge and generosity of spirit, however, provide an abundance of material from which those working in International Relations and Political Theory can draw. If this Forum demonstrates anything, it is that his work and life have had and will continue to have an enduring impact on how we see our political condition. To put him into any one single box prevents us from seeing those possibilities. We hope this Forum points towards the potential benefits of reading our much-missed friend.

### Acknowledgement

Thanks to William Bain and the anonymous reviewers for valuable insights on this introduction and the Forum as a whole.

### Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. Throughout this introduction, I refer to Nick by the name most of us knew him. Much of his published work was under the Nicholas Rengger, though some under Nicholas. Others in the Forum move back and forth between Rengger and Nick in their reflections.
2. Nicholas Rengger, *Political Theory, Modernity and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p. 30. This assessment of the task of political theory draws on his previously published review essay on the work of John Dunn; Nicholas Rengger, 'Trust, Prudence and History: John Dunn and the Tasks of Political Theory', *History of Political Thought*, 16(3), 1995, pp. 416–37.

3. Nicholas Rengger, *The Anti-Pelagian Imagination in Political Theory and International Relations: Dealing in Darkness* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 88–97.
4. Nicholas Rengger, ‘The Medieval and the International: A Strange Case of Mutual Neglect’, in William Bain (ed), *Medieval Foundations of International Relations* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 27–41.
5. Alasdair J. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (London: Duckworth, 1990).
6. Nicholas Rengger, ‘Culture, Security and Order in World Politics’, in John Baylis and Nicholas Rengger (eds), *Dilemmas of World Politics: International Issues in a Changing World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 85–106 at 97.
7. Amanda R Beattie, *Justice and Morality: Human Suffering, Natural Law and International Politics* (Farnham UK: Ashgate Publishers, 2010) and Amanda R Beattie, ‘Storytelling as Unorthodox Agency: Negotiating the 2012 Family Immigration Rules’, *Politics*, 37(3), 2017, pp. 302–16.
8. N. J. Rengger, *International Relations, Political Theory and the Problem of Order* (London: Routledge, 2000).
9. N. J. Rengger, *Just War and International Order: The Uncivil Condition in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

### Author biography

Anthony F Lang, Jr is a Professor of International Political Theory at the University of St Andrews. His research and teaching sit at the intersection of ethics, law and politics at the global level, with a focus on topics such as intervention, responsibility, just war, constitutionalism and the history of political thought. He has written three books and edited eight, and published numerous articles, essays and reviews. He is the incoming editor of the *Journal of International Political Theory*.