

Political Survival and Domestic Religious Influence

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Abstract

The interaction between religion and politics is evident throughout the world. Religious groups are enjoying unprecedented growth and are increasingly active in politics. Religious leaders increasingly speak out on political issues, and political leaders seek the support of religious leaders. Discussions of religion and foreign policy in the media, political commentary, and political think tanks have become more common. An increasing number of news stories, print articles and symposiums address the relationship between religion and foreign policy. All of this activity suggests an interesting paradox. With an increasing amount of scholarly effort chronicling the political activities of religious actors and governments' response to those activities, why is religion not an integral part of international relations scholarship?

The purpose of this paper is to examine the current state of religion/international relations scholarship and propose some important subjects for future research. The paper suggests that current research in religion and international relations suffers from a lack of testable theories about causal relationships between religious actors and policy makers. The paper ends with a theoretical argument that religion is more influential in a country when the religious mix is more diverse.

The publication of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) is possibly the most valuable and most damaging event in the recent annals of religion and international relations scholarship. In his widely read and cited book, Huntington argues that "in the modern world religion is a central, perhaps the central, force that motivates and mobilizes people." *The Clash of Civilizations* compels scholars to reconsider the value of religion as an explanatory variable in international relations. Huntington's theory, which posits that culture and cultural identities can help explain conflict and cooperation in the post-Cold War, created a firestorm of scholarly activity as scholars began to test his theory (1996, 20).¹ In fact, much of the response to Huntington from the scholarly community is an effort to refute his conclusions. Most international relations scholars find little empirical support for Huntington's theories (see Henderson and Tucker 2001, Roeder 2003, Russett 2000, Fearon & Laitin 2003, Fox 2005). Although Huntington brought religion to the forefront, most international relations scholars reexamined the explanatory value of religion and rejected it, thus making future efforts to account for the influence of religion on international relations more challenging.²

The scholarly reaction to Huntington is instructive. By presenting thorough, reasoned arguments with a clearly stated theory, Huntington was able to get the attention of the scholarly community. In addition to all of the scholarly activity created, what makes Huntington's book so valuable is that his theory was both provocative and easily testable.³ The fact that most international relations scholars do not agree with Huntington is not important and certainly not the end of the story. Making a persuasive argument that religious

¹ According to one database, *The Clash of Civilizations* has been cited in over 2200 scholarly articles (www.scholar.google.com).

² Actually most scholars had already rejected the value of religion to explain international events (Fox 2001). These subsequent efforts probably reinforced previously held attitudes.

³ King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, 19-20) suggest that the mark of a good theory is that the theory could be wrong, it is falsifiable, and concrete.

actors change outcomes in the international system is a significant challenge and confronts the prevailing paradigm. Convincing others will require creativity and methodological rigor.

We are witnessing a renaissance of interest in religion and its relationship to politics and increasing activity in the political realm by religious actors. Religious leaders regularly speak out on political issues, and political leaders seek the support of religious leaders. Discussions of religion and foreign policy in the media, political commentary, and political think tanks have become more common. An increasing number of news stories, print articles and symposiums address the relationship between religion and foreign policy. Major news outlets such as CNN and Al Jazeera often feature interviews with religious leaders. This is not surprising. The three largest religions in the world, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, together have over 4 billion adherents.⁴ Rather than subsiding, the growth in Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, and Hinduism has exceeded population growth over the last century.⁵ The sheer size of these religious groups is an important cultural consideration.

According to Shah and Toft (2006), “global politics is increasingly marked by what could be called ‘prophetic politics.’ Voices claiming transcendent authority are filling public spaces and winning key political contests.” Surprisingly, globalization has not tempered religious activism across the world.

Far from stamping out religion, modernization has spawned a new generation of savvy and technologically adept religious movements, including Evangelical Protestantism in America, ‘Hindutva’ in India, Salafist and Wahhabi Islam in the Middle East, Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America, and Opus Dei and the charismatic movement in the Catholic Church. The most dynamic religiosity today is not so much ‘old-time religion’ as it is radical, modern, and conservative” (Shah and Toft 2006).

Increasingly, religious actors are “exercising increasing influence over laws governing marriage, education, foreign policy toward favored groups and states, religious minorities,

⁴ See www.adherents.com for a complete list and methodology.

⁵ See the World Christian Encyclopedia.

and the relationship between religion and institutions of the state” (Philpott 2002, 83). One scholar speculates that there has been a shift from major divisions caused by problems involving political issues, national identity, and social justice to conflicts over “competing revelations, dogmatic purity and divine duty” (Lilla 2007).

Although it should be obvious to even the casual observer that religion and politics interact, political scholars have not offered theories adequate to explain the relationship. Too often, the focus is on describing interactions between religion and politics without offering causal inferences that lead to testable theories. Rigorous case study is an essential step in studying many political phenomena and increases our overall knowledge, but description does not go far enough. “Just as causal inference is impossible without good descriptive inference; descriptive inference alone is often unsatisfying and incomplete. . . . Avoiding causal language when causality is the real subject of investigation either renders the research irrelevant or permits it to remain undisciplined by the rules of scientific inference.” (King, Keohane, Verba 1994, 75-76). What is needed are testable theories that explain how religious actors influence politics. What generalizations can we make about the relationship between religion and politics? What are the important theories that are driving research agendas in the subfield of religion and politics?

International relations scholars seek to explain political outcomes in the international system. Due to a shortage of compelling and testable theories, the reaction of the international relations field is to ignore religion and religious actors as explanatory variables. A key-word search of major political science academic journals finds scant attention to religion and foreign policy in the last two decades.⁶ Philpott (2001) examined articles in four

⁶ A key word search of 43 political science journals (www.jstor.org) yields few articles addressing religions relationship with foreign policy. Most articles closely related to the topic are found in the journal *Foreign Policy*. Although academic journals have largely ignored the subject of religion and foreign policy, there are numerous examples of qualitative research covering the influence of religion and politics, with some consideration of foreign policy. Examples include: Gerges, Fawaz A. 1999. “America and Political Islam.” Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK. Esposito, John L. 1997. “Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism,

international relations journals from 1980-1999 and found only six of nearly 1600 articles include religion as an important influence.⁷ Fox (2001) offers several possible explanations of why religion is often excluded from international relations. These include factors such as a tendency to ignore measures that are difficult to quantify, a general bias against religion or culture as an explanation of political phenomena, and a belief in the separation of church and state.

For any number of reasons, the field of international relations has not embraced the idea that religion matters in relations between states. Arguing against secularism in international relations, Philpott (2002, 92) suggests that “If international relations scholars are to understand the violence of September 11, then they must come to understand how religious movements like radical Islamic revivalism, acting on their political theology, challenge the Westphalian synthesis, the fundamental authority structure of the international order.” The point is that without an understanding of the religious/political nexus, one cannot fully make sense of international relations. As scholars, our purpose is not to promote religion as an explanatory variable in international relations, our objective is to make well-reasoned, compelling, and methodologically rigorous arguments that command the attention of international relations scholars. Although the long-term goal is theory development, in the short-run there are many important smaller steps to be taken. Below, I make several research suggestions that are important to the future of religion and international relations scholarship.

1. Find the causal links between religious actors and policy makers.

Although international relations scholars regularly focus on traditional concepts, such as economic and military strength as explanatory variables, is it possible that religious factors

or Reform?” Reinner: Boulder, CO. Hecl, Hugh. 2007. *Christianity and American Democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. The influence of the religious right in the United States and Islam in the Middle East are common subjects.

⁷ The journals include *International Organization*, *International Studies Quarterly*, *World Politics*, and *International Security*.

have the potential to account for relations between states? How much influence do religion and religious actors have over the public policy preferences of leaders? Does the inclusion of a religious variable improve our ability to explain international events? In order to answer these questions, scholarly efforts must progress from descriptive inference to causal inference. Determining causal relationships in the social sciences is difficult due to the lack of a control group in most studies. Unless you are conducting an experiment with controlled treatments, isolating casual factors is arduous. Two particular issues are difficult when studying religion and politics: determining causal paths and causal direction.

How do religious actors influence public policy? Answering this question requires finding a plausible link between the cause (religious actor) and effect (policy) variables by determining the flow or path of religious actor activity. What was the mechanism that created the influence? Religious actors can attempt to influence policy directly by interacting with political leaders. A second method of influencing policy is indirect. This occurs when a religious actor uses some method of getting the attention of political decision-makers. A religious actor can gain press attention with support or opposition to policy decisions. In democracies, religious actors can mobilize their adherents to support or oppose incumbents at the polls.

Does public policy influence religious actors? The problem of endogeneity exists when the value of an explanatory variable is caused in part by the dependent variable. This is a particularly important problem for the researcher. For example, policy decisions that run contrary to the desires of religious actors may create an increase in religious actor activities. In this situation, the causal direction flows from the political actor to the religious actor. It is possible that religious actor activity is responsive and not proactive.

2. Find out what methods religious actors use to influence public policy.

I examined information contained in Gary King's 3.4 million record IDEA dataset (1990-2004). Using Reuter's news reports from around the world, this machine-coded data creates a record for each headline containing a source country, target country, source sector, target sector, and type of action. Choosing religious actors as the source sector and government agents and national executives as the target sectors yields the following results shown by country (see Table 1). According to the data in Table 1, public actions of religious actors toward government officials or national executives are usually cooperative rather than conflictual.

TABLE 1: A Measure of Cooperative and Conflictual Public Actions by Religious Actors			
	Cooperative	Conflictual	Total
Total All Countries	1,346	194	1,540
%	87.40%	12.60%	100.00%
Top 15			
USA	174	21	195
Iraq	78	13	91
Vatican	83	6	89
Israel	58	15	73
China	64	8	72
France	65	6	71
United Kingdom	61	8	69
India	51	13	64
Palestine	29	13	42
Russia	29	2	31
Italy	27	0	27
France	22	4	26
Iran	22	3	25
Niger	18	7	25
South Africa	23	0	23
Subtotal	804	119	923
%	87.11%	12.89%	100.00%
The numbers are counts of records in the IDEA database where the source is a religious actor and the target is a government official or national executive within the same country. Cooperative events are events with WEIS codes 1 through 11 and conflictual events are WEIS codes 12-22.			

Public actions are all activities covered by the Reuters News Service and included in the database. Among all countries in the database, 87.4% of the actions by religious actors are cooperative and only 12.6% of the actions are conflictual. Examining the 15 countries with the largest number of actions by religious actors in the data yields similar results.

Although the overwhelming percentage of cooperative actions is puzzling, there are several possible explanations. The methodology used to collect the data may not have captured all of the religious actor activity, or the problems may result from incorrect coding of the activities. Since the reliability of the coding has gone through extensive testing, the results do not likely result from coding errors (King and Lowe 2003). It is more likely that the results expose a self-selection bias problem. Religious actors who support the leaders in power speak out, and opposition religious actors remain silent. If religious actors who support the leaders in power are more willing to speak publicly, how do opposition religious actors influence political leaders?

3. Consider capturing the political and religious contexts by modeling religion as an antecedent variable?

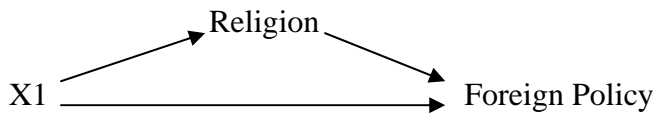
A significant methodological consideration is determining the most effective manner of modeling of religious variables. If religion is an independent variable, then a change in the religion variable should correspond to a change in policy (see Figure 1). This is essentially what Huntington (1996) argues in his *Clash of Civilizations*. Modeling religion as an independent variable creates a high standard for religion as an explanatory variable especially in light of the many obstacles to accurately measuring religious activity.

Figure 1: Possible Formulations of Religious Variables

Independent variable

X1 + X2 + Religion → Foreign Policy

Intervening variable



Antecedent variable

Religion → X1 → Foreign Policy

One possible reason that few quantitative studies find religion as a significant factor in policy-making is that religion may not be an independent variable at all. In their analysis of faith and political conflict, Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000) posit that religion is actually an intervening variable between the given conflict and choice of behavior in the conflict. Intervening variables provide an important link between the other independent variables and the dependent variable, and the value of the intervening variable can affect the strength and causal direction of the relationships (Manheim, Rich, and Willnat 2002). Since intervening variables condition relationships between variables, we need extensive knowledge of their character in order to form our expectations of their possible influence on the dependent variable.

Another possibility is that religion has no influence on policy-making, and any correlation with the dependent variable is spurious. This is the position of neorealists, who assume that domestic influences matter little in the conduct of states.

A final possibility is that religion is most appropriately considered an antecedent variable, a variable whose influence precedes the effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable. This is likely the case in countries with a single, dominant religion or a state religion. Religion provides a context for the policy-making system, but there is little variation in the variable itself. Religion may also be an antecedent variable in countries like the United States. In 2004, 40% of President Bush's electoral support came from Evangelicals and this group remains his most identifiable base of support.

Mahoney (2005, 239-241) provides an explanation of the role of antecedent variables.⁸ In Equation 1, Z is the antecedent variable, X is an independent variable, and Y is the dependent variable. Small *s* represents sufficient conditions and small *n* represents necessary conditions.

$$Z = s \Rightarrow X = n \Rightarrow Y \quad (1)$$

- X is necessary for Y only because it is an inevitable outcome of variable Z, which is itself sufficient for Y.
- X/Y relationship still remains an important finding, in that the removal of X would guarantee the absence of Y, whereas the removal of Z would not necessarily entail the absence of X and Y.

The antecedent variable Z provides the context for the X/Y relationship, but Z only provides sufficient conditions for X, whereas X provides necessary conditions for Y. According to Mahoney, "It is appropriate to view this finding as contextualizing the initial X/Y relationship rather than making it spurious."

Modeling religion as an antecedent variable is one solution to the many methodological problems mentioned above. Although case studies most often use this

⁸ See Chapter 10, Mahoney, James. 2005. *Causal explanations, necessary conditions, and case studies: World War I and the End of the Cold War*. Gary Goertz and Jack S. Levy. Eds. at http://www.compass.org/goertz_levy2005.pdf. Unpublished manuscript. Bullet points are from Mahoney (2005, 239-241).

methodological approach to causation, I believe it offers a new tactic for quantitative scholars attempting to model the influence of religion.⁹ Consider the following relationship:

$$\textit{Religion} = s \Rightarrow \textit{Foreign Policy} = n \Rightarrow \textit{Trade} \quad (2)$$

Foreign policy is a necessary condition for trade between states, and religious factors contextualize the foreign policy-making system. Although religious factors are only a sufficient condition for foreign policy and the removal of these factors does not preclude foreign policy activity, religious factors are not spurious.

4. Make use of and extend existing international relations theories.

The primary concerns of international relations are questions concerning conflict and cooperation between states in the international system. Why do some states sometimes cooperate and other times engage in violent conflict? This is an important question for policymakers and scholars. Theories help to make sense of the overabundance of facts in the world. Prominent IR theories include structural theories such as neorealism (Waltz) and liberalism (Keohane) and theories that allow for domestic political influence such as interest groups/government bureaucracies (Allison, Art), and strategic perspective (Buono de Mesquita). Each of these theories provides a way of explaining political outcomes in the international system. It is up to the researcher to show how his or her theory fits into existing scholarship or creates new theoretical ground. The point is that any examination of religion and international relations should provide support, improve, extend, or even challenge one of the major theories. In my opinion, the strategic perspective (Buono de Mesquita) is an

⁹ Goertz and Levy (2005) distinguish between the covering law, statistical causation school and the necessary condition, counterfactual approach. “The first school thinks in terms of covering laws or generalizations, while the second thinks in terms of individual cases.” One example of using both methods in one study is Buono de Mesquita’s (1981) *The War Trap*.

international relations theory that scholars of religion and international relations should consider.

The strategic perspective on international affairs assumes that decision makers are constrained by both external international system factors and internal domestic political factors. In addition, the strategic perspective assumes that leaders desire to stay in office and make domestic and foreign policy decisions in a manner most likely to satisfy the people who keep them in office. *The Logic of Political Survival* (Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, Smith 2003) divides the real world into two dimensions: the selectorate and the winning coalition. “By mapping a diverse set of political considerations onto the two dimensions of selectorate size and winning-coalition size, we sacrifice detail and precision, but gain the possibility of explaining a rich variety of political phenomenon” (2003, 42). A member of the selectorate is anyone who has a legitimate voice in the selection of governmental leadership. The winning coalition consists of members of the selectorate whose support is crucial to the incumbent government. Using only two dimensions allows the researcher the opportunity to map all regime types (e.g., monarchy, democracy) into one model.

Selectorate theory suggests that when a leader’s winning coalition is small (autocracies), leaders bestow private benefits to stay in office and when a leader’s winning coalition is large (democracies), leaders are inclined to provide public goods (see Table 2). In systems with large winning coalitions, popular public policy is a more important factor in a leader’s ability to maintain his office. Leaders of large winning coalition systems must be aware of the public’s policy desires. In contrast, leaders in small winning coalition systems are more concerned with the few members who keep the leader in office.

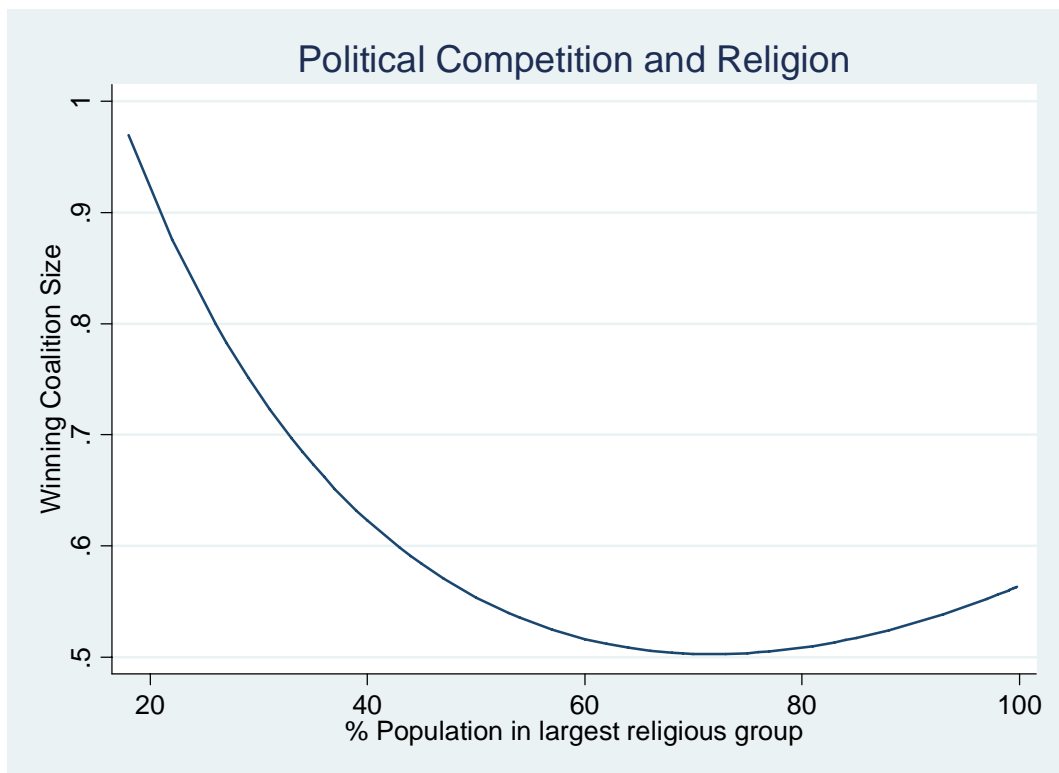
Table 2		
	Winning Coalition	
Selectorate	Small	Large
Small	Private	N/A
Large	Private	Public

When leaders make foreign policy decisions congruent with the desires of domestic religious actors, leaders are providing a public good rather than a private benefit. Thus, religious influence is more likely to occur when larger winning coalitions are present. Among state systems with large winning coalitions, religious actor influence on foreign policy will take place when the leader needs the support of religious groups. Leaders will respond with substantive policy or symbolic gestures based on what provides the most benefits with the least political costs.

Chart 1 predicts winning coalition size based on the percentage of the population in the largest religious group.¹⁰ As the graph shows, when the percentage of the population in the largest religious group increases, the winning coalition size decreases. The size of the winning coalition increases as the religious population becomes more diverse. This phenomenon provides an interesting paradox about possible religious actor influence on policy makers. As the percent of the population in the largest religious group decreases, the political leaders winning coalition increases. Therefore, the more religious diversity in a country, the more likely the leader must be concerned with the policy desires of the public.

¹⁰ The graph was created using STATA. The results are twoway fractional polynomial prediction plots of data between 1969 and 1989. The dataset, from *The Logic of Political Survival*, was generously made part of the public domain. <http://www.nyu.edu/gsas/dept/politics/data/bdm2s2/Logic.htm>

Chart 1



Conclusion

Religion is the 1000-pound elephant in the living room that most scholars don't want to talk about. International relations scholars continue to argue that religion doesn't matter in relations between states and other factors better explain cooperation and conflict. My belief is that they may be right and they may be wrong. As a field, the study of religion and international relations can increase its effectiveness by continuing to seek causal links between religious actors and policy makers and better explain religion influences international relations.

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