International Studies Review (2023), viad029

FORUM

How Religious Are “Religious” Conflicts?

Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar and Reyko Huang
Texas A&M University , USA

Kanchan Chandra
New York University, USA

Evgeny Finkel
Johns Hopkins University, USA

Richard A. Nielsen
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

Mara Redlich Revkin
Duke University, USA

Manuel Vogt
University College London, UK

and

Elisabeth Jean Wood
Yale University, USA

Despite significant advances in our understanding of the politics of religious ideology and identity across time and space, scholars disagree on how to conceptualize “religious” conflicts and “religious” actors, and how to infer religious motivations from actors’ behavior. This Forum brings together scholars with diverse research agendas to weigh in on conceptual, methodological, and ethical questions surrounding the study of contemporary religious conflicts. We ask: How do we know when individuals and groups are acting on religious, as opposed to other, motivations? To what extent can analysts rely on actors’ own claims about their motivations? How does the “secular bias” affect scholarly research on religion and conflict? Is there a bias over which conflicts and actors come to be labeled and coded as “religious” by scholars, policymakers, and the media? The Forum fosters a debate aimed at identifying gaps within and between academic research and policy as well as media analyses on religion and political violence. The contributors examine contradictory conclusions by academics and policy analysts rooted in diverging assumptions and arguments about “religious” actors, “religious” motivations, and “religious” conflicts. The Forum proposes some ways for scholars to overcome these challenges as well as offers

Tabaar, Mohammad Ayatollahi et al. (2023) How Religious Are “Religious” Conflicts?. *International Studies Review*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad029
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implications for policymakers and journalists who shape the public discourse.

Malgré des avancées significatives quant à notre compréhension de l'idéologie religieuse et de la politique identitaire dans le temps et l'espace, les chercheurs sont en désaccord sur la conceptualisation des conflits ≪ religieux ≫ et des acteurs ≪ religieux ≫, mais aussi sur le mode d'inférence des motivations religieuses à partir du comportement des acteurs. Bien que certains chercheurs pensent que leurs homologues et les décideurs politiques sous-estiment la religion à cause de leur ≪ biais séculaire ≫, d'autres estiment que la religion devrait être étudiée comme toutes les autres idéologies, que ce soit le nationalisme ou le communisme. D'autres encore affirment que les observateurs accordent trop d'importance à la religion et qu'ils négligent les autres motivations. Le problème est aggravé par des débats dans les cercles politiques et des reportages des médias qui traitent l'identité comme des monolithes immuables et répètent les affirmations idéologiques des acteurs sans recul critique.

Ce forum vise à rassembler des chercheurs aux programmes de recherche différents pour qu'ils partagent leur avis sur des questions conceptuelles, méthodologiques et éthiques autour des conflits religieux contemporains. Comment savoir si les agissements des personnes et des groupes sont motivés par la religion et non d'autres raisons ? Dans quelle mesure les analystes peuvent-ils se reposer sur les affirmations des acteurs quant à leurs motivations ? Le ≪ biais séculaire ≫ a-t-il un effet sur la recherche académique relative à la religion et au conflit ? Existe-t-il un biais qui pousse les chercheurs, les décideurs politiques et les médias à qualifier et coder les conflits et acteurs de ≪ religieux ≫ ? Le forum encourage un débat visant à identifier les lacunes dans et entre la recherche académique et la politique, ainsi que les analyses des médias sur l'idéologie religieuse et la violence politique. Les contributeurs analysent des conclusions contradictoires de chercheurs et d'analystes politiques ancrées dans des hypothèses et arguments divergents à propos des acteurs ≪ religieux ≫, des motivations ≪ religieuses ≫ et des conflits ≪ religieux ≫. Le forum formule des suggestions pour surmonter certains de ces défis, tout en proposant des implications pour les décideurs politiques et les journalistes qui façonnent le discours public.

A pesar de los avances significativos que han tenido lugar, a lo largo del tiempo y el espacio, respecto a nuestra comprensión de la ideología religiosa y de la política en materia de identidad, los académicos no están de acuerdo ni en cómo conceptualizar los conflictos ≪religiosos≫ y los agentes ≪religiosos≫ ni en cómo inferir las motivaciones religiosas del comportamiento de los agentes. Mientras que algunos académicos creen que el mundo académico y los responsables políticos subestiman a la religión debido a su ≪sesgo secular≫, otros argumentan que la religión debería estudiarse de la misma forma que cualquier otra ideología, como el nacionalismo y el comunismo. Sin embargo, existen otros académicos que afirman que los observadores enfatizan demasiado el papel de la religión mientras descuidan otras motivaciones. Este problema se ve exacerbado por los debates que tienen lugar en los círculos políticos y por los informes de los medios de comunicación que tratan estas identidades como si fueran monolitos inamovibles y repiten, de manera acrítica, las afirmaciones ideológicas por parte de los agentes.

El propósito de este Foro consiste en reunir a académicos con agendas de investigación diversas con el fin de sopesar las cuestiones conceptuales, metodológicas y éticas que rodean a los conflictos religiosos contemporáneos. ¿Cómo sabemos cuándo los individuos y los grupos actúan por motivos religiosos, y no por otras motivaciones? ¿Hasta qué punto pueden los analistas confiar en las propias afirmaciones por parte de los agentes

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sobre sus motivaciones? ¿Tiene algún efecto el ≪sesgo secular≫ sobre la investigación académica en materia de religión y de conflicto? ¿Existe un sesgo sobre qué conflictos y agentes llegan a ser etiquetados y codificados como ≪religiosos≫ por parte de los académicos, los responsables políticos y los medios de comunicación? El Foro fomenta un debate destinado a identificar las brechas en la investigación académica y en la política, así como la brecha existente entre ambas, y la brecha presente en los análisis de los medios en materia de ideología religiosa y violencia política. Los colaboradores de este Foro estudian algunas conclusiones contradictorias a las que han llegado académicos y analistas políticos, las cuales están arraigadas en suposiciones y argumentos divergentes sobre agentes ≪religiosos≫, motivaciones ≪religiosas≫ y conflictos ≪religiosos≫. El Foro propone sugerencias para superar algunos de estos desafíos, y para mostrar las implicaciones a los responsables políticos y a los periodistas que dan forma al discurso público.

Keywords: religion, ideology, identity politics, armed conflict, political violence
Palabras clave: religión, ideología, política de identidad, conflicto armado, la violencia política
Mots clés: religion, idéologie, politique identitaire, un conflit armé, Violence politique

What makes a political actor "religious"? How should scholars analyze the role of religion in armed conflicts? Many scholars have moved beyond casting religion as a set of irrational ideas that make adherents prone to violence (Desch 2013), though much of the public debate lags behind. Instead, several academic trends have emerged with different theoretical traditions, methodological tools, and empirical cases to study what was once a marginal subfield in political science. Yet, despite advances in our understanding of the role of religion in politics and conflict, disagreements remain about how to conceptualize "religious" conflicts, how to study "religious" actors, and how to infer religious motivations from actors' behavior (e.g., see Pearce 2005; Toft 2007; Svensson 2012; Isaacs 2016; Bormann Cederman and Vogt 2017; Walter 2017; Svensson and Nilsson 2018; Tabaar 2018).

Fearing an essentialist trap, many social scientists bypass religion altogether and focus narrowly on actors' strategic incentives within particular structural contexts. However, others assert that there is often a direct link between ideology and outcome, perhaps not due to sincere beliefs (which are challenging to observe), but because ideology undergirds rules, institutions, and identity frames (Philpott 2007; Toft 2011; Costalli and Ruggeri 2015; Leader Maynard 2019; Revkin and Wood 2021). Religious ideology therefore should not be dismissed as irrelevant but instead should be examined in an effort to trace the process linking ideology to behavior. Going beyond religion as ideology, a growing body of scholarship conceives it in personal, communal, and social terms as a set of experiences, practices, rituals, and social structures (Hassner 2013; Parkinson 2021). Scholars have examined relations between faith and loyalty to the state (Cohen 2007; Rosman-Stollman 2014; Adamsky 2019); belief and battleground zeal (Hassner 2016); religious regulation and persecution (Grim and Finke 2007); religion and (inter)national security (Bar-Maoz 2018); and religious conflicts and religious repression (Henne and Klocek 2019). Others propose that religious identity and ideology are endogenous to political contention (Isaacs 2016; Walter 2017; Huang and Tabaar 2021); rather than being driven by them, actors turn conflicts "religious" in response to situational imperatives. And through all of these debates, scholars must work with an absence of agreed-upon principles by which to determine when a conflict or an actor should

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be classified as "religious." Indeed, the scholarly act of labeling can quickly descend into a befuddling *politics* of labeling.

These questions have practical relevance beyond academic research. For example, during the Sudanese Civil War that resulted in the secession of South Sudan, Western media referred to the conflict as one that "pitted the country's Muslim north against its Christian and animist south" (as reported by NPR; Eyre 2005). This description suggests that the conflict centrally featured a clash of religious identities. In turn, such depictions can shape public discourse and policymakers' consideration of appropriate responses and can feed back to affect scholarly analysis. But what if casual depictions mislead and misinform? Sudan expert Gerard Prunier (2009, 166), for instance, has argued that in that conflict, a fissure between a predatory center and neglected peripheries was "more fundamental than which God the people pray to.... [T]he key fault line runs between those who have access.... and those who don't," and the groups on either side of the fault line defy tidy religious classification.

This Forum serves as a reflection on conceptual, methodological, and ethical questions surrounding the study of contemporary "religious" conflicts. The Forum's authors bring to bear their expertise on armed groups, ethnic identity, terrorism, law, and foreign policy, motivated by a shared belief that inquiry into this complex subject matter requires more open, less siloed, dialogue. It aims to identify major fault lines within and between academic, policy, and media analyses on religion and armed conflict. Recognizing that the issues they identify are a joint product of the academic-policy-media nexus, the contributors also address how academic work shapes, and is shaped by, policy and media approaches to religion and conflict. The Forum additionally seeks to explore why the analytical gaps or disagreements exist and address their implications for advancing research.

Religion can manifest in social life in myriad ways, but the focus of this Forum is on religion as *identity*, *ideology*, and *practice*. While this delimits the scope,[1] conceptualizing religion in this manner brings together different lines of inquiry from comparative identity politics, security studies, and political sociology to produce a tractable debate. The contributors work from a common understanding of (and literature on) armed conflict as one that pits the state against armed nonstate organizations. However, this scope is only loosely set, leaving open the possibility that the arguments herein reference, or pertain to, other forms of conflict, such as communal violence.

The essays in this Forum converge around three core issues in the study of religion and political violence. Below, we frame them around the *context*, *construction*, and *content* of religious politics. Nevertheless, the authors' arguments often weave through the three themes and speak to each other through multiple related threads.

Context and Bias

The first issue concerns the ways in which context can bias the analysis of religion and conflict. Observers often implicitly associate certain types of actors or events with certain kinds of outcomes. Further, the associations can be so commonplace as to go unnoticed or be taken for granted, even by seasoned scholars and journalists who claim awareness of the pitfalls of contextual biases. Manuel Vogt writes of an analytical tendency to ascribe a uniquely violence-inducing force to religion. Specifically, modern-day secularism in the West, combined with the normalization of states' use of violence, can lead analysts to see religion as "quasi-irrational." This "uniqueness of religion" fallacy has not only become reflected in the work of important security institutions in Western countries, but also in an influential post-9/11

[1] For example, religion can also be conceptualized as a community, a set of organizations with a hierarchy, or as rhetoric, text, and iconography. We thank a reviewer for this insight.

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political science literature that has emphasized the role of religion in political violence. Yet, many of the studies that postulate a special relationship between religion and violence lack a concrete non-religious counterfactual, rendering it difficult to evaluate the distinct role of religious actors and ideologies as compared to alternative actors and ideologies. To avoid reproducing this bias, Vogt urges scholars to identify non-religious counterfactuals for comparison and probe the specific political and social contexts that may causally link with violent outcomes.

Writing on academic and media discussions of the role of Jews in political violence, Evgeny Finkel notes that analyses of Jews within the Israeli–Palestinian conflict portray them as mainly perpetrators of violence, whereas analyses of Jews outside of Israel tend to focus on Jews as victims. Such depictions are not necessarily wrong so much as they are "biased and incomplete." Analyses of religious actors and events must take into account the broader context surrounding them, and yet stay clear of the biases often attached to those contexts. This is an important, if often difficult, undertaking. Finkel further argues that sweeping references to Jews or Judaism mask internal distinctions and fissures within Jewish communities, showing how monolithic labels often do more to obscure than illuminate political dynamics. These descriptors flatten actors to a single identity dimension and fail to capture the intersectionality that produces social and political outcomes.

The Politics of Identity Construction and Labeling

The issue of context and bias is closely related to the second core question addressed in the Forum: When observers can, or should, use an identity label to describe an actor, event, or situation. When writers casually use ethnoreligious labels such as "Islamist terrorism" or "White supremacists," they are implicitly identifying religion or race as the primary source, cause, or marker of the issue being described, thereby constructing a label or a frame for others to adopt. Kanchan Chandra illustrates the potential pitfalls of such labels by juxtaposing media coverage of the 2019 shootings at New Zealand mosques, attributed by news reports to a "white supremacist," against the bombings of Catholic churches and hotels in Sri Lanka the same year, described by journalists as an act of "Islamist terrorism." These descriptions can be misleading and bias public discourse: "In one case an ideology of violence is labeled according to its association with Islam, while in the other case it is labeled only according to its racial association, with Christianity rendered invisible" despite evidence showing the perpetrator's association with Christian elements. This echoes what Vogt refers to as a prevailing "culture of the Other" fallacy, which pushes observers to resort to stereotyping heuristics, including invoking religious identity, to explain the violent behavior of out-group members while attributing the same behavior committed by one's own kind to other, more nuanced, factors. Academics are complicit, as they often reproduce these biases in the ways they code violent events in widely used datasets, thus perpetuating problematic understandings of identity and violence.

Huang and Tabaar similarly take issue with analyses that focus narrowly on actors' religious identity, potentially reifying identity categories. They argue that identities are not a given; rather, actors have agency over whether or not they are seen as "religious." In a study examining Iranian intervention in foreign conflicts, they find that where Iran deemed its religious identity useful for mobilizing allies abroad, it brought the identity to the fore. However, where its religious face was less relevant, Iran downplayed it and instead mobilized its Persian linguistic and cultural identity to forge "coethnic" partnerships abroad (Huang and Tabaar 2021). Huang and Tabaar suggest that as a starting point, analysts should recognize that actors have multiple identities and that they purposively manipulate the salience of these identities. They write, "We can use political actors' identity assertions as empirical material, but should refrain from using them as analytical frames." Rather, they

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propose endogenizing religious salience—in essence, telling the backstory of how and why actors made religion salient in a given context—in order to yield important insights into its observed effects.

Religious Content, Motivations and Behavior

The third theme of the Forum is the extent to which scholars should rely on actors' own claims about why they do what they do. All authors agree on the importance of studying the *content*—the texts, proclamations, practices, and stated beliefs—of actors' religious ideology. And yet, if an armed group produces religious statements and symbols as they commit widespread violence against civilians, are they acting on religious motivations? How do we, or can we, know? Are religious pronouncements blueprints for behavior, militant propaganda, or an embodiment of beliefs? Beyond these inferential challenges, what are the ethical implications of drawing conclusions based on actors' public statements and narratives? Might scholars risk amplifying political actors' own rhetoric? These questions aside, research is further complicated by legal stipulations on what scholars can and cannot do with material produced by entities formally designated as terrorist organizations (see March 2014).

Mara Revkin and Elisabeth Jean Wood take up these questions by tracing the causal process from religious ideology to violence. Studying the Islamic State's treatment of women, they find a direct connection between the organization's interpretation of the Qur'an and observed patterns of sexual violence among the Islamic State's fighters. They argue that the Islamic State's ideology both prescribed and proscribed the use of certain forms of violence against different social groups (Revkin and Wood 2021). In looking "inside" religious ideology, they take on one of the challenges this Forum presents to scholars, which is to better recognize the importance of studying the content of religion. Although Revkin and Wood suggest that the Islamic State's ideology both legitimized and constrained its use of violence, they acknowledge that forms of violence prohibited by this ideology nonetheless occurred as "practices" when tolerated by commanders or driven by individual opportunism and peer dynamics. They identify this discrepancy between official policies and observed patterns of violence as an important area for future research and pose a set of questions concerning the relationship between religious ideologies, ideologies more generally, and both policies and practices of violence.

Relatedly, Richard Nielsen argues that scholars tend to underestimate religion as an explanation of violence. Given their relative secularity, social scientists underrate religion as a cause of political action, trained as they are to assess costs and payoffs rather than doctrines and emotions. To address shortcomings in existing scholarship, Nielsen urges scholars to embark on "religious fieldwork" so that they can experience religious practice and "better appreciate the motivations and experiences of religious people." Scholarship may indeed reach new heights if academics were as adept at examining actors' religious ideology and practice as they are their military capability or economic resources. Nevertheless, the study of religion and other "cultural stuff" (Barth 1969, 15) poses distinct challenges, as long noted by ethnographers.

How (Not) to Study Religion and Violence

All Forum authors agree that academic, policy, and media arenas have been fraught with biases or have assigned double standards in analyzing the role of religious ideologies. Academics risk inadvertently vindicating existing stereotypes if they

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are not careful in their labeling, coding, and causal inference and are mindful to delink analysis from politicized frames. Powerholders could have political and financial incentives to incriminate adherents of a religion as potentially violent, and hence motivate political entrepreneurs to ratchet up their use of religious rhetoric and symbols to mobilize the opposition. Policymakers use concepts such as "militias" or "terrorists" to invoke different laws in different cases. Journalists' professional incentives for rapid reporting may sit uneasily with the need for due care in the politics of labeling, which could then not only misinform the public but also become another (biased) empirical data point in academic research.

This Forum is a modest attempt to break this cycle. To do so, the contributions identify a series of questions scholars might ask themselves, both in order to exercise greater reflexivity in this complex terrain and in efforts to overcome some of the analytical challenges therein. These questions should also be relevant for journalists and policymakers who shape the public narrative. The challenges are not merely of theoretical and methodological import but also carry ethical implications because scholarship, rather than staying "above" politics, can and at times does constitute the very politics being studied. Academics, therefore, have a particular responsibility to invest in ethical knowledge production, as they are as much a part of the problem as they are a part of the solution.

Imagine a context in which we observe people with a salient religious identity being involved in an armed conflict. Our discussions lead us to suggest that scholars, observers, policy leaders, and writers:

1) Consider the specific context and its potential effects. In what ways might the particular social and political context shape your analysis? What dominant discourses inform or bias your understanding? Are there important intra-group distinctions that may belie monolithic labels?
2) Consider the strategic nature of identity construction. Why is the religious identity salient in this case? Who made it so? What is the broader repertoire of actors' identities? Asking these questions points scholars to the politics of identity without diminishing the role of religious beliefs, practices, and symbols in the case at hand.
3) Consider the strategic nature of labeling. How are the acts of violence described by various parties, including the government and media? How do these public labels compare with your own framework for understanding and classifying acts of violence?
4) Consider delving into the content and substance of actors' religious claims, texts, symbols, and practices. In what ways does examining them enhance your analysis? What are the risks?
5) Exercise caution in inferring motivations from observed behavior. What is the range of political, strategic, ideological, social, and other factors that can help explain the behaviors and outcomes you observe? How do you place religious identity within a broader framework for analysis?

We hope that these suggestions help scholars take a more critical, judicious, and rigorous approach to the study of self-styled religious actors across time and space. The aim is neither to ignore the role of religious ideology nor put undue stock in its relevance—admittedly a delicate balancing act, but one that promises to move this research agenda in a fruitful direction.

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Analyzing Religious Conflicts: Parallels and Differences between Public Debates and Scholarship

Manuel Vogt

How are religious conflicts characterized in current public debates? And how are these characterizations reflected in political science scholarship? I will first discuss two fallacies in how policymakers, political observers, and the broader public characterize religious conflicts in today's world before reflecting on their repercussions for scholarship.

First, the "uniqueness of religion" fallacy refers to the notion that religion possesses a particular, or even unique, violence-fueling force. Consider the statement attributed to Richard Dawkins after the 2005 London suicide attacks that "only religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people" (Armstrong 2014). This view of a distinct causal effect of religion on violence has been echoed by political leaders as ideologically different as Tony Blair (2014) and Donald Trump (Johnson and Hauslohner 2017).

The fallacy has roots in two cognitive biases that have shaped public perceptions of religious conflicts: a secular bias and a status-quo bias. First, modern-day secularism has led many observers in the West to regard religion as something a-political, quasi-irrational—hence the notion that once religion enters politics, compromise becomes difficult or impossible. Second, since at least the Iranian Revolution, religion has provided the ideological material for revolutionary ideas and action against the global political and economic status quo (Rapoport 2002; Kalyvas 2018).[2] The fact that religion is often used by *challengers* of the status quo has contributed to the misperception of those who *represent* this status quo that religion possesses a uniquely violence-inducing force.

The neat association of religion with "international terrorism" (MI5 Security Service 2021) or "violent extremism" (U.S. Department of State 2021) in United States and United Kingdom security institutions exemplifies the degree to which the "uniqueness of religion" fallacy has become reflected in Western state institutions (see also, e.g., Bosco 2010). Yet, the tendency to treat religious conflicts as unique and religion as distinctively conflict-prone might undermine efforts to manage contemporary religious conflicts because it entails a serious risk of overreaction.

The second fallacy, "the culture of the Other" fallacy, stems from a relatively common in-group bias: The tendency to use stereotyping heuristics when dealing with people whose culture (language, norms, etc.) we are not familiar with. Precisely because we are not familiar with it, we invoke this culture—which distinguishes them from us—to *explain* these people's behavior. Accordingly, when violence in the name of religion is committed by out-group members, we treat religion as the cause of this violence. By contrast, violence by members of our own group—even if committed in the name of religion—is typically causally attributed to other factors: We know enough people from our own group who have never committed acts of violence that we will not suspect our own religion to be the *cause* of the violence. Therefore, we privilege political, socio-economic, psychological, and other such causes for the same type of violence committed by in-group members.[3]

How are these popular characterizations reflected in political science scholarship? An influential post-9/11 literature has emphasized the role of religion (and Islam, in particular) in political violence, postulating a "special relationship between religion and violence" (Juergensmeyer 1993, 153). For example, scholars have argued that religion induces martyrdom in individuals, impedes compromise solutions to conflicts, and has a unique potential for radicalization (e.g., Horowitz 2009;

[2]Religious ideologies are not the only contemporary anti-system ideologies, as highlighted by recent secular mass movements, such as the "Yellow Vests," the "Occupy" movement, etc.

[3]These discrepancies have also been revealed in studies of the media coverage of terrorist violence (e.g., Powell 2011).

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Svensson 2012; Toft 2013). Indeed, existing studies indicate that the political exclusion of religious minorities, the combination of ethnonationalist conflicts with religious identity, and religious leaders' calls for violence tend to increase the risk of political violence (e.g., Fox 2004; Satana et al. 2013; Basedau et al. 2016). However, most of these studies lack a concrete non-religious counterfactual to which the effect of religion can be compared.[4] For example, if calls for violence by religious leaders increase the risk of armed conflict, then we need to know whether or not similar calls by non-religious elites have a systematically different effect. In other words, the alleged special relationship between religion and violence can only be evaluated by comparing religious minorities, religious organizations, religious conflicts, etc., to their non-religious counterparts.

Ultimately, religion, like political ideologies, can be used to construct out-groups, considered as falling outside one's own identity or as standing in the way of one's own social and, political goals. Once such out-groups are constructed, ideologies prescribe how they should be treated, as described in Revkin and Wood's contribution. In the extreme, ideologies may explicitly advocate violence against out-groups. From this perspective, radicalization is by no means unique to religion, but constitutes a process towards increasing out-group intolerance that can occur in any ideology, religious or secular. This is not to deny the relevance of religion as an analytical category; yet, to avoid simply reproducing the popular uniqueness of religion thesis, what is needed is an explicit non-religious counterfactual for comparison.

My work with Nils-Christian Bormann and Lars-Erik Cederman compares the effects of religious and linguistic differences between ethnic groups on civil war risk (Bormann et al. 2017). We find that language differences between groups are more likely to be associated with ethnic civil conflict than are religious differences. This suggests that the construction of, and violence against, out-groups is by no means unique to religion. Moreover, Costantino Pischedda and I draw on the EPR-Organizations (EPR-O) dataset to examine the relationship between religious claims made by organizations and political violence (Pischedda and Vogt 2023). EPR-O covers violent and non-violent ethnopolitical organizations in a random sample of forty countries for the period 1946–2013 (Vogt et al. 2021). Religious claims are defined as demands for the protection of the religious rights of an ethnic group and/or the enhancement of the status of its religion. Given that ethnopolitical organizations can make different types of claims, these data provide the necessary non-religious counterfactual.

Our results show that, generally, organizations with religious claims are no more likely to engage in violence than other organizations. However, we do find a significant effect of the Iranian Revolution on the relationship between religion and violence: While we observe no increase in the relative frequency of religious claims, the propensity of organizations with such claims to engage in violence has increased significantly compared to the period before 1979. This suggests that, rather than religion possessing a unique proneness to violence, it is its ideological contributions to revolutionary ideas and action in today's world that shapes its link to violence.

To overcome concerns of endogeneity found in observational studies, others adopt experimental designs that use different vignettes to prime individuals with specific cues. For example, McCauley (2014) showed that the stated policy preferences of survey respondents in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire differed significantly depending on whether they were primed toward a religious or an ethnolinguistic identity in the survey. Such survey experiments offer another promising avenue to explicitly compare the effect of religion to that of concrete alternatives on outcomes of individual (or collective) behavior.

[4]Exceptions include, e.g., Toft and Zhukov (2015), as well as studies using the Minorities at Risk Organizational Behavior (MAROB) dataset, such as Asal and Rethmeyer (2008). Yet, these studies are typically limited temporally and geographically.

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In terms of the second fallacy, Chandra's contribution to this Forum reveals how such group-based biases can find their way into researchers' work by affecting the coding of the raw data that many studies ultimately rely on. At the same time, though, it is important to highlight scholarship that analyzes the *conditions* that empower the "darker side of religion" (Svensson 2019, 3), relying on systematic data that capture these political and socio-economic conditions relatively consistently across world regions and religious groups. The Religion and State (RAS) project, which examines the relationship between government and religion across different states, is a case in point (e.g., Fox 2006). Similarly, Pischedda and I find that the likelihood of organizations with religious agendas to engage in political violence varies across organizations within the same religion, as a function of local conditions, in particular, the repression of religious organizations and high levels of corruption.

This points to the need to focus on individual actors and their specific social and political conditions to understand and counter violence in the name of religion. Detailed knowledge of actors and their social and political environment is always key—but probably particularly so when analyzing religious conflicts outside our "own" culture. The tendency in public discourse to use general labels, such as "Islamist violence," when analyzing specific political conflicts carries the risk of obscuring important variations within broader religious/ideological currents and complicates analysis of why some actors resort to violence while others remain peaceful.

Jews, Judaism, and Political Violence

Evgeny Finkel

Academic literature and popular debates on religion and political violence tend to focus primarily on political Islam and, to a lesser degree, fundamentalist Christian groups and ideologies. In this contribution, I will discuss the "Jewish question" in the religion and violence scholarship.

Jews and Judaism do appear in debates on political violence and religion, but the treatment tends to focus on explicitly religious, ideational and textual sources of violence and non-violence. The discussion is also compartmentalized to different geographic regions and modes of participation and is affected by often artificial labels and definitions. Thus, Jews would be analyzed primarily as *perpetrators* of political violence in Israel/Palestine but its *victims* elsewhere and scholars rarely engage with the question of how Judaism as an ethnoreligious identity might impact both. Media and policy treatments also all too often view Judaism as a monolithic overarching category and fail to properly contextualize intra-Jewish cleavages and the ways in which they are associated with different modes of contention and violence.

In this contribution, I address several gaps in the media treatment and policy debates on the relationship between Judaism (and Jewish identity more broadly) and political violence. More specifically, I discuss the divide between the analyses of Jewish participation in violence in Israel/Palestine and elsewhere and the need to better link intra-Jewish identities and ideologies to different modes of violence and contentious politics. Finally, I discuss legacies of violence, a fast-growing research agenda in which the analysis of Jews and Judaism is exceptionally well represented and the ways in which it can contribute to a broader understanding of the religion and violence nexus.

Jews as Victims and Perpetrators

Unlike in the case of other Abrahamic religions, any discussion of "political science and the Jews" (Zuckerman 1999) is inevitably bound to begin with defining Judaism as an analytical category. Rather than viewing Judaism/Jews dichotomously as either a religion or an ethnicity (Webber 1997; Sand 2020), in this contribution,

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I treat Judaism as an ethnoreligious identity, a commonly used concept in the scholarship on religion and violence (i.e., Fox 1999). More specifically, I focus on the connection between violence and Jewish identity as a form of ethnoreligious group membership, rather than a narrower view of Judaism as primarily a set of religious ideas, beliefs, practices or institutional hierarchies. The relationship between purely religious features of Judaism and political violence is extensively covered elsewhere (i.e., Aran and Hassner 2013; Hassner and Aran 2013; Eisen 2017; Freedman 2019).

Raul Hilberg (1993) famously divided individuals during periods of political violence into three broad categories: perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. Hilberg's labeling is crude and incomplete (Fujii 2009) yet still useful as a general rule of thumb. In the case of Jews and political violence, one can easily observe how in public discussions and policy and academic debates the first two categories largely mirror the distinction between Jews as perpetrators of violence in Israel/Palestine and as victims of anti-Semitic targeting elsewhere. The bystander category is generally absent from the discussion altogether.

The analysis of Jews as perpetrators of violence is limited mostly to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and intra-Jewish relations in Israel/Palestine. Thus, several studies analyze the broader link between the Jewish (often, but not exclusively) religious political right-wing actors and political violence (Sprinzak 1991; Shindler 2015) or focus on specific features: The impact of religion on intra-Jewish violence, most notably the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1995) by an ultra-Orthodox Jew; the Israeli Jewish settlers' *tag mehir* (price tag) attacks against Palestinian Arabs in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Ephron 2015; Eiran and Krause 2018); or the role of religion in the Israel Defense Forces (Peled and Peled 2018). The analysis of Jews and Judaism outside Israel, however, tends to concentrate on Jews as victims, with a special focus on contemporary anti-Semitic attacks against Jewish religious and communal institutions in North America or Western Europe (Feinberg 2020).

Such a focus is not necessarily wrong yet also biased and incomplete, an omission that might have substantial policy implications. Despite the enormous imbalance of power between the State of Israel and the Palestinians, Jews are both perpetrators *and* victims of violence in the Middle East and anti-Jewish violence in Israel/Palestine. Beyond the loss of life, Jewish victimization in this conflict has important political implications (Berrebi and Klor 2008; Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014) as it leads to the rise of right-wing parties and decreases the likelihood of peace.

Outside of Israel, Jews are not only targets but also perpetrators of political violence. The most famous such organization, the Jewish Defense League founded by Rabbi Meir Kahane, has been labeled a domestic terrorist group by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). However, if (or, more probably, when) a similar violent Jewish organization emerges it will likely catch the law enforcement, the media and the public by surprise precisely because of the prevalent "Jews as victims" framing.

The emphasis on Jewish perpetration of violence in Israel/Palestine and victimhood elsewhere also overlooks the fact that in most instances of political violence, the Jews are neither perpetrators nor victims but bystanders. Yet Jewish religious and communal institutions also possess the experience, the capacity and often the willingness to engage in debates about policy responses to ongoing violence and oppression more generally. Jews-cum-bystanders are thus influencing conflict and post-conflict processes across the globe by actively partaking in various political debates and humanitarian efforts (Barnett 2016).

Mobilization and Repertoires of Violence

Analyses of the connection between Jews and political violence also overlooks the important internal distinctions among the Jews and the repertoires of violence and contention they pursue. Some Jewish groups and communities have a higher capacity to mobilize for collective violent action than others. Israel has experienced

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substantial anti-government protest mobilization and even violence carried out by (relatively) recent Jewish immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa (*Mizrahi*) and Ethiopia (Bernstein 1984; Kaplan and Salamon 2004; Kahn-Nisser 2010). Yet other Jewish immigrant groups, such as those from the ex-USSR failed to mobilize despite constant complaints about exclusion and discrimination.

Data from Israel/Palestine clearly shows that small, often armed groups of or individual right-wing Religious Zionists are the main perpetrators of non-state violence against Palestinian Arabs and, occasionally, other Jews. Ultra-Orthodox communities, both in Israel and recently in the United States, on the other hand, adopt mass protests to fight policies they dislike, from conscription to the military in Israel (Fisher 2016) to restrictions on gatherings and prayers in New York during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing these internal distinctions within Judaism has important policy implications as it might allow authorities and law enforcement to better prepare for potential violence and to identify emerging threats. A perception of a monolithic Jewish ethnoreligious identity thus precludes a better understanding of the linkage between Jews and political violence.

Legacies of Violence

Ethnoreligious conflict reshapes communities, alters economic and social behavior and leaves a long-lasting impact. Because of its long history, varying types and geographic distribution, anti-Jewish persecution can make an important contribution to the study of legacies and downstream effects of religious violence.

Indeed, several studies have already uncovered durable and politically meaningful legacies of anti-Jewish violence. Voigtlander and Voth (2012) show that the persecution of Jews in medieval Germany is associated with higher levels of anti-Jewish violence and support for the Nazi party more than 600 years after the events took place. Acemoglu, Robinson and Hassan (2011) argue that the Holocaust has left a durable mark on Russian cities in which the Jewish middle class was eliminated. Even 70 years after the Holocaust these places are poorer, have lower levels of economic development and are more likely to support the Communist Party. Drelichman, Vidal-Robert and Voth (2021) document similarly negative long-term economic effects of the Spanish Inquisition across Spain. Grosfeld et al. (2013) demonstrate that anti-Jewish persecution in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to persistent anti-market attitudes. Charnysh and Finkel (2017) show that in Poland, benefitting from the property of Jews murdered during the Holocaust is linked to higher levels of support for right-wing, anti-Semitic parties in the 2000s. Becker and Pascali (2019) and Johnson and Koyama (2019) analyze Jewish experiences to uncover the economic incentives for religious freedom, tolerance, and oppression.

Unfortunately, even though scholars have identified durable and important legacies of anti-Jewish violence and the ways in which such legacies impact contemporary political attitudes and behavior, outside of academia such findings are viewed mostly as intriguing anecdotes and are largely ignored in policy debates. The key challenge for scholars of religious violence is thus not just to uncover legacies of religious violence but to make such findings relevant in broader debates and policies aimed at reducing anti-Semitism and protecting religious minorities writ large.

Final Remarks

This contribution focused predominantly on the issue of "labeling" and categories in the analysis of the connection between Jews and Judaism and political violence. Moving beyond the overarching, monolithical perception of Jewishness and the artificial divide between Jews as perpetrators in Israel/Palestine and victims elsewhere will help to better address the issue of motivations. How do the content and the practices of Judaism and Jewish ethnoreligious identity impact political violence?

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And what are the short- and long-term effects of violence on Jews as both victims and perpetrators? Hopefully, these questions will be answered by future research.

Categorizing Violence as "Religious": Biases and Blind Spots

Kanchan Chandra

The term "religious violence" might refer in principle to violence of any kind that involves some aspect of religion. This might include violence between members of groups who belong to different religions, violence in which at least one side adheres to a religious ideology, or violence sparked by a dispute over religious doctrine or practice or symbolism. The violence in question could take many forms, including riots, civil wars, hate crimes, gun massacres, lynchings, and terrorist incidents.

This seems straightforward enough. However, there are a number of biases and blind spots in how even the most careful media and policy analyses use the category of "religious violence," which are mirrored in the data we use in academic work. This essay describes some of those biases and blind spots.

Consider the extract below (italics mine) from a *New York Times* article entitled "Examining Religion and Violence" (Cave 2019), published shortly after the shooting at two Christchurch mosques in March 2019 and bombings of Catholic churches and hotels in Sri Lanka on Easter Sunday in April 2019. It is especially careful not to equate religion with violence, and yet ends up doing so anyway:

> "A few days after the Christchurch attacks, I found myself writing a story in a pub not far from where it happened, drawing questions from two bearded blokes sitting beside me at the bar.
>
> Once I told them why I was there, they were quick to tell me they were outraged by the violence. They were also well versed (maybe too well versed) in *4chan and other sites that nurse white supremacy—and they were very worried about retaliation from Muslim extremists.*
>
> "Before, we were invisible," one of them said. "Now we're on their radar."
>
> Sunday's bombings in Sri Lanka, where more than 250 people were killed at Catholic churches and hotels, with the Islamic State taking credit, may or may not have had anything to do with the shootings at two Christchurch mosques—Sri Lankan officials said it did; New Zealand officials were doubtful.
>
> But as I read about the Catholic victims killed while they were praying, like the Muslim victims in Christchurch, I thought about religion's role, and the fears and anger that one act of violence reproduces with almost nuclear force.
>
> The fallout effect of terrorism is what terrorists bet on. Both the Christchurch killer and those responsible for the killings in Sri Lanka committed mass violence to draw attention to a narrative of hate and propel their belief in a global clash of civilizations.
>
> …[W]hat's increasingly clear from research into radicalization online is that *extremists are most engaged with extremists — white supremacists use Islamist terrorism to validate their Islamophobia; the Islamic State uses violence against Muslims to recruit new fighters….*
>
> *The guys I met at the bar in Christchurch were not much for distinctions; they worried about being on "their radar" — referring to Muslims in general, not the small subset of the world's 1.8 billion believers in Islam who weaponize the faith for their own interests.*
>
> Researchers who study religion in conflict point out that it's a common mistake. In a comprehensive look at the intersection of faith and international affairs, produced by the British Academy in 2015…a group of scholars warned against treating Islam, or any other religion, as a clear cause of bloodshed…

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> In short, the evidence suggests, directing our fear or outrage at religion alone—even as religious violence increases—will not do us any good."

The article explicitly objects to the position "that particular religious traditions are, by virtue of their theology, more prone to violence or more likely to lead to conflict or peace than others." However, in the process, it unconsciously reinforces exactly that idea. It calls the Christchurch shooter a "white supremacist," referencing an ideology based on race, while it describes the bombings in Sri Lanka as an act of 'Islamist terrorism," referencing an ideology based on religion.

The reference to "Islamist terrorism" is careful. The use of the word "Islamist" rather than Islamic underlines the difference between a religious tradition and an ideology that utilizes elements of that tradition. The article underlines further that only "a small subset of the world's 1.8 billion believers in Islam [who] weaponize the faith for their own." However, the references to the Christchurch shooter as a "white supremacist" play up the role of race and racist ideology while erasing the connection with religion and religion-based ideologies associated with white supremacy.

There are indeed links between variants of white supremacy and elements of Christianity that recurs in the background of the Christchurch shooter (see Gjelten 2020; Jones 2020), including his alleged fascination with Christian–Muslim battlegrounds in Europe (Kantchev et al. 2019). And yet, in one case an ideology of violence is labeled according to its association with Islam, while in the other case it is labeled only according to its racial association, with Christianity rendered invisible. This means that Islam becomes part of the causal chain that produces the ideologies that produce violence while Christianity does not.

Islam is also disproportionately linked with "terror" in media and policy discourse, while other religious traditions are more commonly associated with other forms of violence.

Consider, for instance, the contrast with Hinduism. Hindus have often been linked with violence, especially following the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. However, the violence in which they participate is usually described as a "riot," rather as "terror." The category in which we place violence—a riot or an act of terror—is not simply descriptive. They allocate blame, issue absolution and guide our research agendas (Brass 1997).

When violence is labeled an act of terror, blame is allocated to the perpetrator of that act, while those who suffer its consequences are its victims. The perpetrators or suspected perpetrators also become subject to national and international laws against terrorism.

When violence is labeled a riot, blame is allocated to all groups involved, with no clear perpetrators or victims. The perpetrators are also not subject to the same penalties as they would be for an act of terror.

Further, when an act of violence is labeled an act of terror, it shines a light on the organizational and financial infrastructure that is presumed to lie beneath it. Terrorism, we assume, requires planning, and finances and usually comes with an ideology that justifies killing.

However, despite a great deal of evidence to the contrary, riots are usually seen as a less alarming form of violence and analyzed using the assumption that they represent a spontaneous civil society upsurge—mobs of people "run amok"—rather than a form of organized violence. There is also influential scholarly work in support of this viewpoint (e.g., Horowitz 2000).

Thus, the labeling of an act of violence as a riot hides, and therefore absolves from blame, organizations, including the police or the military, political parties, militias, and civic associations, which often play a role in the production of riots (Brass 1997; Wilkinson 2004).

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The linking of Islam but not other religions with terror is not simply a creation of the media and policy world. Governments have a stake in these labels: thus, the Government of India has challenged the use of the phrase "Hindu terror" as an oxymoron ("No Hindu Can Ever Be a Terrorist" 2019). The laws and official statistics in India also do not allow for this concept.

Similarly, until 2020, the US government resisted labeling white supremacist groups as terrorist organizations (Savage et al. 2020). It also resisted associating the label of terror with white supremacist interpretations of Christianity.

Social science research on violence—and in particular data-driven research—is, despite our best efforts, partly complicit in the consumption and production of these biases in categorization.

Consider the widely used Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (START 2021), which describes itself as the "most comprehensive unclassified database of terrorist attacks in the world." The GTD uses a broad definition of "terrorism" to mean the "threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation." It is careful about following its own definitions rather than replicating government conventions in its coding. However, in practice, there are puzzling exclusions that make sense only when we relate them to government conventions.

Consider the incidents of "religious violence" in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002. The violence began when a fire on a train in Gujarat on February 27, 2002, killed fifty nine Hindu pilgrims (Sinha and Suppes 2015). A day later, the revivalist organization the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) called for a state-wide blockade in protest (Brass 2004). A massacre of ninety seven Muslims took place during the strike at Naroda in Ahmedabad, for which a leader of the Bajrang Dal, an affiliate of the VHP, was among those convicted (Express Web Desk 2019). Other VHP and BJP leaders were also accused and tried, but not convicted.

Several weeks of violence against Muslims followed. Thousands of homes were damaged and over 150,000 people were displaced (Sinha and Suppes 2015). While there are disagreements over the precise number of casualties, all accounts agree that Muslims constituted the bulk of those killed, injured, and displaced, and that the number of Muslim victims, taken together, were in the many thousands. Eye witness accounts also point to systematic targeting and planning in the violence, with the goal of revenge, dominance, and ethnic cleansing, as well as to the presence of members of Hindu organizations. The violence was widely reported as a case in which nonstate actor(s) used violence to attain a goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation. And yet, neither the Naroda massacre nor any other acts of violence in Gujarat in 2002 were registered in the GTD database.

However, in September there was an attack by two gunmen on a temple in Gujarat in which thiry seven persons were killed and eighty one injured. The two were shot dead. According to the *New York Times*, "a letter found in their possession said the attack was revenge for the deaths of Muslims in Gujarat" (Waldman 2002). This act of violence is coded as an act of violence in the GTD database.

It appears that in this inconsistent coding, the GTD was inadvertently replicating the conventions of the Indian newspapers, which categorized the Gujarat violence as a case of riots, and the Akshardham violence as an act of terrorism. The newspapers in turn were replicating the inconsistencies in government policy.

Similarly, consider the excellent Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) dataset, which offers fine-grained, carefully coded information about the issues at stake in religious conflicts, the actors' religious identities, and the type and salience of religious claims. Its authors justifiably describe RELAC as "the most updated and comprehensive data set on religious identities and incompatibilities of the warring actors in armed conflicts currently available" (Svensson and Nilsson 2018; Toft 2021). One of the trends that the RELAC data points to is a dramatic increase in religious

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issue conflicts in recent years, of which the majority are conflicts fought by Islamist groups.

However, the starting point for the RELAC dataset is the UCDP–PRIO database on armed conflicts and despite its very careful coding, it imports the biases present in the UCDP–PRIO data in what counts as an armed conflict.

The UCDP–PRIO database (Gleditsch et al. 2002) defines an armed conflict as "a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, of which at least one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year."[5] It defines a warring "party" as a "government of a state or any opposition organization or alliance of organizations and adds that "Typically, battle-related deaths occur in what can be described as "normal" warfare involving the armed forces of the warring parties. This includes traditional battlefield fighting, guerrilla activities (e.g., hit-and-run attacks/ambushes) and all kinds of bombardments of military units, cities and villages etc. . . . All deaths—military as well as civilian—incurred in such situations, are counted as battle-related deaths."

Judged by these criteria, the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building by Timothy McVeigh and his associates, which killed 168 people and wounded at least 500, should have entered the UCDP database. The state was the target. The non-state "warring party" in question were, according to the historian Kathleen Belew (2018, 210, 218), operatives associated with white power paramilitaries, who were expected to act on their own or in small groups in order to prevent prosecution and surveillance. They saw themselves as "firing the first shot in a new American revolution." [6] And the 168 deaths exceeded the threshold for inclusion in the dataset.

However, the Oklahoma bombing is not included in the UCDP–PRIO database. This is possibly because it is conventionally described in US media reports and by government agencies as the act of a lone wolf. However, as Belew points out: "In no sense was the bombing of Oklahoma City carried out by one man. The hell McVeigh described represented the culmination of decades of white power organizing" (Belew 2018, 223). Still, in following these conventions, academic databases replicated their biases.

Consequently, it does not enter the RELAC database either. If it did, then it is not clear that it would be coded as a case of religious conflict, given that white power violence is conventionally described in racial rather than religious terms.

This is just one example. But without more scrutiny of other examples in other countries, we cannot tell whether the increase in religious issue-based conflict is indeed driven by Islamist movements as the RELAC data suggests, or whether it is driven by conventions that render the role of other religion-based ideologies invisible.

How might we do better? I suggest that the solution lies in incorporating multiple categorizations of acts of violence in our datasets, with the criteria for each clearly defined. This does not mean we should ignore the labels used in the media and government policy: We should code those too, and flag them accordingly, so that we can explore the variables that influence the media and government framing.

Allowing multiple categorizations, I should note, is not the same thing as allowing all possible categorizations: While there are usually multiple interpretations that can be reasonably imposed on the same act of violence, there are also many interpretations that cannot be so imposed.

The Christchurch shooting, for instance, might be coded as an act of violence motivated by a religious as well as a racial ideology: both apply based on objective criteria, although the first is also the commonly used media label. It would not,

[5]See https://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/#tocjump_9061188663982315_2 (accessed March 26, 2023).

[6]See https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/the-oklahoma-city-bombing-20-years-later (accessed March 24, 2023).

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however, meet the definition of a riot. The Gujarat violence might be coded as a riot as well as an act of terror, noting that the first is the commonly used media label. It would not, however, meet the definition of an act of racial violence. The Oklahoma bombing might be coded as an armed conflict as well as an act of terror, and an act of religious as well as racial violence, since both of those identities are associated with the white power movement.

Allowing for multiple categorizations may, by helping us reduce or at least pay attention to the biases and blind spots, help us arrive at a less arbitrary understanding of the relation between religion and violence.

The Politics of Multiple Identities

Reyko Huang and Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar

How should we think about the role of identities in politics? On this question, research has yielded something of a consensus among scholars (e.g., Brubaker 2004; Chandra 2012; Wimmer 2013; McCauley 2014). The consensus has three parts: (1) identities are a fundamental part of world politics; (2) all political actors (in fact, all individuals) have multiple identities; and (3) identities are shaped by, and in turn shape, political and social milieus and events. Building on this scholarship, our own recent works engage with a fourth argument, which itself enjoys widespread scholarly agreement—that political actors navigate between identities and modify the salience and meaning of their identities as appropriate for a particular situation or objective (Tabaar 2018; Huang 2020; Huang and Tabaar 2021).

Unfortunately, appreciation of these basic tenets of identity politics seems to stop at the boundaries of academia, or may even be confined to the very group of comparativist scholars who specialize in the politics of identity. And yet, this understanding of identities has immediate implications for how academics, journalists, and policy communities might think about political actors' identity claims.

Multi-Identitizing Analysis

If all actors have multiple identities, an implication is that when a political actor publicly proclaims an identity, there are other identities the actor is choosing *not* to tout. All actors are more multidimensional than they themselves might have us believe. Furthermore, depending on the audience or the situation, the same actor can "shift" identities by downplaying one identity and emphasizing an alternative one. For example, the GAM (Free Aceh Movement), fighting for secession from Indonesia, played up its Muslim identity to successfully court Libyan support in the 1980s. And yet, concerned that an overemphasis on its Islamic identity in the post-9/11 context would, in the words of GAM's founder, "frighten the outside world," the organization went to great lengths to reassure Western audiences that it had no connections to radical Islamist networks and was primarily fighting for freedom from state oppression (quoted in Aspinall 2009, 200–1).

Iran's role in the 1990s Tajik civil war is another case in point. Iran first sided with the Islamist rebels in an attempt to capitalize on their loose religious affinity. Seeing this strategy as ineffectual, however, Iran soon deemphasized its Islamist identity and instead threw its support behind the secular Tajik government, in the process using its Persian co-linguist and cultural appeal to boost bilateral relations (Huang and Tabaar 2021, 11–2). Indeed, while Iran's "Islamist" face often dominates US discourses about the Islamic Republic, its Persian identity is similarly salient in its near abroad where Iran shares historical, cultural, and linguistic ties with several neighboring countries. Suffice it to say that whether an analyst views Iran as "Islamist" or "Persian" should not depend on whether she sits in Washington or Dushanbe. Observers often stop with the identity they deem the most salient or "obvious" for

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an actor. However, we must dig deeper and ask why the actor is brandishing that identity, what other identities they may have in their repertoire, and why those are not being emphasized.

All of this points to the importance of broadening, and more specifically "multi-identitizing," our analytical lenses.[7] Political actors' own identity claims constitute one slice of empirical data; the scholarly toolkit, informed by a wealth of research on comparative identity politics, should enable scholars to contextualize such claims and search for other pieces of data that together paint a fuller picture of the politics of identity. As Kanchan Chandra argues in this Forum, scholarly and media analyses should exercise caution in the way they attach identity labels to political actors because labels can take a life of their own, making it increasingly difficult to see the actors as anything but the labels by which we come to know them. While actors' self-labels are valuable empirical material, analysis based on a singular focus on these identity claims risks allowing actors to bias the way we observe and analyze them. Analysis that recognizes self-labels as but one of many identities helps to illuminate the strategic choices actors make in identity construction, thereby training our attention to the *politics* of identity.

The Conventional Approach

These arguments become clearer when contrasted with what we see as the conventional approach. Casual observers and the media often take actors' self-styled identities as a given and at face value; if an actor proclaims a religious ideology, they must be "religious" and driven by that ideology. If the actor invests significant importance in an identity, observers do the same and analysis thus becomes narrowly identitized. Hence, observers often attribute the brutal violence of the Islamic State to its particular ideology, inferring causal effects from it. It is indeed plausible that ideology drives behavior. Nevertheless, scholars must go a step further to examine why the actor adopted the particular ideology or identity in the first place. The argument linking identity to behavior cannot be assessed—and should not be casually asserted—without an empirical investigation that considers, if not repudiates, alternative arguments. Given the equifinality of mass violence, this is a formidable task.

Another conventional approach is to consider as one's religious coethnics those with whom one shares a religious affinity. In this view, Iran's alliance with its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, hardly requires explanation because they are both Shia Islamist actors. Multi-identitizing this analysis, however, one would recognize that Iran also maintains strong alliances with Sunni organizations such as Hamas while ignoring the plight of fellow Muslims such as the Rohingya in Myanmar. In the first Nagorno-Karabakh War in the 1990s, Iran chose to side *against* Shi'a Muslims of Azerbaijan and instead backed Armenia, with its overwhelmingly Christian population. Similarly, Iran has cultivated strong ties with the anti-Shi'a Taliban against the United States in recent years, even though the Islamic Republic had once backed the Persian-speaking Sunni and Shi'a Afghans against the Taliban and collaborated with Washington to overthrow the Pashtun organization after 9/11. Through all of these diverse alliances, Iran continued to operate on identity-based narratives, whether by proclaiming its Shia theological mission, its constitutional prerogative to help fellow Muslims or its Persian historical ties with its neighbors. It is not any single identity label, but actors' interests and politics, that help explain this complex variation in alliances (Christia 2012). A singular focus on the most obvious identity dimension would create blind spots in analyses of political outcomes.

[7] Here we follow Wimmer (2013, 38) who called for "de-ethnicizing" research designs, warning that if we adopt an ethnic lens, we risk over-attributing outcomes to ethnic (and religious) identity.

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These issues are not confined to the realm of knowledge production; they carry ethical implications for scholars, policymakers, and journalists alike. When scholars narrowly put stock in actors' self-styled identities, the actors are likely getting precisely the result they wish to see, namely international audiences buying into their global marketing efforts. The Islamic State reaps benefits when audiences believe their behavior is driven by their ideology because such a response legitimates the ideology and reinforces their identity claims. In turn, such outcomes help the Islamic State with practical tasks such as recruitment and bolstering organizational cohesion. We can use political actors' identity assertions as empirical material but should refrain from using them as an analytical frame. Rather, striving toward ethical work means insisting on using our own theoretically-informed analytical approaches.

This conceptualization of actors' agency over identity formation and instrumentalization raises important questions: Why assume actors are strategic and instrumentalize identities? Do they not have sincere commitments to religious faiths? Certainly, individuals can have deep and genuine religious faiths, and such beliefs can and do shape behavior. Our approach is compatible with this understanding of religious faith. We ascribe strategic thinking because our subjects are by definition *political actors*—actors who aspire to alter political power dynamics in some way and seek to mobilize a base of supporters toward that end. Such actors *must* think about how to recruit, expand their realm of control, and make progress toward the attainment of objectives. To succeed, they must be calculating and strategic about the use of various resources at their disposal—including identity formulation and utilization.

Moving Forward

Identitized issues, be they "religious" conflicts or threats from "religious" actors, should be better understood once observers free themselves of the very identities through which the actors themselves would have us understand their behavior. Multi-identitizing analysis does not mean disregarding actors' identities; identities are important precisely because they matter to individuals and groups and hence can play powerful political roles. Rather, when a political actor frames an issue as being *about* a (religious or other) identity, we ought to think about the fuller inventory of identities available to the actor as well as consider why and for what ends the actor is emphasizing the particular identity over others. Given the actor's goals and circumstances, what are their political motives? "*Why, and what else?*" might be a refrain that can help bring greater clarity to studies of identity. This way of thinking provides a window into actors' strategic thinking and places self-styled identities alongside other social, economic, and political factors that shape outcomes. The analyst, not the actor's pronouncements, should then determine what role an identity has on the actor's behavior.

Religion, Ideology, Institutions, and Patterns of Violence

Mara Redlich Revkin and Elisabeth Jean Wood

Scholars of armed organizations with ideologies that claim to be based on religion have increasingly documented micro-level variation in the attitudes and conduct of individual members of the organization who sometimes but do not always comply with the organization's ideology, i.e., its official interpretation of religion (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014; Leader Maynard 2019). It is now well-established that ideology—as expressed through an organization's official policies and doctrines—is a causal factor in the violence wielded by members of armed organizations, although scholars disagree about its importance relative to other factors

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including economic incentives (Weinstein 2006), changes in the relative military power of competing organizations leading to "side-switching" (Christia 2012), and territorial control (Kalyvas 2006). However, there is more to be learned about how and why individual members of an organization vary in their level of commitment to the ideology, whether religious or secular, and the role that commitment plays in the divergence between violence prescribed as policy and that observed on the ground.

In our study on the Islamic State's pattern of sexual violence (Revkin and Wood 2021), we documented how the organization's ideology—based on a selective and extreme interpretation of Islam—authorized the targeting of particular social groups with specific forms of sexual violence, but effectively prohibited the targeting of other groups with those specific forms. However, we also found that the pattern of violence was more diverse than those policies predicts: Unauthorized but tolerated "practices" of violence also occurred. In this essay, we briefly review our findings and discuss fruitful avenues for further research.

After showing that extant theories of violence do not fully explain the Islamic State's observed pattern of violence, we argue that its pattern of violence is better explained by ideology. By *ideology*, we mean "a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic, or other social group), an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change—or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action" (Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood 2014: 215). Ideology, to varying extent, prescribes policies that order or authorize particular forms of violence against specific social groups (i.e., particular sub-patterns of violence) and proscribes other sub-patterns. It also prescribes—again, to varying extent—institutions to produce violence it deems legitimate, to regulate the conditions under which authorized violence occurs, and to punish prohibited sub-patterns of violence.

We find that the organization adopted policies that authorized certain forms of sexual violence, including sexual slavery and child marriage, against distinct social groups. However, some sub-patterns of violence were "practices," namely, *violence that is neither ordered nor authorized but nonetheless tolerated by commanders* (Wood 2018), e.g., gang rape of Yazidi women (which violated its policy requiring exclusive ownership of and sexual access to slaves) and forced marriage of Sunni Muslim women (which violated its policy requiring that marriage be consensual).

We also found evidence that the Islamic State's pattern of violence varied across non-contiguous "provinces" in Afghanistan, Nigeria, and other contexts where pre-existing organizations (Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Taliban in Afghanistan) pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. We suggest that their pre-existing organizational policies and practices, along with local cultural traditions, hindered the Islamic State's efforts to enforce compliance with its ideology. Forced marriage of Sunni women was a frequent occurrence in the Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan, e.g., even though it was prohibited by the Islamic State's official ideology and occurred only occasionally as a practice in its core territory in Iraq and Syria.

Our article and other previous research have suggested that peer socialization may help to explain discrepancies between official policy and observed patterns of violence. Members of an armed organization are socialized *vertically* from the top down (to varying degrees) as well as *horizontally* through peer influence (Checkel 2017). Whether from above or through peers, socialization may reinforce official policies or undermine them (Wood and Toppelberg 2017). Socialization from above may reinforce official policy through education, training, and discipline as well as the enforcement of traditions, concepts, rituals, and other social processes. Top-down socialization by particular officers may, on the other hand, undermine official policies through unauthorized and perhaps illegal behavior and discourse,

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which may explain practices of violence by particular units that deviate from policy. Horizontal socialization in the form of rituals, traditions, and other processes between peers may similarly undermine official policies by reinforcing prohibited forms of violence, which if tolerated become sustained practices (Wood and Toppelberg 2017). Horizontal socialization into formal organizational norms and rules is also possible in highly cohesive and deeply socializing organizations.

One of the best-documented examples of sexual violence as a practice is the pattern of frequent sexual assault of both female and male members of the US military by their colleagues (almost always male; Wood and Toppelberg 2017). That it is driven primarily by horizontal social dynamics is evident in the fraction of rapes that are carried out by multiple perpetrators (much higher than among civilians) and in the frequent retaliation for reporting sexual assault not only by the perpetrator but by the victim's peers and unit leaders. No one claims that such intra-force violence is organizational policy, yet it has persisted despite two decades of supposed "zero tolerance."

An important methodological challenge to research on practices is that they are observed primarily through the behavior or communications of individual members, in contrast to policies, which are formally expressed in texts or other communications that are relatively easy for researchers to access and interpret. Nonetheless, scholars can find evidence of practices through interviews with current or former members of an armed organization, or with individuals who though not members of the organization could observe the conduct of its members (e.g., family members or civilians living in areas controlled by the organizations), or—in cases where it is not possible to interview members of an organization—by collecting statements that individuals make on social media, in diaries or other archival records, or during judicial investigations.

Below we suggest some questions for future research on the relationship between religious ideologies, ideologies more generally, and both policies and practices of violence.

To what extent does our argument about religious ideology prescribing institutions and policies of violence account for patterns by other armed organizations that draw on religious ideology to motivate and legitimate armed conflict, including other Salafi-jihadist organizations?

Does our argument generalize to ideologies drawing on different religious traditions? Extending our theoretical framework to the study of patterns of violence by armed organizations with other religious ideologies would help to address a problematic double standard identified by Kanchan Chandra in this Forum in which Islamist organizations are often singled out as if they are particularly prone to violence while overlooking many examples of extreme violence by organizations that claim to be motivated by other religions. For example, the Ku Klux Klan is rarely referred to as a Christian organization despite its extensive use of biblical verses, Christian symbols (most notably the burning cross), and churches to promote its ideology. Earlier Christian white nationalist movements cited biblical justifications for enslaving and lynching Black Americans (Gorski and Perry 2022, 54; Louise Wood 2011, 48). These preliminary observations suggest, consistent with our theory, that the patterns of violence of Christian white nationalist movements are shaped by their ideologies.

The finding that different religious ideologies are associated with different patterns of violence raises a related question: Do differences in political ideology account for differences in patterns of violence across leftist insurgencies? In Latin America, Sendero Luminoso engaged in a much wider repertoire, targeting, and higher frequency of violence against civilians than did the Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional in El Salvador, for example. To what extent is the difference accounted for by differences in ideology? By peer dynamics including social rituals as well as ideology?

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Another set of questions concerns the relationship between religion and ideology. Does treating religion as merely one form of ideology among others (e.g., political or philosophical ideologies) neglect important aspects of the lived experience of combatants that involve faith practices and rituals? Both secular and religious armed organizations may have ideologies aimed at the realization of a higher good, and corresponding institutions designed to promote combatants' belief in that good. How precisely do religious beliefs and rituals differ from the secular beliefs and rituals in ideological armed organizations that do not subscribe to a particular religion? From those in more professional state militaries, including drilling and hazing?

Finally, what happens when different commanders have different interpretations of the organization's policies? Local commanders often encounter situations not covered or even anticipated by official policies, which may lead them to adapt existing policies or develop new policies based on their individual interpretation of the underlying ideology. To what extent does variation across local commanders' interpretation of official ideology and policies account for variation in patterns of violence *within* armed organizations? To what extent does that variation reflect socialization that undermines official policy (rather than a good-faith interpretation)?

We hope these questions raised by our theoretical framework will be taken up by other scholars studying armed organizations with different religious ideologies as well as those with secular ideologies and in different historical and regional contexts to build generalizable knowledge across different categories—such as Salafi-jihadist groups—that may not be as *sui generis* as they are often assumed.

Religious Fieldwork for International Relations Scholars

Richard A. Nielsen

Social scientists are, by and large, a fairly non-religious bunch, at least in the United States. Surveys conducted by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s show declining religiosity among faculty in the United States. These surveys have not been updated, but the latest, in 1984, shows that even then, only 6% of political scientists were "deeply religious" while 54% were indifferent or opposed to religion.[8] It is safe to say that religiosity of social science faculty has continued to decline. This contrasts with remarkable levels of religiosity among the American public; some 50% of Americans reported that religion was "very important" to them in a 2014 Pew survey.[9]

The inexperience of many social scientists with religion may detrimentally affect how we study it. We may discount religion as a cause of political action because we ourselves are not as likely to find it motivating. When we do acknowledge its force, we sometimes adopt simplistic understandings of religious identity, discuss canonical texts without considering varied interpretations, and give too much attention to religious ideology and too little to religious practices.

As a remedy, scholars could prioritize religious fieldwork: Going to, entering, and observing the religious spaces they study and the people who inhabit them. This may entail traditional fieldwork, but the increasing importance of virtual religious practice means that scholars can also gain experience by attending online religious services and perusing websites. Social scientists who increase their intuitive understanding of religion by observing (and perhaps practicing) will produce better scholarship about religion because they better appreciate the motivations and experiences of religious people. This is not to say that they will take the statements of religious subjects at face value—experience can also be instructive about when

[8] See https://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Downloads/NSHEF84_DL2.asp (accessed March 24, 2023); Wald and Wilcox (2006, 526).

[9] See https://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/RELLAND14_CB.asp, question 77 Q.F2 (accessed March 24, 2023).

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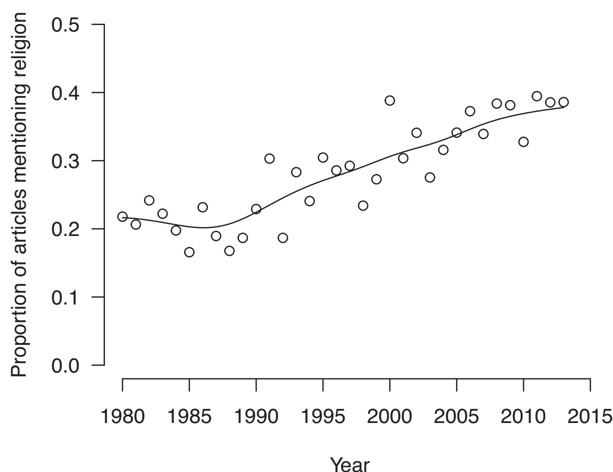

Figure 1. The proportion of articles in the top twelve International Relations journals mentioning variants of the word "religion" between 1980 and 2013.

social scientists should be *less* credulous of the claims of religious actors. However, it will help social scientists more seriously consider the range of effects religion may have on politics and the channels through which those effects flow.

How are scholars of International Relations and Political Science sometimes getting religion wrong? Social science scholarship has historically downplayed the role of religion as a cause of political outcomes. Wald and Wilcox (2006) report that the *American Political Science Review* published an article considering religion as a serious cause only every three or four years for its first 100 years, which they attribute to "low and declining levels of personal religiosity" among political scientists (526). In the area of my research, at the intersection of religion and terrorism, attributing significant causal force to religion seems common sense to many policy-makers and journalists (Wood 2015), but is at odds with the academic discourse; recent articles are even trying to "bring religion back" in to the study of Jihadism (Larsen and Jensen 2021). This is despite a prior wave of research that admirably paved the way for broader recognition of the role of religion in IR (Fox et al. 2004; Hassner 2010; Toft et al. 2011).

To investigate more systematically, I examined a sample of articles from the TRIP Journal Article Database between 1980 and 2013 (Maliniak et al. 2018; Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project 2020). Using the text of these articles, I identified each use of variants of the terms "religion" and "religious" and then sampled from the articles published since 2010 to assess how religion was being treated qualitatively. References to religion are on the rise, (see Figure 1), but closer reading revealed that 80 percent of references to religion are tangential or shallow; religion is referenced briefly or a religion variable is included in regression models with little discussion. The most common reference to religion having causal force is the inclusion of Fearon and Laitin's (2003) measure of religious fractionalization.

While religion might be acknowledged as a causal force more often than in the past, scholars often treat it superficially. One issue, noted by others in this forum, is that religion is often coded bluntly: wars are coded as religious or not, combatant forces are coded as belonging to a single denomination, and religious fractionalization is measured bluntly using broad religious categories. Blunt coding is convenient for analysis, but it can obscure more than it reveals about the politics of conflict. Consider two examples: the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan and the 2011 Syrian uprising and civil war. While the Afghan invasion is not classified as a

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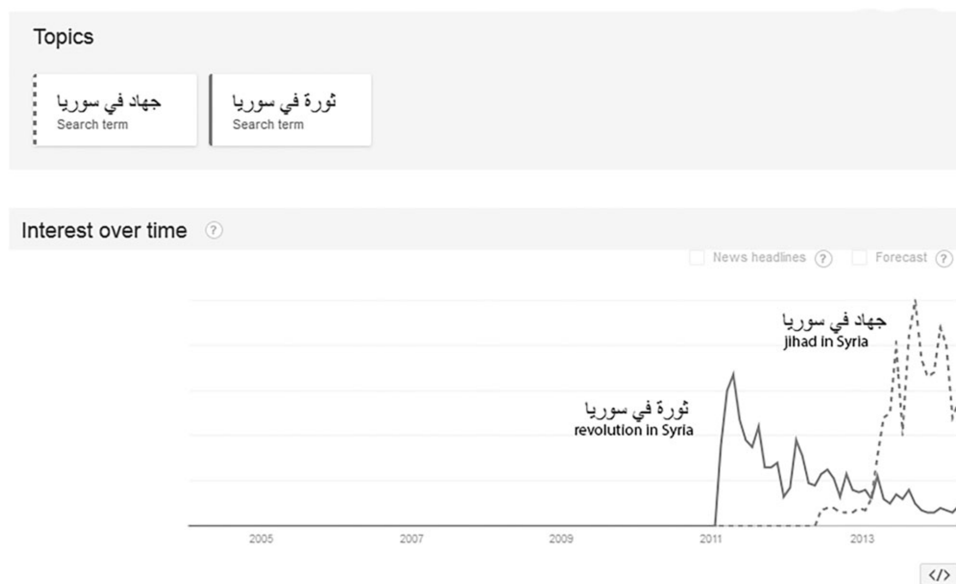

Figure 2. Google Search interest in the Syrian uprising in terms of "revolution in Syria" (solid) or "jihad in Syria" (dashed).

religious conflict in most quantitative data sets, at least some participants viewed it in religious terms; the Taliban framed their resistance in religious terms, and some coalition troops followed suit, wearing patches identifying themselves as "Pork Eating Crusaders" in 2012.[10] In the Syrian uprising, initial waves of protest were secular and media outlets framed the conflict as a non-religious "revolution." Then, about two years in, the narrative around the conflict changed to religious "jihad" because of combatant groups with religious commitments (see Figure 2).

Attempting to code either of these conflicts as "religious" or "not" misses that part of the contest is over the narrative: Combatants in both took efforts to turn their respective conflicts into religious conflicts and at least partially succeeded. I am not advocating that scholars should add complexity for the sake of arbitrary "nuance" (Healy 2017). Rather, without recognizing the nuance, our blunt, binary coding can be non-sensical, and obscure a key site of political contestation. Recently released data sets offer partial solutions by encoding more information and considering more nuanced aspects of religion (Vüllers, Pfeiffer and Basedau 2015; Svensson and Nilsson 2018), although these still struggle to represent the complexity of conflicts where the role of religion is fundamentally contested or shifting over time. In this forum, Kanchan Chandra offers a comprehensive critique of this problem and proposes data collection to ameliorate it.

Scholars also sometimes have conceptions of religion and religiosity derived primarily from canonical texts, ignoring that interpretation of these texts is contested. My own research examines disagreement among Muslims about how to interpret the canon of Islam in relation to violent conflict (Nielsen 2017). In this research, turning to the Quran would have been uninteresting; all of the Muslims debating the legitimacy of jihadist violence believe in the primacy of the Quran. Instead, I collected a data set of 150 000 fatwas, books, articles, and social media posts offering *interpretations* of Islamic doctrines and texts, and found that clerics with fewer connections and employment opportunities were more likely to endorse a militant jihadist interpretation.

[10]See https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2012/3/26/1077847/---Pork-Eating-Crusader (accessed March 24, 2023).

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Finally, reducing religion to confessional status and ideology risks missing how it is lived and felt by participants. One helpful corrective comes from scholarship that emphasizes that behavior and belonging are as essential to religiosity as belief (Marshall 2002; Smidt 2020); fieldwork can help to impress the multifaceted nature of religious experience upon researchers. My own interest in statistical text analysis has led me to give undue emphasis to texts at times, and I have found that an ethnographic sensibility, informed by scholarship in religious studies (Orsi 2013), helps to balance my approach. Adopting this sensibility helped me learn that jihadist clerics are emotionally invested in their roles as scholars and teachers, which in turn led me to investigate the importance of their educational networks, which I otherwise might have overlooked.

One solution is to spend more time engaging with religion and religious individuals through fieldwork, learning what it feels like to be religious, and engaging in religious practices where appropriate. For example, I spent time in mosques memorizing portions of the Quran to understand the importance of this religious practice for Muslim clerics (Nielsen 2020). Of course, if carried out without reflexivity, entering the religious spaces and rituals of others might reenact colonial or orientalist behaviors, or reinforce pre-existing researcher biases. My own preference has been to enter with permission, and sometimes instruction, from an interlocutor in the field. But within many religions, there is a wide ambit for participation by curious non-believers. Entering religious spaces and trying religious practices with an open mind is more likely to reduce researcher bias than exacerbate it. Our scholarship on religion will be better if we sometimes step into the shoes of the religious individuals we study to learn more viscerally what it feels like.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the valuable comments from the anonymous reviewers. Camarah McLean and Nathaniel Long provided excellent research assistance. We gratefully acknowledge funding support sponsored by Texas A&M University's Bush School of Government and Public Service and the June B. and Bryan J. Zwan Endowment at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

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Tabaar, Mohammad Ayatollahi et al. (2023) How Religious Are "Religious" Conflicts?. *International Studies Review*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viad029
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