Religious Fieldwork for International Relations Scholars
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Social scientists are, by and large, a fairly non-religious and atheistic 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, especially in the social sciences. 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.[1] 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 who reported that religion was "very important" to them in a 2014 Pew survey.[2]

The inexperience of many social scientists with religion may detrimentally affect how we study it. In our research, we sometimes reduce religion to a caricature, or adopt impoverished accounts of what religion is and does. 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 the causal force of religion, 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 religious practices.

To avoid these shortcomings, social scientists studying religion could place more emphasis on religious fieldwork: going to, entering, and observing the religious people and spaces that they study. Often, this may entail traditional fieldwork (Driscoll, 2021), but the increasing importance of virtual religious practice means that scholars may also gain experience by attending online religious services and perusing websites. Social scientists who increase their intuitive understandings 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 social scientists should be less credulous of the claims of religious actors. But 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.

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[1] Carnegie readme, https://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Downloads/NSHEF84_DL2.asp, and Wald and Wilcox 2006, 526

[2] https://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/RELLAND14_CB.asp , question 77 Q.F2

A byproduct of increasing social scientists experiential understanding of religion may be that scholars can better understand and help policy-makers. In the United States, government officials tend to be religious,[3] and, in my experience, may give more weight to religion where social scientists give too little.

How are scholars of International Relations and Political Science sometimes getting religion wrong? For one, social science scholarship has historically downplayed the role of religion as a cause of political outcomes. In a survey of the leading Political Science journal, Wald and Wilcox (2006) find that *American Political Science Review* published an article in considering religion as a serious cause only every three or four years for its first 100 years. Like me, they attribute this in part to "low and declining levels of personal religiosity" among political scientists (526). "Those who set the research agenda for the profession were almost universally uninvolved in organized religion and indifferent to it more generally" (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 (Dawson and Amarasingam 2017, 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; Toft et al, 2011, Hassner 2010).

To investigate more systematically, I examined a sample of articles from the TRIP Journal Article Database (Maliniak et al 2018, Teaching, Research, and International Policy Project 2020). The version of the TRIP database I use includes twelve leading International Relations journals, between 1980 and 2013, and has been used in articles tracking trends in IR publishing (Maliniak et al 2013). Using the word counts of these articles, provided by JSTOR for another paper (Roberts et al 2020), 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. Numerically, references to religion are on the rise, as shown in Figure 1. However, closer reading of the sampled articles shows that 80% 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 popular measure of religious fractionalization (Fearon and Laitin 2003).

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[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/11/01/highlighting-value-christians-state-departments-first-ever-employees-faith-group-underscores-mike-pompeos-influence/
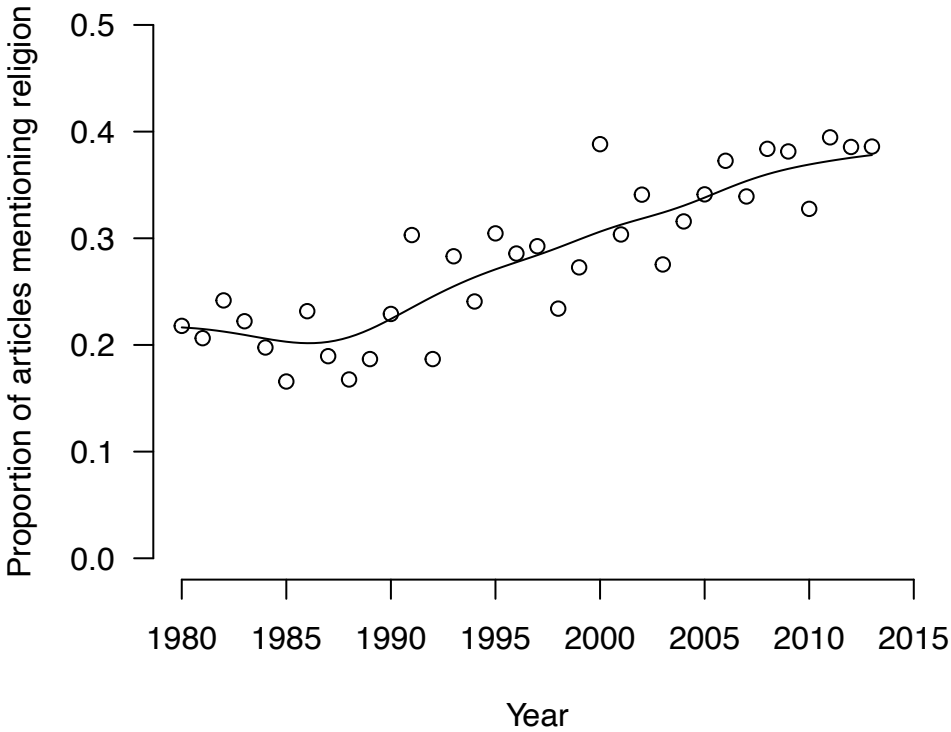
Figure 1: The proportion of articles in the top 12 International Relations journals mentioning variants of the word "religion" in each year between 1980 and 2013.

My findings suggest that while religion might be acknowledged as a causal force more often than in the past, scholars often treat it superficially in several ways. One issue, noted by others in this forum, is that religion is often treated as a binary classification. 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. While these binary coding decisions are convenient for the types of rectangular data matrices that many scholars would like to analyze, they can obscure more than they reveal about the politics of conflict. Consider two examples: the United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the 2011 Syrian uprising and civil war. The Afghan war is not generally classified as a religious conflict in most quantitative data sets, and it is certainly not clear that religious grievance was the primary motivating factor behind the decision by the United States to invade. Nevertheless, at least some combatants in the conflict viewed it in religious terms; the Taliban framed their resistance in religious terms, and a few coalition troops followed suit, wearing patches

identifying themselves as "Pork Eating Crusaders" in 2012.[4] 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 combatant groups with religious commitments pushed it (see Figure 2).
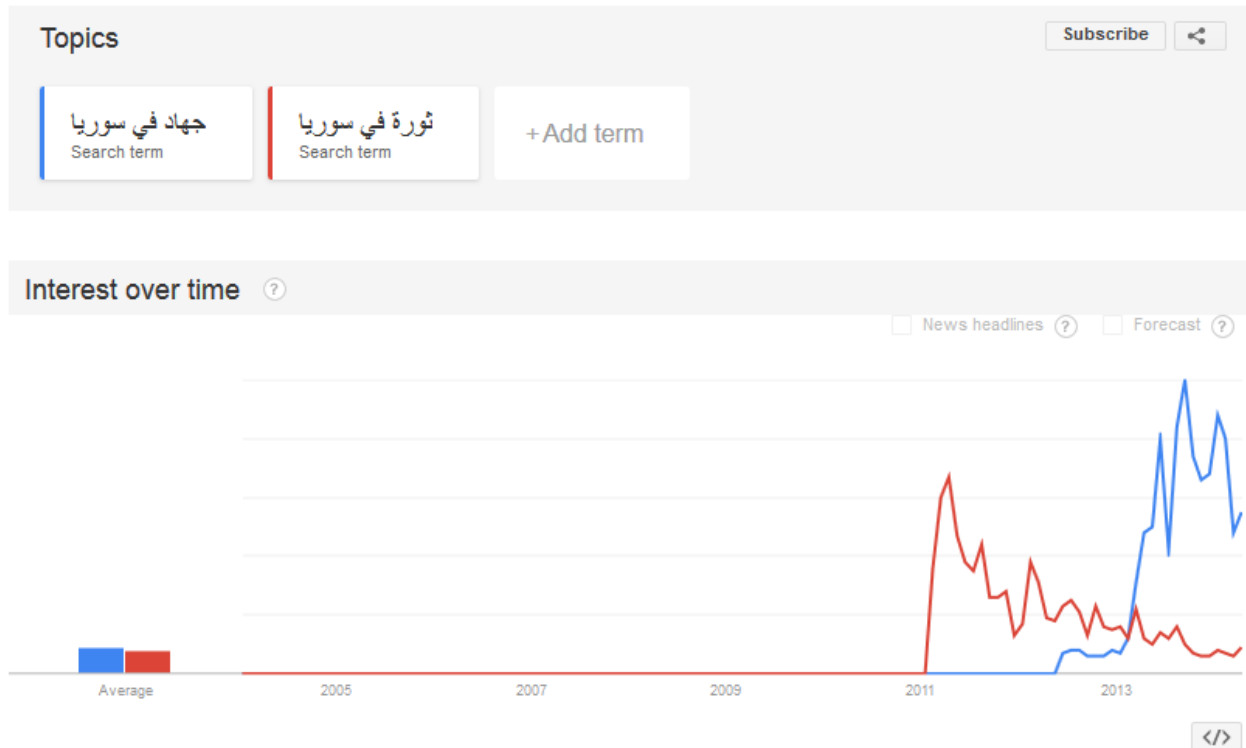

Figure 2: A screenshot showing Google Search interest in the Syrian uprising in terms of "revolution in Syria" (red) or "jihad in Syria" (blue).

In both instances, 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 avoid question binary categorizations for the sake of arbitrary "nuance"(Healy 2017). Rather, without recognizing the nuance, our binary coding can be non-sensical, and obscures 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 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

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[4] https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2012/3/26/1077847/--Pork-Eating-Crusader

this forum, Kanchan Chandra offers a more comprehensive critique of this problem and also proposes techniques for data collection to ameliorate it.

Scholars also tend to have conceptions of religion and religiosity that are oriented around canonical texts. Yet much of the interesting variation in religiosity happens in how religious observers interpret those texts. My own research on jihadism (Nielsen 2017) attempts to understand the roots of a difference in interpretation among Muslims about how to interpret the canon of Islam in relation to violent conflict. In this research, turning to the Quran would have been uninteresting; all of the Muslims debating the legitimacy of jihadist terrorism believe in the primacy of the Quran. Instead, I collected a data set of 150,000 fatwas, books, articles, and social media posts by a wide range of clerics offering *interpretations* of Islamic doctrines and texts, and used them to show that clerics with fewer connections and employment opportunities were more likely to endorse a militant jihadist interpretation of the Quran.

Finally, scholars give too much attention to doctrinal and ideological aspects of religion and not enough attention to the physical and emotional aspects of being pious. 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. In my own work, adopting this sensibility helped me learn that jihadist clerics are emotionally invested in their roles as scholars and teachers (Nielsen 2017). This in turn led me to investigate the importance of their educational networks, which I otherwise might have overlooked.

One solution to these shortcomings in our scholarship is to spend more time engaging with religion and religious individuals through various forms of fieldwork. This fieldwork will require political scientists to get more comfortable with learning what it feels like to be religious. Building on a long tradition of participant observation, I have advocated for this kind of "learning by doing" elsewhere (Nielsen 2020), and religious participation has been part of my research on Islam. For example, I memorized portions of the Quran to understand the import of this religious practice for Muslim clerics.

Scholars should be careful not to engage in religious practices in offensive ways. 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 occasionally step into the shoes of the religious individuals we study to learn more viscerally what it feels like.

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