Identity, Internal State Conflict, and Religion ⓐ

Summary and Keywords

Social science literature does not identify a direct effect of religion on the occurrence of intrastate conflict. Yet religion as a sociopolitical identity does have several fairly unique features that render religious differences particularly useful to political entrepreneurs in the course of conflict. First, religions often have codified guidelines, typically written, that convey normative behaviors—what one should do to attain salvation, for example. The presence of such guidelines can reinforce the organizational strength of particular groups and underscore the nonnegotiable status of their beliefs, both of which can be useful in the course of conflict. Second, the religious identity includes multiple levels of division that do not exist within other identity types—including interfaith differences, differences between sects within religious traditions, and divisions between secularists and strong religionists. Such divisions create opportunities for outbidding that exacerbate tensions and conflict. Third, religious group membership confers nonmaterial benefits, such as perceived access to salvation, that can motivate behavior in very tangible, this-worldly ways, for example by encouraging fighters to choose martyrdom over negotiated settlements. Finally, religious networks link adherents transnationally in a manner that no other identity type can, creating opportunities to mobilize resources and support from abroad for a conflict within borders.

These features suggest that, whereas religion is no more likely than other types of identity divisions to cause conflict, it can be particularly powerful for political entrepreneurs to wield as a tool in conflict settings. In some cases, conflicts are viewed as religious because the religious labels of competing sides differ, even if the conflict itself has nothing to do with religion. In other cases, conflicts may be described as religious if the content over which adversary sides fight is itself religious in nature; violence over the imposition of Islamic sharia law in a religiously mixed country may be one such example. Even when intrastate conflicts are fought over religious content, however, from the perspective of political scientists the matter is still one of political choice. This underscores the critical role that political entrepreneurs play in the shaping of conflicts as religious. Understanding the power of codified behavioral guidelines, multiple layers of division, non-material payoffs, and transnational networks that religious identity provides, political entrepreneurs can use religion to exploit the (sometimes unrelated) grievances of their supporters and

thus escalate conflict where doing so pays political dividends. In this way, scholars recognize that intrastate conflicts with various causal foundations frequently become fights in the name of God.

Keywords: religion, intrastate conflict, behavioral guidelines, secular, extremist, nonmaterial payoffs, transnational, religious labels, religious content, entrepreneurs, politics and religion

Introduction

For 17 years beginning in 1955, Sudan was divided by a civil war that pitted northern Arab herders desiring water and expansive lands to the south against southern black farmers seeking to protect their ethnic homelands. Ultimately those southern farmers sought to secede and establish an independent state free from northern exploitation, motivated by what the southern Sudanese scholar Francis Deng described as "tribal, ethnic, and racial values" (Deng, 1973, p. 20).

After a respite during which underlying grievances were never resolved, conflict again broke out in 1983, lasting for 20 additional years. The principal northern and southern antagonists remained unchanged, and many individual actors from the first war took up arms once again in the second, fighting over a division that would ultimately be recognized in the establishment of South Sudan as an independent state in 2011. Yet, upon the outbreak of renewed conflict, the identities of the two sides had changed. As John Garang, the famous leader of the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement/Army, put it in 1985: "the central problem is religious bigotry" (Collins, 2008, p. 161).

The emergence of religion as a centerpiece of the second Sudanese civil war illustrates its power as well as its fluidity in conflict. It is not uncommon to think first of religions as institutions with fundamental differences that remain fairly static over time, perhaps with tensions that explode as populations shift (see, e.g., Huntington, 1996; Kaplan, 2007). Yet social scientists increasingly treat religion not only as an institution but also as a distinct identity whose salience can wax and wane, especially as political entrepreneurs seek new advantages vis-à-vis their opponents. In this way, scholars recognize how conflicts that initially have nothing to do with religion can later become fights in the name of God.

This article explores the role of religion as an identity in internal state conflict. That requires first evaluating the place of religion as a political identity. The article then underscores the particular features that set religion apart as an identity and that may contribute in unique ways to intrastate conflict. From there, it highlights two key aspects of religion as an identity in conflict: first the distinction between religious labels and religious content, and second the powerful role that leaders can play in exploiting the features of religion. The article concludes by considering alternative explanations for religious conflict and the implications of religion as a fluid identity in war.

Drawing largely on literature from comparative politics and from scholars of religion and politics, the thrust of the article is that neither religion nor religious differences *cause* conflict, or even make societies particularly prone to conflict. In fact, no identity causes conflict, and the obvious variation in peace and contention across times and places is enough to dispel that perspective. Yet religious identities do lend themselves particularly well to exploitation by political entrepreneurs in contexts of violence. In that sense, religion is a powerful tool that can be used in conflict and that can exacerbate whatever tensions sparked violence in the first place.

Religion as a Political Identity

Social scientists once treated identities, and the salience of those identities, as objective, innate, and fixed. According to this "primordialist" perspective, religious divisions might define a political context and leave groups with intractable differences that beget ongoing tensions (Douglass, 1988; Geertz, 1973), though it could also be that other identity types—such as ethnolinguistic or caste differences—are viewed as more inherently important. Decidedly outdated by the end of the 20th century, the primordialist perspective nevertheless spawned post–Cold War arguments seeking to explain a changing world order based on civilizations (largely defined in religious terms) rather than states (see Huntington, 1996).

More common since the late 20th century are two alternative views suggesting that political identities are fluid and context dependent. First, constructivists argue that identity divisions and the importance of particular identity types are constructed by political forces, then adopted by masses. The creation of identities in this way may come from political entrepreneurs, institutions, media, or other shapers of public opinion. Laitin (1986), for example, demonstrates that despite strong everyday attachments to Muslim and Christian religious identities in the Yoruba-dominated region of Nigeria, people there instead identify politically in terms of ancestry, as a function of British colonial organization of politics around ancestral city-states. McCauley and Posner (2017) suggest that otherwise identical individuals living along the Burkina Faso-Côte d'Ivoire border self-identified differently after Ivoirian leaders constructed a religious narrative during a decade-long civil conflict on that side of the divide.

Second, instrumentalists argue that identity divisions and the importance of identity types change as actors seek instrumental or self-serving advantages by presenting themselves as members of particular groups. Members of the Indian diaspora in Britain recreated their identity around Hinduism, for example, as a means of distinguishing themselves from the South Asian Muslim minority at a time of widespread anti-Muslim bias (Raj, 2010). Of course, scholars also frequently recognize that constructivist and instrumentalist motivations can be two sides of the same coin: political entrepreneurs may act instrumentally in reifying particular identity types, and in so doing may construct the identity context of their followers. Eifert, Miguel, and Posner (2010) demonstrate that ethnolinguistic identities in Africa become increasingly important as elections approach,

but they are careful to note that this may occur either because individuals wish to align themselves instrumentally with access to patronage or because political candidates construct identity differences to mobilize voters.

Thinking in these terms—of political entrepreneurs playing an identity card and broad identity divisions emerging as a result—obviates the need to draw strong distinctions between the contemporary perspectives of constructivism and instrumentalism. Instead, scholars can understand the salience of identities like religion as a fluid response to the political context, with leaders seeking instrumental advantages and masses swayed by the power of belonging. That is not to suggest that group members are irrational, but only that their pursuit of self-interest is framed by the identity constructed around them (see McCauley, 2014). Others argue more explicitly that political conflict is routinely a function of strategic leaders followed by passionate masses (Coleman, 1990; May, 1991).

Treating Religion as a Distinct Political Identity

While some consensus is emerging regarding the context-dependent nature of identities in politics and political violence, differences persist over the treatment of religion as a distinct political identity. This has important implications for understanding religion's potentially unique influence on conflict.

Under what may be considered an umbrella definition of ethnic politics, many scholars treat religion as just another label applied to competing groups, no different from ethnolinguistic differences, caste, region, or class. Horowitz (1985, p. 41), for example, conceptualizes ethnicity as "differences identified by color, language, religion, or some other attribute of common origin." Rothchild (1997) suggests that ethnic groups are "formed along ethnic, racial, religious, regional, or class lines—they have distinct origins and appeals, but they share common features" (p. 3). Posner (2005) writes that "linguistic, tribal, and religious communities . . . are all ethnic options" (p. 14). In other words, a group is a group is a group, and religious identity is lumped under a generalized conception of ascriptive identity that, if anything, implicitly puts the ethnic or ethnolinguistic identity at the fore.

The appeal of such an approach to identities in conflict comes in the parsimony of assuming that actors have the same political interests regardless of the identity context in which they compete, so that factors such as coalition size can be studied without obfuscation. The limitation, however, is that it precludes the study of religion (or other identity types) as having attributes that might shape conflict in unique ways. Several scholars have noted this shortcoming. Brubaker (2015), for example, labels this a "generalizing stance" that treats religion as a form of ethnicity, focusing too much on the role of group boundaries at the expense of group attributes. Varshney (2002) highlights the ambiguity of using "ethnic politics" as a label for both narrow ethnolinguistic divisions and broader divisions based on religion, caste, or other ascriptive traits. Bormann, Cederman, and Vogt (2017) lament the fact that scholars typically adopt an encompassing approach that draws no distinction between religion, language, and other forms of political identity.

Of course, some scholars of religion and politics take the study of religion as a political identity in the opposite direction, arguing not just that religion should be treated as distinct but that certain religions—often Islam—are systematically responsible for particular conflict-related outcomes (Fox, 2004; Hegghammer, 2010; Toft, 2007). Those arguments too face questions regarding variation in peaceful and contentious outcomes across time and place, but they at least recognize religious identity as introducing unique concerns in the study of intrastate conflict.

Distinctive Features of Religion

What, then, are the characteristics of religion that distinguish this identity from other forms of political identity, and that potentially link religion to conflict outcomes? Four broad features may plausibly be taken as unique to religion: the presence of codified behavioral guidelines, qualitatively different divisions in practice and belonging, the presence of nonmaterial payoffs, and religion's transnationality. Each may link religion to internal state conflict, but, as the following section underscores, they are in fact better viewed as exploitable during the course of conflict than as causal in the emergence of conflict.

Codified Behavioral Guidelines

The uniqueness of religion begins with the presence of guidelines that describe normative behaviors, such as how to attain salvation through one's actions. Of the thousands of documented religions, some do not make use of sacred texts, but most do, including the major world religions: the Christian Bible, the Muslim Qur'an, the Jewish Torah and Talmud, the Hindu Vedas, and others establish codified guidelines for the beliefs and behaviors of members. Other important political identities lack such codified behaviors. National identities may be linked to constitutions, but those typically outline rights and responsibilities as opposed to normative behavioral guidelines. Political party manifestos similarly lack input on right and wrong behaviors. Ethnolinguistic groups' social norms can certainly carry the weight of written words in some cases, yet they typically serve the function of the ethnic community rather than a broader normative goal (see McCauley, 2017).

Codified behavioral guidelines may link religion to conflict in a number of ways. First, they may be taken by both members and nonmembers as indivisible (Hassner, 2009; Svensson, 2007; Toft, 2006) and nonnegotiable (Reynal-Querol, 2002), since what is presumably from the divine cannot be altered or compromised. As Laitin (2000) writes, one cannot easily be "bi-religious" in the way that she may be biracial or biethnic, because religious identities carry behavioral codes that cannot be mixed. Horowitz (2009) stresses that adherents often treat their own positions as above reproach, because the behavioral guidelines of religion are perceived as having supernatural origins.[1] As a result, one can rather easily imagine religious differences becoming a sticking point in efforts to resolve political differences. To the extent that one group's nonnegotiable behavioral guidelines cause tangible infringements on another group's space or way of life—think of Easter

marches by Catholics in the Philippines, for example, or Muslim prohibitions on alcohol in Turkey—one might also imagine religious differences as a spark for conflict.

Related to the normative behavioral guidelines that underpin religious identity are the symbols that accompany religious doctrine, belief, and behaviors. The Jewish yarmulke, the Muslim hijab, and the Christian cross all reinforce religious identity on the basis of texts and teachings. In so doing, they also draw sharp distinctions between ingroup and outgroup members (Basedau, Pfeiffer, & Vüllers, 2016). Finally, the behavioral guidelines inherent in religious identity commonly serve as a foundation for the organizational characteristics that religious groups adopt. Prayer meetings; choir groups; birth, marriage, and death rituals; sacred ceremonies; and public service activities differ across religious traditions but create a common advantage for religious groups that other forms of social identity do not enjoy. These activities promote the regular meeting of group members for normative purposes (see Stewart, 2009). Organizational strength may of course serve many prosocial outcomes, but it also makes religious identities particularly appealing to political entrepreneurs in the course of conflict, as some of the mobilizational steps required to overcome collective action problems have already been resolved.

Multiple, Distinct Divisions in Practice and Belonging

When asked "what is your nationality?" it would be odd for a person to respond that she is not currently practicing. Racial and ethnic identities can be fraught with complexity due to intermarriage, mixing, sociopolitical construction, and choices of self-identification, yet almost all people have a racial or ethnic identity that they report. The same cannot be said of religion. In fact, the religious identity is fairly unique in that it includes multiple divisions in practice and belonging that differ qualitatively from one another and from divisions within other identity types.

There are the broad distinctions between religious traditions—Muslims as distinct from Buddhists, for example, which has colored social conflict in Myanmar. There are also distinctions between denominations or sects within religious traditions, often emerging as a result of different interpretations of sacred texts or of lineage disputes within the religious hierarchy. Examples include frequent Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions in the Middle East and the 20th-century troubles between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Finally, in addition to broad interreligious divisions and narrower sectarian divisions, the politics of religious identity are colored by potential divisions between those of no religion and those of strong religious beliefs, or, broadly, secularists versus extremists. Differences between Islamists and secularists shaped divisions in Egypt and Algeria in the early part of the 21st century, for example, and China in the Xi era faces increasing pressure from expanding religious communities in a context of state atheism.

A number of scholars make the closely related distinction between inclusivity and exclusivity in religious identities. Harpviken and Røislien (2008), for example, note that some religious groups and actors liaise across identity lines, whereas others work at cross purposes to peaceful outcomes in the very name of religion. Djupe and Calfano (2012, 2013)

demonstrate experimentally that exclusivity versus inclusivity in religious messaging shapes intercommunal threats as well as practical outcomes such as support for interventionist foreign policy.

The distinction between inclusivity and exclusivity, and between secularists and extremists, has implications for the unique nature of religious politics and conflict. One important consequence of the secularist-extremist division is that outbidding among political entrepreneurs—the effort to present oneself or one's subgroup as a more consistent or pure representative of the broader identity—can occur with much greater frequency in religious contexts. Brubaker (2015) and Toft (2007) suggest that outbidding without hierarchical oversight helps to explain the frequency of clashes within the Muslim world, particularly in the face of perceived neoimperial Christian oppression. The efforts of violent Islamists to target moderate Muslims (see Wignell, Tan, O'Halloran, & Lange, 2017) and the choice of some Islamist clerics to advocate violent extremism when their scholarly ambitions are blocked (see Nielsen, 2017) can also be viewed through the guise of outbidding in the context of moderate versus extremist divisions.

This unique aspect of religious politics is closely intertwined with the presence of codified behavioral guidelines. The divisions between sects or between secularists and extremists are typically a function of how sacred texts are used and interpreted. From a political science standpoint, what exactly is written in sacred texts is less important than the fact that the texts exist at all, as interpretations vary widely but then carry the perceived force of divine right in the eyes of adherents. In this sense, more extremist or literalist interpretations often have an advantage in perceived "purity" in the name of the religion (Liebman, 1983). In the context of contentious politics and potential violence, where outbidding can pay real dividends, it is reasonable to expect that more extremist entrepreneurs will exploit these unique religious divisions with greater effectiveness.

Nonmaterial Payoffs

The third largely unique feature of religious identity is the important place that nonmaterial payoffs occupy for religious adherents. Nonmaterial benefits such as status and belonging can certainly accrue in other identity contexts (Sambanis & Shayo, 2013), and political economists recognize utility in both material and nonmaterial forms (Opp, 1989; Simon, 1985). Yet payoffs in the religious context go well beyond one's position vis-à-vis others in society. They may accrue despite—or even because of—ostracism, oppression, poverty, or minority status.

Stark and Bainbridge (1987) note that religious group members generally seek to maximize their spiritual rewards—principally the attainment of salvation—in addition to material ones. Psychological payoffs from the comfort of presumably choosing right over wrong or from the perception of divine approval can also motivate religious actors in ways that material benefits cannot (McCauley, 2012). In the context of violence, religion can provide additional, specific payoffs. Commitment to a supernatural being and the belief in an afterlife can serve combatants by allowing them to overcome fear, for example

(Brubaker, 2015). Similarly, religion and the possibility of an afterlife remove the time horizons in which combatants typically evaluate their potential for action and their pay-offs (Toft, 2006). In the space of "divine time," fighters may extend their patience, tolerate greater short-term losses, and hold firm to rigid negotiating positions.[2] Finally, even where religious adherents face the risk of death in conflict, they do so with the potential benefit of martyrdom as a payoff (Berman & Laitin, 2008).

The emphasis on nonmaterial benefits in religious contexts is not to suggest the irrationality of religious actors. Berman (2009) takes a somewhat different view from Brubaker (2015) and Toft (2006), arguing that religious terrorists are motivated not by rewards in the afterlife but by serving the group that provides them with religious club goods. Even in those cases, however, Berman acknowledges that the religious group leader's ability to control defection, which is central to spurring terrorist acts by members, may be rooted in appeals to righteousness in addition to the provision of earthly goods.

All of these nonmaterial benefits have the potential to affect conflict fought in the name of religion. Fighters may resist negotiations if their long-term, nonmaterial payoffs from salvation and martyrdom outweigh what they stand to gain through negotiated settlements (Berman, 2009; Toft & Zhukov, 2015). They may engage in more violent or brutal behavior in the absence of fear, and they may extend conflicts beyond what might appear in a nonreligious context to be a politically sensible endpoint.

Transnationality

Finally, religion is unlike other social and political identities in its transnationality. According to the Pew Research Center, Christians form a majority in over 150 countries in the world.[3] Muslims make up a majority in 49 countries and are expected to surpass Christians in total numbers by the middle of the 21st century.[4] Hinduism and Buddhism also have more than 500 million global adherents each, and numerous other religions including Judaism, the Baha'i faith, Sikhism, and Taoism have sizable communities in multiple countries around the world. No other political identity can claim networks as broad as these, and the potential implications for intrastate conflict are considerable.

The transnationality of religious identity is closely related to the importance of codified behavioral guidelines. Built on the strength of sacred texts and teachings, religious identities can be a function of family lineage but can also spread as the sacred teachings spread, without geographic constraint. Chandra (2006) thus describes religion as unique in its combination of descent-based attachments (i.e., those born into a religion who remain there as a matter of family lineage) and voluntarily adopted attachments based on the acceptance of religious teachings.

In what ways might the transnationality of religious identity contribute to conflicts within states? Principally, as Grzymala-Busse (2012) explains, the breadth of religious networks can be critical to mobilizing resources for parties to conflict within states, even if the conflict itself is confined within borders. The Biafran War in Nigeria was one of the deadliest civil wars ever fought. During the conflict, flyers posted in Christian churches in the West

urged congregants to "help your brothers in Christ, help the Biafrans" (Omenka, 2010). Gribetz (2014) describes an increase in the salience of religion during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when Muslim-majority countries in the region took a more active interest. During the civil conflict in Syria, Muslim foreign fighters from around the world have gone to fight in the war motivated largely by perceived antireligious bias in public policies in their home countries (McCants & Meserole, 2016). In this last example, consistent with the role of foreign fighters supporting the PKK in Turkey (Chalk, 2008) and the IRA in Northern Ireland (Arthur, 1991), coreligionists from abroad are often willing to contribute not just financially to intrastate conflicts but also by putting their own lives at risk to swell the number of fighters supporting their religious agenda.

Each of these features distinguishes religion from other types of politically important identities. Together they necessitate the treatment of religion and politics as a distinct field of study rather than a subset under the umbrella of "ethnic politics," particularly when it comes to understanding conflict outcomes. Yet it is important to note that adherents of different religious traditions within states are still far more likely to coexist in harmony than to engage in conflict, despite codified behavioral guidelines, distinct levels of division, nonmaterial payoffs, and transnational networks. The unique features of religion must be exploited politically for conflict to follow, so it is more commonly the case that religion serves as a tool to strengthen one's position in conflict rather than as a cause of conflict itself. The following section explores key aspects of this claim.

The Exploitation of Religious Identity in Conflict

In treating religion as a fluid political identity rather than as a set of fixed institutions or a "unitary 'thing'" (Brubaker, 2015, p. 7), the underlying premise is that conflicts are made to be religious rather than somehow religious in their own right. This follows from the conceptualization of political identities as context dependent. As conflicts in the name of God unfold, it is important to evaluate two key aspects of those conflicts: the role of religious labels versus religious content and the power of leaders to appeal to religious rhetoric for strategic purposes. Doing so will help to answer the question of what makes conflicts religious.

Labels Versus Content in Religious Conflicts

As studies on religious conflict—and religious conflicts themselves—have increased in the decades from the 1970s to the 2000s, scholars have noted the important distinction in types of intrastate religious wars. On one hand, conflicts are described (and coded in the data sets we use) as religious if the members of adversary sides are of different predominant religions. Thus, the conflict in Northern Ireland that mobilized adversaries along Protestant and Catholic lines is treated as religious, though the issues at stake were nationalist and territorial (Svensson & Nilsson, 2017). In the Central African Republic's civil war that began in 2012, tensions between agriculturalists and pastoralists and a power

struggle between competing elites happened to overlap with differences in predominant religions, so the war became a Christian-Muslim one (Arieff, 2014). Both cases represent examples of conflicts treated as religious based on the identity labels assigned to the adversaries and irrespective of the issues at stake.

On the other hand, conflicts may be described as religious if the content over which adversaries fight is itself religious in nature. Efforts to impose Islamic sharia law for criminal matters in northern Nigeria in the late 1990s spurred conflict between Muslims and Christians that is coded as religious by virtue of its content. Demands from ultraorthodox Jews in Israel regarding gender segregation and road closings—fundamentally linked to their interpretation of religious teachings—have led to unrest between the ultraorthodox and secular communities.[5] Of course, these content-based conflicts also tend to be fought between adversaries with different religious labels.

Numerous scholars have underscored the difference between labels and content and have thus influenced the analysis of religion as an identity in intrastate conflict. Toft (2007) focuses on whether religion is peripheral or central to conflicts. Svensson (2007) highlights the difference between religious identity and religious incompatibility. Pearce (2005) describes identity-oriented conflicts as opposed to issue-oriented ones. Fox (2004) distinguishes conflicts in which religion is a descriptor from those in which it serves as a salient factor. To Brubaker (2015), the stakes of the former are boundary-defining while the stakes of the latter are normative ordering. Basedau et al. (2016) describe the difference as one between interreligious conflict and theological conflict. Whereas a number of studies examine only the importance of different religious identity labels in conflict (De Soysa & Nordäs, 2007; Ellingsen, 2005; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Sambanis, 2001), those that address the distinction between labels and content highlight a nuance of religious conflicts that can be overlooked when religious labels are applied to civil and communal conflicts only by dint of predominant membership.

In general, conflicts defined by religious labels come about for three reasons. First, the salience of religion may shift domestically for either local or international reasons (e.g., the effect elsewhere of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the United States), thus coloring unrelated intrastate conflicts with religious difference. Second, the application of religious meaning to conflict may in some cases emerge from research and scholarship that examines otherwise unrelated disputes through a lens of religious differences on the two sides. Third, political entrepreneurs may use language that transforms nonreligious disputes into religious wars as their followers embrace the significance of religious difference. In the Ivoirian civil conflict, Roger (2010) notes that the two sides "found their battle horse in religion," and the former President Laurent Gbagbo famously referred to the northern, ostensibly Muslim-majority rebel movement as the "Ivoirian Taliban" in a conflict over immigrant access to land and opportunities devoid of religious stakes (Soudan, 2003). Indeed, Bormann, Cederman, and Vogt (2017) stress that the grievances underpinning conflict are not necessarily religious just because the religious identities of the adversaries differ.

Conflicts defined by religious content can also emerge for multiple reasons. First, the salience of religious differences may again change, but in this case with respect to theological differences between groups. This could occur, for example, if cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad are depicted in a way that brings forth matters of respect for religious sanctity. Second, public interpretations or applications of religious teachings may change to a degree that at least one side finds reason to fight for the change or for a return to the status quo.

Note, however, that even in the case of these conflicts over religious content, from the perspective of political scientists the matter is still one of political choice. Where sharia law was applied in Nigeria, for example, it is appropriate to label the conflict as one in which religious content was at stake, yet one should still recognize that political leaders such as Ahmad Sani Yerima chose to drive a religious wedge between opposing sides—which is exactly what should be anticipated in applying sharia law in a mixed-religious, contentious environment—rather than some other political wedge.[6] Certainly, political entrepreneurs can and often do have deeply held religious convictions consistent with their political choices. If we accept that they are political actors first and foremost, however, we must acknowledge that they understand the potential political consequences of choosing religion, and that they act accordingly.

Quantitative studies suggest a number of important patterns and differences between conflicts with religious labels and conflicts over religious content. Over time, the share of religious conflicts—generally defined—rose from approximately 20% of all conflicts in the 1970s to between one-half and two-thirds of all conflicts in the early part of the 21st century (see Fox, 2012; Svensson & Nilsson, 2017). That trend can be explained by a number of factors, including democratization that has given voice to competing religious institutions, globalization that has allowed religious identities and grievances to spread widely, and a general pattern of secularization that has created backlash from strong religionists (see Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2009). According to Fox (2012), however, most religious conflicts are not fought over religious content but instead occur between groups who happen to have different religious labels—so they are certainly not caused by religion and religious differences may not even be relevant to those involved in violence. Only about one-third of religious conflicts have religious content at stake, and even then it is important to remember that political entrepreneurs often choose the issues at stake. Svensson and Nilsson (2017) suggest that content-based religious conflicts are becoming relatively more common, though this may suggest that political entrepreneurs like Ahmad Sani Yerima are simply improving their tactics.

Scholars do note differences in outcomes as a function of the place that religion occupies in a conflict. Those fought over religious content tend to last longer (Tusicisny, 2004) and to result in more casualties (Pearce, 2005) than those fought between groups who simply have different religious labels. This suggests that actual religious grievances—as perceived by those who take up arms—better activate some of the unique features of religion such as the nonmaterial payoffs of divine time and martyrdom. Content-based religious conflicts also tend to be more difficult to resolve through negotiated settlement (Svens-

son, 2007) and to result in more rapid breakdowns in peace when they are settled (Gurses & Rost, 2017), confirming the notion that adherents see their normative religious guidelines as indivisible and nonnegotiable.

The Power of Leaders to Exploit Religion in Conflict

Political entrepreneurs—in the broadest sense, including elected officials and opposition elites as well as religious leaders with their own sociopolitical objectives—seek to gain and maintain power for themselves or their groups.[7] In the context of contentious politics and potential violence, the principal objective of political entrepreneurs is to mobilize supporters to engage in collective action in the name of the leader's proximate strategic interests (see McCauley, 2017). Constituencies, for their part, pursue their own interests but within the identity framework that their leaders have constructed (Jones, 2001; Simon, 1985). Those interests may be in the protection of ethnic homelands, for example, if the identity frame is an ethnolinguistic one, or, if leaders have created a religious frame for contention, in sacred normative guidelines and the nonmaterial payoffs that come through belief in the divine (McCauley, 2017).

It should be clear, then, that the unique features of religious identity make religion especially susceptible to exploitation by political entrepreneurs in the course of conflict. Normative religious guidelines—such as the instruction to pick up the sword versus the alternative to turn the other cheek found in the Christian Bible, or the perceived Qur'anic call for violence against nonbelievers weighed against the advice that there can be no compulsion in religion—are subject to widely divergent interpretations, but, once interpreted, represent to followers a set of indivisible, nonnegotiable positions.[8] More extreme or violent interpretations may enjoy greater perceived purity than moderate or secular ones, and the nonmaterial payoffs that accrue in religious contexts represent a unique resource for entrepreneurs to leverage in recruiting support even transnationally for a conflict within borders.

Scholars of religion and politics widely recognize the central role that leadership plays in making conflicts religious. Seul (1999) suggests that religious leadership is especially important in shaping how individuals engage in communal conflict. Basedau, Pierskalla, Strüver, and Vüllers (2016) argue that when religious differences overlap with other identity divisions, particularly economic ones, political entrepreneurs can use religion to exploit the (unrelated) grievances of their supporters and thus escalate conflict where doing so pays political dividends; this despite the fact that the link between normative religious guidelines and violence is, across traditions, a tenuous and unclear one (Appleby, 2000). The key, however, is that leaders who stand to benefit from intrastate conflict justify hostility as a theological imperative (Basedau et al., 2016). In fact, Basedau et al. (2016) find that, when religious leaders justify calls for violence in this manner, conflict increases fourfold. Similarly, Toft (2007) argues that religious leaders are particularly well positioned to capitalize on popular grievances. Canetti, Hobfoll, Pedahzur, and Zaidise (2010) suggest that the only systematic factor linking political and economic grievances to violence is the presence of religious actors who inflame tensions. Fox, James, and Li (2009)

argue that violence worsens when government leaders explicitly engage in religious discrimination as opposed to other types of discrimination. Neuberg et al. (2014) find that "religious infusion"—the introduction of religion into a group's private and public life—predicts the likelihood of intergroup prejudice and incompatibility, which can further fuel conflicts. McCauley (2014) argues that, whereas individuals have strong preferences and priorities in religious contexts, political leaders determine whether the frame of conflict is religious or something else, based on their own strategic interests.

The outbidding argument, particularly common in religious contexts due to the subjectivity of interpreting sacred texts, implicitly suggests that leadership makes conflicts religious. Isaacs (2017) argues, for example, that political entrepreneurs tend to make public expressions of religion when their groups are aggrieved for other, unrelated but overlapping reasons, thereby turning conflicts religious. Separately, Isaacs (2016) notes that religious rhetoric is particularly useful in the course of conflict as a tool for solving the logistical challenges of mobilizing resources, recruiting members, and maintaining a fighting force. When those incentives are coupled with the psychological and nonmaterial payoffs that accrue to religious group adherents, it should be of little wonder that most intrastate conflicts become fights in the name of God. However, they do not typically start that way. Isaacs (2016) stresses that leaders and organizations employ religious rhetoric only 7.5% of the time in the absence of recent violence but nearly three times that often if the group has participated in recent violence. Nordas (2014) agrees that the relationship between religion and conflict is mediated by the rhetoric of conflict actors who see advantages in compelling violence in the name of the divine.

Thinking about the distinction between religious labels and content and the power of political entrepreneurs to exploit religious differences helps to bring understanding to the Sudanese civil conflict mentioned in this article's introduction. Renewed conflict began largely as a function of internal political tensions in the north of Sudan. President Jaafar Numeiri faced growing opposition from groups in the north who sought to outbid him for support from the predominant Muslim community (Collins, 2008), so in September of 1983 he imposed sharia law throughout Sudan to consolidate his hold on northern support (Deng, 1993). He began performing Friday prayers in public, forbade the consumption of alcohol by government officials, and publicly called for more devout dress and behavior (Collins, 2008). Southern Sudanese took the swift change to a religious frame and the imposition of religious laws as an affront to their desired independence, perceiving that the war had become one based on "religious bigotry." As Basedau et al. (2016) note, when religious identity is exploited by one side in a conflict, the other side almost invariably responds in kind, in this case with appeals for secularism and support from both the Christian West and Israel (Collins, 2008).

Numeiri had been a secularist but adopted many of the religious prescriptions he imposed publicly (Fearon & Laitin, 2000), and his successor in the conflict, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, was by all accounts devout. The religious frame was thus not inconsistent with leadership's personal beliefs. Competition for power, however, rather than religion per se, offers the best explanation for why religion was introduced as a wedge between the

North and South. Furthermore, sharia law was clearly a key issue at stake in the second civil war, leading scholars to treat this conflict as one based on religious content rather than on labels. And yet, religious differences between the North and South had persisted for hundreds of years without generating or contributing to conflict. Only when it paid politically for northern leaders to exploit the religious passions of their constituency did the tensions between North and South become religious in nature.

Conclusion

That religion does not cause intrastate conflict, or even make states particularly prone to internal conflict, constitutes, at this point, a fairly widely understood convention among scholars of religion and politics. Appleby (2000) notes the ambivalent relationship between religion, violence, and peace. Brubaker (2015) stresses that no intrinsic link exists between religion and conflict. Bormann et al. (2017), Fox (2004), Neuberg et al. (2014), Russett, Oneal, and Cox (2000), and numerous others have failed to find a direct effect of religion on conflict between groups. So why such rich interest in the topic, and why the sense that the 21st century represents "God's century," particularly when it comes to explaining political violence?[9]

This article has argued that religion, far from being just another option under the umbrella of "ethnic politics," represents a personal and political identity with attributes that are unique among identity types. Religious identity is rooted in sacred texts and guidelines that prescribe nonnegotiable behavioral norms to religious group members. Religion as an identity type also includes multiple levels of division that do not exist within other identity types—including interfaith differences, differences between sects within religious traditions, and divisions between secularists and strong religionists. Third, religious group membership confers nonmaterial benefits, such as perceived access to salvation, that can motivate behavior in tangible, this-worldly ways. Finally, religious networks link adherents transnationally. These features do not make civil or communal conflict more likely to occur, but where conflicts do occur they offer unique opportunities for political exploitation of identity differences. In some cases, religious labels are applied to conflicts rooted in nonreligious causes. In other cases, religious content is presented as the key source of grievance. In almost all situations, however, political entrepreneurs occupy a central role in framing the conflict as one fought in the name of the divine. As institutional space has opened to religious groups in most parts of the world, the tendency to wield religious differences as a tool to gain advantage in conflict has increased commensurately.

Treating religion as an identity that is subject to exploitation by political entrepreneurs is not the only way to evaluate the place of religion in intrastate conflict. Scholars have also considered the structure of religious populations as an explanatory factor in intrastate conflict. Religious fractionalization (Fearon & Laitin, 2003), polarization (Reynal-Querol, 2002), and dominance (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005) all garner attention in studies exploring the mechanisms through which religion may affect the likelihood of conflict.

The results remain decidedly mixed, however, with little systematic evidence of a direct correlation between population-based religious factors and conflict outcomes. Overlap between religion differences and other cleavages, especially economic or resource-related ones, constitutes an additional explanation for intrastate conflict (Selway, 2011; Stewart, 2008). Birnir, Satana, and Sawyer (2017) argue that when ethnic minority groups are sufficiently large, they can mobilize coreligionists across ethnicity, thus increasing the odds of conflict. These arguments imply that the root causes are not religion per se but other divisive matters to which religion is then applied.

Other arguments seeking to explain the relationship between religion and intrastate conflict may emphasize differences in political theology (Philpott, 2007) or, relatedly, the religious preferences of individuals that culminate in grassroots grievances and pressure (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). Those sentiments are undoubtedly strong for many religious adherents, but the next step—to organization, collective action, and the use of widespread violence—requires more than strongly held beliefs, even if shared. Political entrepreneurs who stand to gain from political division and violence represent, in many cases, the catalysts who turn political tension into religious war.

Just as religion can unite, it has great power to divide, and the consequences can be severe. Religious conflict tends to be bloodier, to last longer, to be harder to solve, and to be on the rise. In evaluating religion as an identity, however, evidence suggests that the salience of religion can wax and wane, and that religious divisions may serve important, nonreligious agendas. To understand intrastate religious conflict, then, we must ask, What makes conflict religious? Frequently, the answer is found not in the roots of contestation but in the opportunities that the unique features of religious identity provide to those who benefit from violence.

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Notes:

(1.) This claim is notwithstanding evidence from places like the United States, where religious choices are frequently subject to negotiation and adherents often selectively choose the elements of religions that they like. See Putnam and Campbell (2010) among others.

(2.) Note that the extended time horizons of "divine time" serve combatants' interests in potential martyrdom through violence; they do not have the same effects on religious adherents' views of policy outcomes. Christian end-times theology, for example, can undermine support for policies with long-term rather than short-term benefits (Barker & Bearce, 2012).

(3.) Global Christianity: A report on the size and distribution of the world's Christian population. Pewforum.org. December 19, 2011.

(4.) "World's Muslims population more widespread than you might think". PewResearch.org. January 31, 2017.

(5.) See "Four arrested in Arad clashes between ultra-Orthodox, secular residents." *Times of Israel*, September 10, 2017.

(6.) Ahmad Sani Yerima served as governor of then-Zamfara State in Northern Nigeria and began the push to institute sharia law for criminal offenses (see Kalu, 2003).

(7.) Gill's (1998) important work explains the conditions under which religious leadership may be opposed to political dictators or supportive of those political leaders. This article does not evaluate that relationship but instead considers all leaders with the capacity to mobilize followers, including religious ones, as political entrepreneurs.

(8.) See Matthew 10:34 versus Luke 6:27 in the Bible, and verse 90:18 compared to verse 2:256 in the Qur'an.

(9.) See Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2009) for use of the term "God's century."

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