

Competing Political Science Perspectives on the Role of Religion in Conflict

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Abstract

Over the last few decades, real-world developments have led political scientists to begin to conceptualize the relationship between religion and conflict. The aim of this article is to provide a brief overview of three political science perspectives on this question: primordialism, instrumentalism, and constructivism. Understanding these perspectives is important, because the way they conceptualize the role of religion in conflict has a direct impact on any policy recommendations that are derived from them. From a conflict transformation perspective, constructivism provides the most flexible conceptual toolkit, as it does not suggest specific solutions to conflict, while primordialism and instrumentalism do. As an alternative to specific solutions, constructivism calls for a better understanding of the cognitive religious frameworks at work in a specific conflict as the first step to minimizing violence between social groups.

Introduction: Religion and Political Science

With the advent of modernity and the decline of “traditional society” in some parts of the world, many scholars in political science thought that religion would cease to play a role in society and politics. This view was best captured by modernization theory, which argued that urbanization, economic development, modern social institutions, growing rates of literacy and education, pluralism, and advancements in science and technology would inevitably lead to the demise of religion and to the rise of secular, rational, and scientific phenomena (Fox 2004).

Despite the quasi-religious fervor with which political scientists defended these assumptions, developments on the ground have recently led to a renewed focus on religion in political science. The first wake-up calls came in the 1970s and 1980s with the Iranian Revolution and the rise of the religious

right in US politics. Since then, numerous political events have seriously challenged political science theories of religion’s demise.

As if awakening from a long, secular slumber, political science at the beginning of the 21st century has thus started to grapple with the question of religion in politics, and especially the link between religion and (violent) conflict. The apparent religion-conflict nexus has also caught the attention of Western media and publics. Fears of looming “clashes of civilizations” and “modern crusades” are now common in discourse about the 11 September 2001 attacks, the “Global War on Terror”, tensions over immigration in Europe, and popular understandings of conflicts such as those in the “Holy Land”, Chechnya, or Kashmir.

The focus of this article, therefore is, not answer the question: “What role does religion play in conflict?” Rather, its aim is to present an overview of competing political science perspectives on this question. It also seeks to highlight possible implications of the various concepts on how to deal with conflict. One of the key findings is that the way we conceptualize the role of religion in conflict has a direct impact on the suggestions made regarding how to deal with conflicts. As these concepts exist and as they have real-world impacts, the question is not so much whether we agree or disagree with them. As long as they are being used, we need to understand their logic and be aware of their potential impact, whether in academia, in the media, or in the policy or conflict resolution field.

Three Theoretical Perspectives

The three political science perspectives on religion and conflict we focus on here are *primordialism*, *instrumentalism*, and *social constructivism*. These theoretical lenses represent competing ways of understanding the relationship between religion and conflict: They advance different assessments on the inevitability of “religious” conflicts and, more

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importantly, on the prospects of dealing with such conflicts.

Primordialism: Ancient Hatreds and Clashing Worlds

The key tenet of primordialism is that differences in religious traditions are among the most important *causes* of conflict. According to this view, there is an inherent or *primordial* animosity between religions that renders conflict quasi-inevitable. No scholar has done more to propagate this view than Samuel Huntington with his “Clash of Civilizations” thesis (1993, 1996). Though it uses the term “civilization”, Huntington’s work has been widely interpreted as predicting conflict between groups belonging to different religious traditions in the post-Cold War era. As Huntington explains, “civilizations” are differentiated by “history, language, culture, tradition and, *most important, religion*” (Huntington 1996, italics added). As a result, people of distinct civilizations “have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, [...] liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy” (Huntington 1993: 24). “Over the centuries, [these] differences among civilizations have generated the most prolonged and the most violent conflicts” (ibid).

According to the primordialist view, religious differences lead to conflict due to the central role that religion plays in constituting both individual and group identity.² As Jeffrey Seul explains, “no other repository of cultural meaning has historically offered so much in response to the human need to develop a secure identity and sense of locatedness” as religion (Seul 1999: 564). Religions help provide the predictability and continuity that individuals need in order to maintain a sense of psychological stability. They do so by providing adherents with a worldview that assures

their place in a meaningful and orderly universe. Moreover, religious communities and meaning systems are often the source of the belonging and affirmation that most individuals seek. For these reasons, religion is often at the core of individual and group identity. While arguments on how religion shapes identity may also be propagated by non-primordialist scholars, primordialists are distinguished by their assumption that actors have one main identity and that the way religions shape that identity is fixed over time.

Given the importance of religious frameworks in the psyche of adherents, when such frameworks are challenged, adherents will also feel challenged at the most basic level (Fox 2004). Such challenges can thus provoke defensive and sometimes violent reactions. The tragedy, according to primordialism, is that religious frameworks are felt to be threatened by the mere presence of a different religious community. Because groups – religious or other – usually define themselves in opposition to a significant “Other”, when an out-group asserts its identity it poses a direct – even if unintentional – threat to the identity of the in-group. Such dynamics are particularly problematic in the case of religiously-defined groups, since religions often inspire believers to abide by customs and behavioral rules that increase the visibility of inter-group difference (Fox 2004).

What are the policy implications of primordialism? The primordial paradigm is popular largely due to its simplicity in explaining complex phenomena. It has had a tremendous impact outside academia. International media, especially in their covering of conflicts in the Balkans and the Middle East, have often resorted to primordialist arguments, framing differences in religious adherence between groups as the key explanation for violence. For example, the bloody conflicts that ripped Yugoslavia apart are explained as resulting from long-suppressed “ancient hatreds” between ethno-religious groups that resurfaced after the fall of Communism (Kaplan 1994).³ Similar discourses have dominated certain foreign policy circles. Clash-of-civilization

2 The term “identity” raises a host of philosophical questions that are beyond the scope of this article. We here refer to the notion of “personal identity” – the sense of self or subjectivity and its persistence. Treatment of identity varies across the three theoretical perspectives presented in this article. Primordialism sees identities, as well as the culture/religion in which they are embedded, as having an inherent and fixed essence. Constructivism, on the other hand, adopts a post-modernist conceptualization of identity, seeing it as a process or a discourse. Identity is thus a shifting process and a temporary construct (see for example Hall 1994)

3 Note that the primordialist or Huntingtonian accounts are particularly popular for explanations of ethnic conflicts where warring groups are differentiated by, among other things, religion. See the contribution by Jean-Nicolas Bitter in this section of the issue for the problem of treating ethnic and religious conflict as conceptually equal.

undertones could be read in rationalizations of the “War on Terror” and explanations for the 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States.⁴ In Europe, the political right has resorted to primordialist arguments to explain tensions and assert the ultimate incompatibility between “local” populations and “immigrants”, especially if these immigrants happen to be Muslims.⁵ When it comes to recommendations on how to deal with potential conflicts, the primordialist perspective therefore simply consists of propagating a separation of different cultural and religious groups.

Despite its popularity, primordialism suffers from severe empirical and theoretical shortcomings. From a theoretical perspective, scholars such as Amartya Sen (2006) and Edward Said (1981) have criticized primordialism for its essentialism. Religions (or “civilizations”, in Huntington’s idiom) are not monolithic, immutable, or isolated entities. Plurality, change, and osmosis are terms that better capture the inherent dynamics of civilizations. From an empirical perspective, primordialism’s predictions have not materialized. Many – if not most – wars today are fought in religiously homogenous areas (Hansenclever/Rittberger: 646). Moreover, instances of religiously plural yet peaceful societies also cast doubt on primordialism’s validity. The deterministic nature of primordialism has also been criticized. It has limitations in grasping the complexity of human behavior and tends to lead to self-fulfilling prophecies (Sen 2006).

4 General William Boykin, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence under George W. Bush, has been quoted as saying that the war on terror was a fight against Satan, and of telling a Somali warlord that “My God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol.” <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/nov/02/usa.religion>

5 “As long as there is repeated violence and serious sexual coercion, even rape of school girls, where the majority of the perpetrators are foreigners, mostly from Muslim countries, then nobody, neither politician nor judge, can prevent citizens from being extremely reticent when it comes to the nationalization of foreigners.” Translation of: “Wenn es – auch in der Umgebung von Schweizer Schulen – wiederholt zu Gewalttaten, zu schwerer sexueller Nötigung, ja sogar zu Vergewaltigungen von Schülerinnen kommt, wobei die weit überwiegende Zahl der Täter Ausländer zumeist aus muslimischen Ländern sind, dann kann niemand – weder Politiker noch Richter – den Stimmbürgern verbieten, bezüglich der Einbürgerung von Ausländern äusserste Zurückhaltung zu üben. *Islam-Argumentarium – Grundbegriffe Fassung: 01 (Egerkinger Komitee) Datum: 04.05.2007.*”

Instrumentalism: The Utility of the Sacred (or the “Opium of the Warriors”)

Instrumentalism rejects the view that differences in religion are real causes of political conflict. Conflict, like all politics, has always been and will always be about “who gets what, when, and how”. From this realist perspective, the causes of conflict are *material*. If the world is witnessing a rise in violent religious movements, we should not attribute this to any dogmatic dispute but, rather, to growing economic, social, and political inequalities in and between nations (Hansenclever/Rittberger 2000: 645).

Instrumentalists nevertheless recognize that religion can play a part in violent conflict. They see this role as the “opium of the warriors” – a tool used by self-interested elites to mobilize support and fighting power for conflict. The distinction between the elite and the mass is central to the instrumentalist account. In this agent-based approach, it is power-seeking elites pursuing economic and/or political ambitions who *instrumentalize* religion and manipulate the masses in order to improve their strategic advantage.

To explain why elites would exploit religion at times of conflict, instrumentalists draw on several primordialist arguments. Firstly, collective organization and mobilization for conflict generally require some unifying mission or identity that is sufficiently powerful to motivate masses of people to kill and be killed on a large scale (Stewart 2009). As discussed above, religion can provide both. The security of one’s religious framework has been identified as a common good in whose defense individuals are willing to take up arms.

Secondly, when conflicts are framed as being about religious values – not interests – it is more likely that combatants will regard the use of violence as morally justified. Religion can be used to dehumanize the enemy, exalt the virtues of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, and lead combatants to believe they are fighting for a transcendental cause (Rapoport 1984). Michael Sell’s (1998) account of how Serbian nationalist propaganda during the Bosnian war portrayed Muslim Slavs as “Christ-killers” is an illustrative example.

Thirdly, the likelihood of violent campaigns succeeding also depends on the level of support

from broader sectors of society, which in turn depends on the public justification for the use of violence (Hasenclever/Rittberger 2000: 651). Here again, religion becomes an ideal instrument. As Fox (1999) explains, one of the principal social functions of religion is its ability to legitimize actions and institutions through its moral authority. Thus, movements that invoke religion are able to align themselves with what is considered moral in society, even if their goals have little or nothing to do with religion. Robert Pape's (2003) discussion of the "art of martyrdom" exemplifies this legitimating function. According to Pape, suicide terrorism is a high-value strategy against democracies. However, it can also provoke alienation and moral repugnance from host societies. In order to avoid a backlash, organizations using suicide bombings often justify their actions on the basis of religious motives that match the beliefs of the broader community. Such framing can also help them acquire valuable allies in the form of religious institutions and networks, both local and transnational.

What are the policy implications of instrumentalism? In order to prevent or end conflict, instrumentalism focuses on addressing the socio-economic and political interests of parties. The essence of the conflict, as well as the means of its resolution, is seen as centering on the distribution of material resources and political power. Religious frameworks do not enter into the equation, except if the argument is made to secularize the masses in order to make them immune to elite manipulations.

Although less simplistic and deterministic than primordialism, instrumentalism too faces theoretical challenges. It is difficult to reconcile instrumentalism's focus on material factors with its recognition that religious discourses are often necessary to mobilize the masses. Instrumentalism's arguments for why the sacred is a potent weapon are largely based on primordialist assumptions on the flammability of religious identity and doctrine. There is therefore an inherent lack of consistency in the instrumentalist account, especially when it comes to understanding the masses. Meanwhile, elites and their motivations remain too narrowly conceptualized in this overly rationalist approach.

Constructivism: Religion as Worldview

Constructivism, finally, takes up some insights from both primordialism and instrumentalism, but does so from a very different angle.

Constructivism encompasses a wide range of theories and approaches.⁶ It is thus inaccurate to speak of a single "constructivist understanding" of the role of religion in conflict. Here, we focus on constructivism as it is frequently used in political science, emphasizing the social construction of reality.⁷ Within this understanding, we focus on constructivism's account of the crucial role that *ideational or cognitive structures* play in shaping social actors' identities and, consequently, realities.

"Cognitive structures" can be understood as "shared understandings, expectations, and social knowledge" (Wendt 1994: 389). They interact with material structures to make up the social world. Examples of ideational structures include ideology, nationalism, ethnicity, and religion.

According to constructivists, cognitive structures play a *constitutive* role in defining social actors' identities. To "constitute" means that certain properties of actors are made possible by, and would not exist in the absence of, the structure by which they are constituted (Wendt 1995: 72). In other words, ideational structures ascribe *meaning* to actors' identities, infusing them with a sense of who they are, what social roles they are expected to play, and how they should relate to other actors around them.

Given this conceptualization of identity, the link between cognitive structures such as religion on the one hand, and political phenomena such as violent conflict on the other, becomes clear. Actors' identities (products of the ideational structures in which they are embedded) will shape their perception of the material world, define their interests, and determine their behavior towards other actors.

Of course, social actors are rarely, if ever, defined by a single identity. We are enmeshed in a complex web of cognitive structures, which endow

6 According to Emanuel Adler (2002: 95), there are many theoretical branches within constructivism, including modernist, modernist linguistic, critical, and the radical postmodernist wing.

7 See the contribution by Jean-Nicolas Bitter in this section of the issue for a cultural-linguistic (post-constructivist) approach to conflict and religion.

our identity with multidimensionality. Nevertheless, religion often does play an important role in constituting individual and group identity for reasons discussed under primordialism. As a consequence, religion can often act as an independent motivating force in politics by functioning as the lens through which actors understand the world and their role therein. In this context, Fox (2009) points out that religious worldviews can at times lead to extreme and intractable policy decisions and strategies (e.g., the role of George W. Bush and Tony Blair's messianic worldviews in their 2003 decision to go to war in Iraq). As a result, behavior in conflict can in great part be read in terms of *role-plays or scripts* provided by religious worldviews. This will be particularly true for actors who emphasize religious frameworks in their self-identity. Fundamentalist movements would be one such example.⁸

Religious cognitive structures can also impact the conflict behavior of non-religious actors. Indeed, political actors who do not hold religious worldviews might nevertheless be constrained by widely held religious beliefs among their respective communities (Fox 2009). For example, it might be unwise for actors to undertake actions that run directly counter to some belief, moral ethos, or value that is widely held by their communities. A case in point is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which even non-religious leaders on both sides need to weigh how their people will react to any negotiated agreement concerning holy sites like the city of Jerusalem. From this perspective, actors – even if secular – are *constrained* by the religious frameworks in which they operate.

It is important to clarify that constructivism does not deny that power and material interests play a role in explaining conflict. Nevertheless, material structures such as the distribution of wealth only acquire meaning for human action through the structures of shared knowledge in which they are embedded (Wendt 1995: 73). In this sense, constructivism rejects instrumentalism's rationalist assumption that actors' interests are exogenous-

ly given; it is cognitive structures such as religion that define them.

Constructivism also recognizes that self-interested elites can, at times, seek to exploit religious cognitive structures in order to legitimize violent campaigns. However, in contrast to instrumentalists, constructivists see a limit to how far religious traditions can be manipulated (Hasenclever/Rittberger 2000). Constructivists remind us that religions are intersubjective structures. Consequently, they take on a life of their own; they are not as malleable to the interests of elites as instrumentalists pretend them to be (ibid.). Moreover, constructivism maintains that religious frameworks contain symbolic resources that can be used to promote both conflict and peace. As complex and multilayered matrices of meaning, religions can at times be interpreted as legitimating - even sublimating - violence and at times be interpreted as encouraging unity and reconciliation. For this reason, constructivism disagrees with primordialist and instrumentalist views that religious doctrine inevitably contributes to stoking violence. Because of the inherent ambiguity in religious doctrine, conflict-prone elites will have to emphasize discourses that interpret religion in a way that legitimates violence and convince their constituencies of the validity of their interpretations. These interpretations, however, will always be vulnerable to counter-interpretations contesting the purported righteousness of conflict. From a constructivist perspective then, the ultimate role of religion in conflict depends not on a "clash of civilizations", but, rather, on a "clash of interpretations" (Hasenclever/Rittberger 2000).

To summarize the constructivist perspective: Religious worldviews can profoundly shape actors' identities, which in turn shape conflict behavior. Constructivism, however, does not maintain that religious worldviews inherently push adherents towards violent conflict. Religious frameworks can equally inspire non-violent behavior. Whether conflict is escalated or de-escalated by religious structures ultimately depends on which interpretation of religion prevails in a given situation and, consequently, on the identity adherents derive therefrom. Unlike primordialism, instrumentalism does not treat identities as fixed; these can be transformed depending on the intersubjective interpretation of religious doctrine. Conflict,

⁸ Appleby (2000) defines fundamentalism as a religious response to the marginalization of religion in modern, secular society. The aim of fundamentalist movements, therefore, is to enhance or restore religious hegemony in their society.

therefore, can be prevented and resolved through interpretations and reinterpretations of religious frameworks that challenge the legitimacy of violence.

Conclusions

This overview of three political science approaches to the role of religion in conflict highlights that the theoretical lens we use shapes our understanding of the causes, nature, and potential solutions to conflict. In the case of primordialism, the policy implication is to separate religious groups. Regarding instrumentalism, the policy implication is to deal with the "true" material causes of conflict, or to educate the masses so that they can no longer be manipulated by the elites. Constructivism, finally, is less simple than the other perspectives, but is also more useful from a conflict resolution perspective, as it conceptualizes how religion can lead both to violence and peace. From a conflict transformation perspective, constructivism can be used better to understand and penetrate the cognitive religious frameworks involved in specific conflicts, as a first step to exploring how different religious frameworks can co-exist in a flexible manner. How constructivism can be useful in this endeavor is elaborated in more depth in the following article.

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