# Reflections on Quantitative Analysis in Religion and International Relations

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During a recent talk I gave to the Rome Summer Seminars on Religion and Global Politics—an excellent workshop for graduate students run out of Notre Dame in Rome—I opened by asking students what event or personal experience got them interested in studying this topic. For me it was the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) 2002 victory in Turkey. While I tell my students my interest in terrorism and the Middle East came from the 9/11 attacks—my second week of college—my eventual focus on the religious nature of contemporary terrorism came from this election. Early debate had to do with whether this was an Islamist rejection of Turkish secularism, or even the victory of al-Qaeda's struggle. As I studied the AKP—and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan—I realized it was more complex than that. The AKP was far from Islamist, and Turkey had religious parties contest elections before this. My inquiries inspired me to pursue a PhD and study religion and international relations. Specifically, I was interested in how changing religious beliefs and activism influenced international security.

This, however, was just an idea. When I began my graduate studies, I realized I needed to turn it into a dissertation. And a major part of that involved working out a research design: how to translate the initial interest into a real academic study. As I will discuss in this piece, I settled on a quantitative approach. This worked out for me; I published books and articles and got a tenure-track job. But I also realized the limits of quantitative analysis in studying this topic. The realization of these limits actually helped me, though, as they inspired new directions in my work.

So if I had PhD students (which I do not), I would suggest they follow my route: begin with quantitative analysis, and push it as far as it will go. This piece is addressed primarily to junior scholars, but even more established scholars may benefit from thinking through how to broaden their research designs. And while it discusses religion and international relations, many of the methodological takeaways are general.

**The methodological debate in the study of religion and international relations**

Junior scholars reading this may have already encountered this debate, but just in case they have not—and to make sure all readers are on the same page—I wanted to provide a short overview of what I mean by quantitative analysis.

Quantitative analysis comes from the broader neo-positivist approach to social science, defined by Patrick Jackson as assuming a "separation" between the researcher and

the world and the desirability of basing conclusions on an examination of past occurrences." Scholars should, according to this approach, turn the specifics of the cases they're studying into variables: an independent variable that causes an outcome, and a dependent variable that measures the outcome. We should aspire to model the relationship between these variables.

This can be done with both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods rely on deep understanding of one or a few cases through approaches such as archival research or interviews. Quantitative methods involve turning the concepts—the basis for the variables—into numeric form. This could be measures of religiosity, measures of

regime type, or measures of political instability, among many others. Scholars would then conduct analysis looking at the average effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable, as well as the certainty of this effect.

The most common way to do this is regression analysis, modeling the independent variable (X), the dependent variable (Y), and control variables that may also explain the effect. But there are also newer approaches being used. There's network analysis, where the focus is on how actors connect with each other, how networks form. There's textual analysis—in which a scholar "teaches" a computer how to read a lot of text and summarize topics and understand the sentiment in the texts. Finally, there are survey experiments, in which scholars randomly assign different scenarios to people to see how they react and measure the effect.

The debate over whether quantitative analysis is appropriate thus extends beyond the study of religion and international relations to social science in general. It deals with questions such as what is the standard for determining if a finding is valid, and what should students be taught? Some will argue for the precision of quantitative analysis, others the depth of qualitative analysis. Others say the attempt of both to impose causal claims is inappropriate, and instead focus on interpretive methods, what Jackson calls reflexive approaches. Reflexive approaches are a sharp contrast to neopositivist ones, rejecting neopositivism's focus on repeated patterns in data and instead arguing researchers can "grasp the deeper processes and factors" that produce phenomena (Jackson 2011, 35–7).

But this debate intersects with a specific one on how best to study religion. There is essentialism, typified by scholars such as Ernest Gellner or Bernard Lewis. This focuses on enduring elements of religions, often based on religious texts, to explain political behavior. There is constructivism, advanced by figures like Peter Berger, which explores how religious values change through social interactions. And there is the economic approach, pioneered by people like Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, which treats religions as a marketplace where people compete to maximize their value.

There are also different attitudes towards these debates.

One is what I call imperialist: the preferred approach is correct, and all others are bad. Many see this as an issue mainly with quantitative analysis, but it is present in interpretive approaches as well, some of which argue quantitative analysis is inherently flawed.

There is also a division of labor perspective, which sees each approach as being good at something. Quantitative analysis can find general patterns, qualitative analysis produces narrow but deep findings, and interpretive analysis uncovers what values are and where they come from.

Finally, there is a Cold War approach. A scholar picks their preferred side and generally tolerates the others, although tensions occasionally break out into fights.

So as junior scholars advance in their careers, they have to decide which methodological approach they prefer and how they will engage with different approaches. This will determine professional networks, job prospects, and their ability to engage across methodological lines.

**My research design journey**

As I had said, I believe the quantitative approach is useful as a starting point for studies on religion and international relations. A useful way to demonstrate this would be to walk through the progression of my own academic career.

In graduate school I studied under José Casanova, a leading scholar on public religions and the rise of a post-secular world. I read scholars like Olivier Roy and Armando Salvatore, who have explored the changing nature of Islam in the modern world. As a result, I became a fan of the constructivist approach to religion; I believed religious values and practices mattered but found essentialism too simplistic.

My early papers for classes basically used these rich ideas and applied them to the security questions I mentioned at the beginning of the talk. I conducted rich case studies, conducting qualitative and interpretive analyses. But I ran into some problems.

One, to be blunt, was a lack of interest. The people from this school of thought just didn't like what I was talking about; they saw security issues as suspect and worried this line of inquiry would lead to essentialist claims about Islam.

There were also problems conducting the studies. A lot of this work is in Western countries where you can easily interview people. Some work focuses on Muslim countries but deals with social topics. It is difficult to undertake these same studies on security issues, as I was interested in doing.

My early work on religion and international affairs was thus struggling, partly because of the methodological approach I was taking. But around this time, I was getting quantitative training, a requirement in my program (and in most US programs). While I had not previously considered quantitative methods, I found I enjoyed them and began adapting my ideas to be tested using quantitative analysis.

This led to a better reaction. Professors in my program who did not study religion were enthusiastic about it because of the methods. I was getting into conferences and got feedback that was higher quality. I met mentors who appreciated the quant approach and helped me develop my ideas.

And I could address the data issue. I was able to collect indicators across numerous countries and conduct high-quality analysis, thus side-stepping the methodological problems I ran into using the constructivist and qualitative approach.

Some of my papers took existing studies and added religious variables. There was a debate on what caused suicide terrorism, and I added a variable on religious ideology. This led to my first published article. Likewise, there were existing models for why interstate conflicts initiated and escalate, and I added religious variables to it, producing my second article.

There were also some papers that engaged with debates among religious scholars. People have discussed tensions over blasphemy laws and what explains them. I decided to test this quantitatively, measuring blasphemy debates through votes in the United Nations on an anti-blasphemy resolution and producing another article.

These early works developed into a focus on how religion and state interact, and the impacts this has on domestic and international politics. I expressed this most clearly in my dissertation, which became my first book. I looked at the impact of Islamic politics on Muslim states' policies about counterterrorism using quant and case studies. I also pursued it in some later articles.

This early quantitative approach was beneficial to my career in many ways. I received interest in my work, which helped me gain publications and a tenure-track job. And I was able to ask and answer questions that others were not getting at, either by expanding conventional international security topics to include religion or studying religion and international relations using quantitative analysis.

However, several issues arose. There were very interesting debates in religion and global politics dealing with things like how religious organizations formed, how religious norms shifted, and how growing religiosity interacted with the broader state system. My research questions tended to be narrower, however, so I did not engage with these debates and felt that I missed out on an important part of the research.

Additionally, I hoped that using standard models to study religion would "force" mainstream international relations scholars to listen and see that religion mattered. It did not work out that way, however. Most of my engagement was with fellow scholars of religion and international relations, while the rest of international relations proceeded as if our work wasn't happening.

Despite these setbacks my career progressed. As I approached tenure, I thought about where I wanted to go next with my research and settled on both theoretical and empirical ideas.

Theoretically, I wanted to focus more on religion as an interactive force. That is, I began to see that what matters is the relations among actors—expressed through religious debates they hold amongst themselves or religious organizations they take part in—rather than the personal religious beliefs actors hold Personal beliefs are obviously important, but it is only when individuals act on them that they influence politics; moreover, the interaction between individuals can change beliefs, and the relations should be the focus of analysis. This arose from my work on religion-state connections, as I found that religion's impact was due to its interaction with the state rather than the force of religious ideas themselves. So, I wanted to find a way to explore that.

Empirically, I received many questions early in my career about whether religion can benefit states. Most of my work showed religion is a problem for states, so reviewers and audience members wondered whether they could also use it as a tool.

As I began to explore these questions, however, I found that my standard approach was not working. I could not just turn concepts into numerical measures and apply quantitative methods. If I really took the interactions seriously in religious politics, then standard quantitative analysis—which treats observations as rows in a spreadsheet—was not appropriate. Likewise, while I tried coding religious benefits that arise for states in international crises, it felt too simplistic to capture what I thought was going on.

Therefore, after I was awarded tenure, I shifted my analysis away from the conventional quantitative approach.

One way I did this was to re-open questions in religion and international relations to explore the role of relations rather than ideas. Some of this was theoretical. I reviewed works on religion and international relations and noted they implicitly relied on relational analysis. I argued that adapting our analyses in a relational direction would let us overcome problems that had arisen in the study of religion and international relations. I also drew on social network analysis, which—while quantitative—allowed studies to move past standard regressions to understand the dynamic interactions among actors. For example, one forthcoming article looked at the relationship between religious repression and religious conflict. Several studies have found the former leads to the latter, but it is unclear why. My co-author and I found that religious repression affects social networks in countries, and changes to these networks explain some of the effect on religious conflict.

Additionally, I abandoned quantitative analysis completely for my second book on religion as a tool in foreign policy. I found that the mix of qualitative data I drew on—archival research, interviews, media analysis—and qualitative analysis through process tracing allowed me to identify the complex and context-dependent ways in which states draw on religion and the unexpected impacts it has.

Finally, I have started a new project on religion and peacebuilding that is following a similar path. I initially intended to conduct quantitative analysis on religious peacebuilding efforts, to more clearly demonstrate their impact. Yet, through my survey of existing literature and preliminary analysis, I suspect that religious peacebuilding does not have a broad impact on conflict that would be identifiable through quantitative methods. That does not, however, mean that religious peacebuilding is ineffective, only that its impacts appear in a more subtle and localized manner. I am proceeding with this project primarily through interviews and ethnographic fieldwork.

**What this tells us about the importance of quantitative analysis in religion and international relations**

What does that say about quantitative methods that someone who began his career exclusively using quantitative analysis has moved away from it? Are the interpretive imperialists right, that quantitative analysis is flawed and over-simplistic? Is it incapable of truly understanding religion in international relations? Or maybe I am giving up on quantitative analysis too easily, and with more work I could develop better tests of these questions.

I believe the situation is different than either of these takes. It is good that I started with quantitative analysis, but also

good that I am moving on from it in some of my projects.

My early quantitative work did let me do things I could not with case studies. I was able to move some vague, abstract debates into a precise numerical format. Additionally, it did help me professionally; whether or not people like it, quantitative analysis is the standard for much of international relations. Learning and using it helped me get published and get a job.

Beyond that, I do not think I would have developed my recent and current projects without beginning with quantitative analysis. Quantitative analysis structured my thinking as I approached a new question. More than that, however, the quantitative approach revealed what aspects of my questions did not fit within this framework, and what a better approach would look like. Contrary to critiques of quantitative analysis that it obscures complexity, it actually revealed it as I delved into new areas of religion and international relations.

**Suggestions for incorporating (and maybe moving beyond) quantitative analysis into research on religion and international relations**

Given this—that a quantitative framework is a useful starting point for studies on religion and international relations, even if junior scholars decide to move past it—what steps should these scholars take as they begin their studies?

I would make the (potentially, depending on who is reading this) controversial claim that every project should start with an attempt at quantitative analysis. As junior scholars are translating their initial ideas into a proper research design, they should think in quantitative terms. Turn the topic and outcome of interest into independent variables and dependent variables. Think about the levels of each: is it a yes/no concept, are there different categories, could it be continuous? Think about the relationship: would a change in the cause of interest lead generally to a change in the outcome?

Then translate that into numbers. How would you measure the cause in numeric terms? What about the dependent variable? Do you think measuring it in the same way across different cases would be accurate?

If the answers to any of these are yes, then the junior scholar can proceed with quantitative analysis. There are a few specific ways they can proceed.

They could look for “taken for granted questions” in the study of religion and international relations that could use rigorous quantitative testing. An example of this is Samuel Huntington’s clash of civilizations. It was a provocative but influential argument when it first came out. Many believed it was inaccurate, but some of the most powerful critiques were quantitative; scholars categorized countries by their supposed civilization and tested whether conflict occurs between them. The answer is generally no.

Alternately, they could look for claims in the literature that are rather solid and accepted and could be the basis for quantitative coding. For example, my background reading on religion and politics found many examples of religious beliefs in society pressuring states to adopt policies in response. This was the basis for my quantitative work on religion-state connections. Similarly, the junior scholar may have read a case study on a specific country that they believe could be generalized to other countries through quantitative methods. Alternately, they may have found quantitative studies outside of religion and international relations that could touch on religious issues if they were incorporated into the study.

If, however, the answer to any of the above questions on the research design were “no,” the junior scholar still has something interesting. This reveals a tension between the quantitative framework and the topic being studied. The junior scholar should use that tension, figure out what cannot be turned into a typical variable-based design and why. They should figure out why the relationship between cause and outcome is not consistent. This can then open up many avenues for exploration, which may not have been obvious without first identifying the limits of a quantitative approach.

### Concluding thoughts

So when junior scholars attend conferences and workshops, they may hear scholars claim that quantitative analysis is not appropriate for studying religion and international relations. They may claim it reduces complexity and that turning concepts into numbers destroys them. That is just not true. Quantitative analysis can reveal aspects of religion and international relations that qualitative and interpretive approaches cannot and also present these findings in a way that the broader field is receptive to.

Yet, it is important to understand that this is not *the* way to study religion and international relations. My argument that it is valuable does not mean every graduate student and junior scholar should use quantitative analysis. But they should learn how it works, and maybe even start their initial translation of ideas into research designs using a quantitative framework. It can help open up possibilities for research that were not apparent, reveal what is missing in the "common knowledge," and demonstrate which accepted claims hold up to rigorous testing. At the same time, these junior scholars should be open minded to the fact that their topic of interest may not work with quantitative methods. They may not reach that point—at least in a way that lets them fully explain why alternatives to quantitative analysis are needed—without a quantitative foundation for their research, however.

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## About the author:

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