In Good Faith? Reconsidering the Impact of Religion on Negotiated Settlements

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In his September 24, 2014 remarks to the United Nations General Assembly, President Barack Obama summarized the expansion of U.S. military operations against ISIS as follows: “There can be no reasoning – no negotiation – with this brand of evil. The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force.” These comments mirror a now commonly held assumption among scholars and policymakers alike that religiously motivated insurgencies are more intractable than other types of conflict. This conventional wisdom construes religious (especially extremist) beliefs as more robust, rigid, and uncompromising than other political or economic preferences.

Yet, despite their popularity in academic and policy discussions, the above claims have received relatively little scrutiny beyond a few cross-national analyses. These studies support the idea that religious appeals decrease the likelihood of a negotiated settlement between warring parties, but they rarely evaluate the causal process purported to explain this relationship. It remains unclear, therefore, whether it is the impact of religion on rebel behavior that reduces the probability of a peace agreement or some other dynamic.

In this article, I draw attention to an important, but overlooked, alternative causal mechanism. More specifically, I suggest that secular governments may be just as unlikely to compromise in religious conflicts as rebels. This reluctance, I propose, stems from the “myth of religious violence”, a founding assumption of the modern state system that portrays religion as a violent and irrational force that must be tamed in order to preserve social harmony. Support for these claims are drawn from a variety of contemporary civil wars, especially British counterinsurgency operations during the early postwar period.

Past Intransigence

Over the past two decades, an increasing number of studies have explored the impact of religion on conflict termination. Many adopt a quantitative approach. Russell Leng and Patrick Regan (2003), for instance, compare over 700 mediation attempts in conflicts between 1945 and 1995 and find that differences in the religious identities of belligerents significantly hinder third-party interventions. They contend that such divisions obstruct communication between belligerents and, therefore, reduce the likelihood of a peaceful resolution. Shifting the focus to intrastate wars, Isak Svensson (2007) finds that post-Cold War conflicts in which combatants’ make explicit religious demands are significantly less likely than others to be terminated through negotiated settlements. He argues that religion increases the subjective value of the contested territory or control of the government, making combatants more resistant to compromise. Monica Duffy Toft (2007) notes a similar pattern, also observing that religious conflicts tend to last longer than their secular counterparts.

Other scholars rely on in-depth case studies to illustrate a variety of causal mechanisms that might account for the inflexibility of religiously motivated combatants. Michael Horowitz (2009), for instance, argues that beliefs tied to the sacred are particularly compelling because they derive from a divine, absolute source and concern potential rewards and punishments after death. He maintains that this explains, in part, how religious fervor drove the Crusaders to continue in their campaigns long after the material costs exceeded the benefits. Jessica Stern (2004, p. 51) offers a more contemporary example, outlining how religious extremist groups, such as Hamas, train suicide bombers to

value the expected benefits of an eternal life over those of the present. Finally, Mark Jurgensmeyer (2000) contends that religious fundamentalists often view a conflict in terms of sacred or divine time, which reduces their willingness to compromise their goals.

While these studies present a compelling case for the intractability of religious conflicts, they are not without their limitations. First, few scrutinize the causal process they purport to link religion with fewer negotiated settlements. Causal mechanisms are posited, but rarely tested against competing explanations for how the observed relationship arises.

Second, even when alternative mechanisms are considered, the analysis remains overwhelmingly one-sided. With few exceptions, these studies focus on how religious identities and beliefs alter the behavior of rebels to reduce their willingness to make concessions. Rarely do they consider that the religious dynamics of conflict might also provoke a distinct response from state forces. As a result, the side of the table where talks break down remains unclear.

An Uncompromising State

The trend in past research to attribute blame to religiously motivated rebels for the scarcity of negotiated settlements rests on a peculiar and often unstated, assumption: that secular actors, especially state forces, approach the opportunity for peace talks in good faith. However, there are at least two reasons to suspect this assumption, because it is rarely the case in religious conflicts.

First, military and civilian decision makers may discount the value of bargaining with rebels that are, at least nominally, fighting for their faith due to "the myth of religious violence". Described most notably by William Cavanaugh (2009), this is a founding assumption of the modern state system that construes religion as an inherently violent and irrational force that must be tamed in order to preserve social harmony. The prevalence of this idea means policymakers are apt to construe rebel groups that mobilize along confessional lines as particularly unlikely to compromise.

Two cognitive processes further reinforce and increase the saliency of these perceptions. The first, *confirmation bias*, leads policymakers to seek out, interpret, or recall information that confirms prior beliefs more readily than information that contradicts their views (Wason, 1960). Accordingly, reports of the most recent atrocity committed by Boko Haram or the Lord's Resistance Army are more likely to catch elites' attention than similar actions by groups with secular aims. A second influence, *negativity bias*, means that negative information influences decision makers' perceptions more strongly than does positive evidence (Rozin and Royzman, 2001). Therefore, threats like those recently made by al-Shabaab to attack malls in the United Kingdom and the United States will garner more notice than concessions offered by similar groups.

Second, the "myth of religious violence" may also reduce the likelihood that domestic criticism will be raised about operations against religiously motivated rebels. Popular ideas about the danger of religion provide governments with a stock character to construe as the enemy of contemporary political order, and, thus, legitimate coercive action (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 5). As a result, security forces may face fewer constraints on offensive measures and, therefore, perceive less need to consider a negotiated settlement. Public debate on how best to respond to ISIS over the past few months vividly captures this dynamic. Discussions remain almost exclusively focused on the amount of force to apply, not between various strategic options.

In short, the pervasiveness of the "myth of religious violence" casts doubt on whether political elites pursue the possibility of negotiations with religiously motivated rebels in good faith. Cognitive biases and limited constraints at home suggest that policymakers will discount the efficacy of peace talks under such circumstances. To what extent does this line of argumentation hold up against the empirical record?

Persistent Evidence

Even a cursory review of civil wars over the past few decades reveals a number of religious conflicts where secular

governments, not rebels, bore substantial responsibility for the failure of peace talks. For example, then-President Ferdinand Marcos undermined the 1976 Tripoli Agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) by creating his own regional government in Mindanao and handpicking its leadership. The breakdown of the 2008 Juba Peace Talks, likewise, may have been as much a consequence of Joseph Kony's intransigence as Yoweri Museveni's public commitment to a military solution to the conflict with the Lord's Resistance Army. Finally, U.S. negotiations with the Afghan Taliban have been equally unproductive due to, among other factors, poor timing and ineffective management by American officials.

The above examples are, of course, merely illustrative. My own research on British counterinsurgency operations during the early postwar period aims to more systematically capture this pattern. Here, in perhaps the least likely cases, given that the major existential threat of the day was Communism, we find evidence that security forces were often reluctant to dialogue with religious actors and that such reticence undermined negotiation attempts.

In Cyprus, for instance, Archbishop Makarios III's influence proved to be a major stumbling block for British forces during the Emergency Period (1955-59). As the key political figure on the island, colonial officials had little choice but to enter into talks with the head of the Church of Cyprus. However, while Sir John Harding – the Governor for much of the conflict – initially approached this endeavor with optimism, others in the administration never expected talks to accomplish a peaceful resolution. Most tellingly, before joining the final of three meetings between Harding and Makarios, the Secretary of the State for the Colonies, Alan Lennox-Boyd, wrote to a colleague in Eden that there was no chance of reaching an agreement (French, 2015, p.104). Soon thereafter, Makarios was deported and a radio broadcast announced that the Archbishop's absence would pave the way for "moderate politicians to come forward" (Holland, 1998: 119).

British actions likewise undermined the potential for peace talks during the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya (1952-60). Operation Wedgewood, which attempted to organize the mass surrender of rebel forces through the help of one of their captured leaders (General China), stands out most notably. Three days before the coordinated date of surrender, security forces unexpectedly ran across a Mau Mau gang during a sweep near the Gathuini Reserve. This encounter resulted in the death of twenty-five rebels, the capture of seven others, and the complete loss of trust in the British (Bennett, 2013, p. 139). Although many members of the security forces continued to attribute the persistence of the Mau Mau to "pseudo-religious oath taking", it is clear that the disaster of Operation Wedgewood also played a significant role in reducing the likelihood of any further compromise.

Conclusion

Past research on the link between religion and negotiated settlements remains overwhelmingly one-sided. With few exceptions, analysts focus on how religious identities and beliefs make rebels more uncompromising and inflexible. Yet, there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to reevaluate these claims. In this article, I have stressed the need to give more attention to the role of security forces. The type of state response provoked by the religious identity of insurgents may be as important, if not more, to explaining the dearth of negotiated settlements as how religion shapes rebel behavior. This analysis, of course, does not demonstrate a pervasive or systematic bias in state response. It does, however, suggest the value of future study. Only by looking at both sides of the bargaining table can we fully understand the apparent intractability of religious conflicts.

Notes

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