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RELIGION AND CIVIL WAR
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Summary:

Civil wars are influenced in multiple ways of religious dimensions. There are therefore several ways in which religious factors can explain the onset, dynamics, and termination of civil wars. Whereas research on peace and conflict has often tended to neglect religiously-focused explanations in favor or explanations based on strategic, economic or other factors, research on religion and conflict has seen a resurge in later years. Research has occurred on three different levels of analysis: 1) explanations relating to the religious group level, 2) explanations relating to the level of inter-relationships between different religious groups, and 3) explanation relating to the level of the group's relationship to the state. As religiously defined conflicts are becoming more common (Isak Svensson & Nilsson, 2018) it is pivotal to understand more about the conditions under which religious factors influence civil wars' onset, dynamics, and termination.

Introduction:

This chapter will examine the extent to which religious factors can explain the onset, dynamics, and termination of civil wars. The study of peace and conflict has traditionally tended to neglect and disregard religious dimensions of armed conflicts and rather focus on explanations based on strategic, economic or other factors. Yet, this 'secularism bias' is now increasingly being challenged (Fox & Sandler, 2004; Hurd, 2003; Sheikh, 2012a; Thomas, 2005). Thus, a growing body of research, particularly in recent years, has started to take

seriously the possibility that there can be religious factors shaping why civil wars occur, escalate and end. This scholarship contends that we might not be fully able to understand a critical set of questions – for instance, why non-state groups are formed and challenge the state, why states respond violently, why those dynamics escalate into civil wars, and why wars eventually end – if we do not take the religious aspects into account. Even though the subject of religion in civil war is an important area also in other scholarly fields, such as Religious Studies and IR, this overview builds primarily on work from peace and conflict research in this review.

The religious factors in this overview of existing explanations and empirical findings will be examined through a level-of-analysis framework, utilizing three different levels: 1) factors relating to the religious group level, 2) factors relating to the level of inter-relationships between different religious groups, and 3) factors relating to the level of the group's relationship to the state. Consequently, this chapter will be divided into three sections reflecting these levels of analysis, which could be thought of as three overlapping circles, see Figure 1 for illustration. Organizing the level-of-analysis framework does not imply that we should perceive the religious groups as unitary entities. By contrast, while this different level can help to categorize and bring some order and overview into the many different ways in which religious factors have been shown to influence civil wars, it is important to recognize that significant variations occur for all these explanation factors, both within religious groups as well as over time. The overview will discuss how these factors have been examined through empirical research and the results emerging from the study of onset, development and termination of civil wars. As we are interested in the larger picture, the focus here will be primarily on the large-N quantitative research in this field, but examples of how the religious dynamics play out in particular civil wars will be mentioned as well.

[insert Svensson-Fig 1 here]

Figure 1. Religion and civil war: an overview of the three levels of analysis.

Before discussing each level of analysis, however, there are two areas of overall consensus in the field of religion and conflict worth noting. The first perspective that has wide scholarly recognition is that religious factors can serve as either increasing or decreasing the risk of civil war onset, escalation, and intractability. Thus, religious dynamics can play both a positive and negative role, albeit under different conditions. In other words, there are certain elements in religious beliefs, structures, institutions, and practices that increase the propensity for organized large-scale violence within states, and other elements that serve to mitigate it. The term used to describe this duality is the 'ambivalence of the sacred', and any analysis of the role of religion needs to depart from this foundational insight (Appleby, 2000). This overview will reflect this duality as well, and, hence, try to describe how religious factors can have either a peace-promoting or war-mongering effect. At the same time, it is important to recognize that research has not been symmetrical: there is considerably more research on the negative, darker side of religion, than on its more peace-promoting, brighter role, particularly when it comes to research utilizing quantitative approaches.

A second point of overall consensus in this growing body of research is an approach that takes the religious factors seriously but refrains from any exaggerated emphasis on the religious dimensions. The relationship between religion and civil war is not mono-causal. Religious factors play a role in explaining civil wars, but their effects are conditional, probabilistic, and

multi-variate. Thus they represent only one set of explanations that complement and interact with other explanations (economic, political, strategic, psychological, and emotional). In this sense, the field is moving away from the foundational but rather simplistic question of does religion matter, to the more theoretically and empirically interesting ones (Bellin, 2008), including the question of what are the conditions under which religious factors explain wars in general, and as is the focus here, civil wars. It is with regards to this latter question that this essay will try to provide a review of the current stage of scholarly knowledge.

The first level: The Religious Group

The analysis will first review the explanatory factors for civil wars based in religion itself, that is, in the religious beliefs, religious demography, religious practices, and religious institutions, and the religious constituency. There are clearly important variations within the different religious groups, as well as over time: beliefs, practices demography, constituencies and institutions, are dynamics and constantly changing over time. And religious groups cannot be seen as monoliths, rather there are significant variations within all religions when it comes to these explanatory factors.

Religious Beliefs

Religious beliefs, it is argued, have a certain degree of dogmatic quality to them, making them less transformable and less likely for compromise and rational bargaining. Moreover, religious identities can be harder to compromise than other types of identity markers, such as for example language barriers, because religious identities are more intimately related to the integrity of the community (Thomas, 2005). Thus, the dogmatic nature of religious beliefs may make them, once they have entered the scene of political disputes, less amendable through negotiations and lead to a decreased possibility of making compromises if demands are religiously anchored. Armed conflicts framed in religious terms can become particularly

violent and intractable "due to the non-bargainable nature of the motivations behind them" (Fox, 2004:58). Indeed, if parties in conflict perceive that they are fighting over as a sacred value, any material compensation will not be sufficient and may actually, and offers of such can actually decrease the willingness to resolve the conflict (Atran, Axelrod, & Davis, 2007). Religiously based beliefs may also increase the risk for fractionalization of militant groups since the dogmatic nature of religious beliefs tends not to allow for tolerance of different interpretations, albeit such fractionalization also is conditional on on the nature of religious authority including the degree to which religions have well-established centralized authority structures.

One reason for the rigidity of appeals to religious values and aspirations is that these demands are anchored in a framework of absolute values and interests, from which it is difficult to back down. Religiously charged disputed may create conflicts between fundamental principles of orders, or what Juergensmeyer has labelled as 'cosmic wars', which can be seen as a "great encounter between cosmic forces – an ultimate good and evil, a divine truth and falsehood" (Juergensmeyer, 1993:155). Framed as cosmic war, the enemy group can be portrayed as supporters of evil, leading to dehumanization of the opponent. Thus, the idea that a specific political or social conflict is manifestation of, and integrated into, a larger holistic pattern, and a manifestation of a cosmic war, in which religious language and worldviews are activated in the present conflict, can serve to escalate the conflict into the realm of violence and war (Juergensmeyer, 2008). The present socio-political issues are then interpreted from a cosmic perspective, leading to a strengthening and hardening of the enemy-images.

There is some support for the notion that religiously charged conflicts tend to be particularly difficult forms of conflicts. The introduction of sacred values may create situations of

indivisibility (Ron E. Hassner, 2009), although indivisibilities in their strictest form are empirically rare. Thus, a religious anchoring of a political conflict may therefore make it more difficult to settle peacefully. There is a decreased chance for negotiated settlement in civil wars if any of the parties have raised religious claims, which can be explained by the indivisibly-problem that occurs when state and religion become intertwined (Isak Svensson, 2007). Indeed, religion can influence the dynamics of civil war can be influenced by the advancement of ideas about the inseparability between state and religion. Religious nationalism – as conceptualized as "a mixture of nationalism and religion" (Juergensmeyer, 1996:2) – provides a fundamental challenge to the separation between state and religion: religious militants can question whether the underlying character of the state should be secular, and champion the alternative perspective that the state should protect and foster a particular religious tradition. Between these two perspectives of the fundamental character of the state, there may be difficulties to locate mutually acceptable compromises, even if countries around the world have found numerous ways of striking a balance between religious and secular state dimensions. Any compromises between secular and religious nationalism "suggest that spiritual and political matters are separate, which most religious activists see as a capitulation to the secularist point of view" (Juergensmeyer, 1993:39).

The dogmatic feature of religious disputes may decrease the chance for peaceful settlement short of civil war, but not necessarily make such settlements impossible. Conflict resolution mechanisms such as horse-trading and procedural agreements can be ways of reaching settlement in religiously defined intrastate conflicts without any actors necessarily making concessions on the religiously based aspirations (Isak Svensson & Harding, 2011), and there are examples of how various forms of accommodative solutions have been reached even in conflicts originally framed as religious worldview conflicts (Isak Svensson, 2012). Examples

include the peace settlement in Mindanao (Philippines) reached in 2014, the Tajikistan peace settlement in 1997, the comprehensive peace agreement between the southern insurgents in Sudan and Kharthom, reached in 2005, as well as the mediated ceasefire and the transition of the armed Sadrist movement into a political movement in Iraq in 2007 (Isak Svensson, 2012).

There is also a set of particular religious ideas or specific beliefs that may influence the risk for civil war onset, escalation, and intractability in that they may serve to influence either the readiness or endurance to suffer, the willingness to impose destruction upon others, or the inflexibility in terms of negotiating a solution short of war. Four such religious ideas have been identified in previous research as particularly important: the religious legitimacy of violence, the idea about martyrdom, the religious definition of an out-group, the apocalyptic ideas, and the longer time-horizons.

The first important factor in explaining the variation in the role of religion in conflict lies in the political theology, particularly, the *religious legitimacy of the use of violence* (Philpott, 2007; Toft, Philpott, & Shah, 2011). Political theology, as defined by Philpott (2007:507) is "the set of ideas that a religious body holds about legitimate political authority", and these ideas shape the way in which religious actors (leaders and organizations) back or contest state's behaviour, including its use of force. These ideas are also clearly interacting with the state institutions: they are partly shaped by the particularities of state-religion ties (an area of research we will discuss later), and the nature and content of these ideas also partly help to explain how various institutions come about. Political theology can therefore serve to provide religious legitimization for violence by the state, but also, it is important to point out, for non-state actors (rebel groups) engaging in civil wars. This religious legitimacy of violence is often based in interpretations of juriprudence (Sheikh, 2012b). The normative basis of religion

can therefore serve to 'feed uncompromising attitudes once religion is drawn into a conflict', by legitimizing the use of violence through anchoring it religiously 'within a system of meaning of a higher order' (Harpviken & Røislien, 2008, p. 358). The legitimization of violence can be driven by a discourse in which religious militants perceive their core values, including the religion itself, to be under threat (Sheikh, 2016). Indeed, religious leaders' call for violence increases the risk of intrastate armed conflicts between different religious communities and over religious issues (Basedau, Pfeiffer, & Vüllers, 2016), although it has been shown that the causal direction can also be the opposite, that is, it is not religious rhetoric that is causing intensification of conflict, but the other way around: conflicts increase the risk for hardened religious rhetoric (Isaacs, 2016).

The concept of *martyrdom* is a second type of religious belief which may influence the development of civil wars. The idea of suffering for one's beliefs is influential in several faith traditions and when mobilized in the context of civil war this belief may incentivize deaths for the sake of the cause. Obviously, the idea of martyrdom is not exclusive to religions, as such concepts also are of prevalent use also in for example nationalist conflicts, which we will discuss further below. Still, it may play a particular prominent role in religious frameworks. The idea of martyrdom provides a set of extra-worldly incentives that can change the cost-benefit analysis of prospective participants. For example, it may help to ease collective action problems by creating non-material costs for non-participation and non-material rewards for participation. Extra-worldly beliefs can serve to ease collective action problems and thereby facilitate violent mobilization. In particular, ideas about private rewards in the after-life, create private incentives for participation in violent uprisings and organized violence, and punishments for non-participation. This provides extremist groups, including religious militants, with an incentive-structure that provides a strategic benefit compared to other non-

state militant groups (Walter, 2016). Moreover, ideas about martyrdom may influence the chances of the conflict reaching a stalemate of war-weariness, as the costs of conflict are not perceived in a similar manner compared to a conflict fought over non-religious terms. Costly stalemates have been identified as an essential precondition for any meaningful attempts towards resolution of conflicts (Zartman, 1995).

A third way religion can increase the risk for conflict onset, escalation and duration of civil wars is by providing a way to establish boundaries between individuals, by determining and anchoring the *in-group vs out-group distinction*. In inter-religious conflict, religion can serve as a collective identity-marker (Seul, 1999). Also, in intra-religious disputes, religious ideas serve to define the in-group. Such differentiation will increase the perceived legitimacy for engaging in violent interaction against those defined as belonging to another group.

For some religious groups the *apocalyptic* idea of a near-end of the world (at least as we know it), is a fifth way that religion can affect civil war dynamics. These beliefs influence the interest to invest in long-term engagements and carry implications for the readiness of its militants to bear the costs of conflicts (Wood, 2015). More mundane matters such as family, career, health and safety will carry less priority in light of the accelerating chain of events drawing the apocalypse closer. For instance, the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria represents an amalgamation of three movements: a global Salafi-jihadist movement, a local Sunni-empowerment movement, and an apocalyptic movement. As the ISIS collapses in Syria and Iraq, the trajectories of these three movements may follow different routes. The IS state-formation project's collapse can be explained through a combination of internal and external factors, including in-fighting, increasing doubt, a discredited leadership, and the existence of alternative opportunities. External factors include multi-cultural respect, accommodation and

rehabilitation. The ideology can, however, remain long after the territorial project has vanished (Juergensmeyer, 2017).

A sixth, and final, religious idea provides longer *time horizons*, in which the militants can understand and frame their present struggle. Longer time-horizons can make religious militants discount costs in the present. By contrast, shorter time-horizons can lead to discounting of future investments. Such an expanded time-frame provides a way for achieving one' goals not necessarily in an individual but collective perspective, and not necessarily in the present life, but also taking the possibility for life after death into account. The religious dynamic therefore can be seen to affect the underlying rationality of conflict, including the willingness to engage in high-cost engagements, such as suicide attacks (Moghadam, 2009), or the willingness to engage in a negotiated settlement (Toft, 2006).

All of these religiously based ideas – religious violence-legitimization, inseparability between state and religion, martyrdom, the religious excommunication, apocalyptic ideas, and time-horizons – can increase the risk of civil war. Yet, the effects of religious ideas on civil wars are neither clear-cut nor undisputed. Five major points of contention are worth noting. First, there is no established connection between religious ideas in general – or of any one particular –, on the one hand, and the occurrence of civil war, on the other. Second, there is no consensus on whether religiously based ideologies in conflict differ in any substantial way from other ideologies, including militant leftism or militant nationalism, which can have content that may resemble the religiously framed ideas. For example, nationalists may also have longer time-horizons when engaging in civil wars (Toft, 2006). Non-religious militants in civil wars may be as dogmatic as religious militants. The idea of martyrdom is also frequently utilized in nationalist or revolutionary struggles (Bloom, 2005). Thus, whether

there is any set of particular religious ideas that can serve to increase the risk of civil war is something that remains disputed. Third, secularism can often in practice can be just as dogmatic, absolutist and conflict-prone as religious ideologies (Cavanaugh, 2009). Foruth, religious ideologies tend to be perceived as immune to change, but empirically, shifts in ideologies as well as strategies among religious militants do occur. Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and al-Jihad in Egypt, and AIS (Islamic Salvation Army) in Algeria, are cases in point (Ashour, 2009; Matesan, 2009). Fifth, whether a conflict is understood in religious terms, depends ultimately on the success of the religious framing, that is, elites' ability to portray the conflict as one over religion. The framing processes of conflict issues in religious terms vary in civil wars. The ability to frame a conflict in religious terms depends on the authority of the leadership (both religious and political), the appeal of the religious frames in relation to other ideological frames, and the quality of the communication infrastructure through which religious frames can be disseminated (De Juan & Hasenclever, 2015).

The depth of religious beliefs, not only their content, matter. In addition to the ways religious ideas per se influence civil war dynamics, it can also be discussed whether the intensity to which followers hold religious beliefs, the knowledge that they possess about their religious tradition, and the particular religious interpretations, can influence the risk for civil war. It is possible to separate knowledge about beliefs on the one hand, and the intensity of those on the other. The degree of 'religious illiteracy' (Appleby, 2000:69) can influence the chances for participation in violence. In other words, lack of knowledge about the content of one's own religious tradition, as well as lack of familiarity with the basic texts and scriptures, practices, and interpretations may make religious followers more open to militant and extremist versions of a religious tradition. A newly converted recruit to a radical cause, may know relatively

little about the subtle details and nuances of religious practices, but may hold on to a rather rudimentary belief-system with great intensity. For example, in a survey aimed at militant religious extremists 51 percent of the respondents self-reported religion to be an important factor for why they joined a violent extremist group. Moreover, 57 percent of the respondents were religious illiterate, that is, held very low levels of knowledge about their religion in terms of never reading or not understanding religious texts (UNDP, 2017). Indeed, as found in the study of support of religious militancy in Pakistan, better knowledge of the Koran significantly decreases the support for Islamist terror groups (Fair, Malhotra, & Shapiro, 2012). Moreover, a more spiritual – inner – interpretation of jihad (as a struggle for righteousness) decrease the chance for support to militant activities and groups. Moreover, depth of belief can also account for differences between recruitment mobilization potential between different radical groups. For example, foreign fighters joining ISIS seems to be more incline to support the group's reductionist ideology, and appeal individuals who have little previous experience of political Islamism, whereas non-IS Salafi-jihadist organizations tend to appeal to with more religious training and commitment (Tezcür & Besaw, 2017).

Lastly, we have so far been concerned with how religious beliefs can play a role in increasing the risk of civil war. It is important to point out that the religious traditions harbor a set of ideological traits that can provide important ideological support for peaceful resolution and conflict prevention (Powers, 2010). The commitment to peace exists in all world faith traditions (Gopin, 2000). There are a set of religious ideas that provide motivational frameworks for individuals and groups to take action to prevent civil war, seek reconciliation and try to establish peaceful interactions and dialogue (Abu-Nimer, 2013). Such ideas include the cultivation of empathy, compassion, a readiness to endure sacrifices, sanctity of life, the role of self-discipline and constraint, as well as ideas about the illegitimacy of violence

(religiously motivated pacifism in various forms). These ideas provide 'ethical visions' that provide guidance and motivation: "religions establish ethical visions that can summon those who believe in them to powerful forms of committed action" (Sampson, 2002:275).

Religious practices

Another set of factors to examine when it comes to religion and civil war, is the behavioral factors. In particular, religious practice can help to explain the variation in empirical trajectories in terms of how civil wars unfold. By conceptualizing the religious influence, not in terms of ideological factors, but in terms of practices relating to the sacred, it is possible to start to detect ways in which religious factors serve as, no necessarily underlying causes, but a "force multipliers" or "force dividers" (Ron E Hassner, 2016:2). The study of religious practice expands the focus from theology or identity, dimensions (that, as we have seen above) have been preoccupying previous research. This emerging field of study (at least in the study of civil wars) emphasizes how religion is lived out in real life, rather than how principles or dogmas are formulated, or how such religious ideational frameworks are interpreted. The counter-insurgency in Iraq (2003-2009) shows how sacred time, sacred spaces, religious leaders and religious rituals influenced the dynamics of the conflict, through constraining or provoking armed action (Ron E Hassner, 2016:2).

Yet, it is not clear whether religious practices (and the more precise research question being – *what type of practice under what type of conditions* – influence the risk of civil wars breaking out, escalating or dragging on. So far, there is little evidence that actors more involved in religious practices should in general be more receptive to calls for violence, if anything the opposite seems closer to the truth. Religious practice can include both a social component (such as attending religious services) and an individual practice (such as prayers), which may

(or may not) reflect a religious commitment. Religious observance (which combines both a social dimension and a personal commitment) has an effect on support for religious tolerance, but this effect occurs only in the local settings that are diverse and integrated (R. A. Dowd, 2016). Moreover, religious practice is not associated with support for militant group. (Fair et al 2012). Summarizing the insights in terms of support for militancy, the authors conclude: "it is the *content*, not the *practice*, of one's religious beliefs that matters" (Fair et al., 2012:690). Thus, the field is far from consensus on the explanatory power of religious practice.

The Religious Constituency

Religious identities and demands may appeal to a particular religiously defined constituency. Religions have transnational constituencies, and they represent the largest unit to which individuals can be associated with (Grzymala-Busse, 2012). The way in which religion helps to define the underlying constituency for an armed actor may have a profound impact on the dynamics of conflicts. One of the most important characteristics of religions is that religious traditions in general have transnational constituencies, and that religious appeals therefore can have a bearing on individuals beyond the nation-state. On the other hand, as discussed above, religious appeals can be more conflict-prone if they are meshed with nationalism. The relationship between the national, and the transnational, constituencies of religious identities therefore stand in an interesting tension vis-à-vis each other, and the balance between the two dimensions of the religious identities, can shape the dynamics of civil wars.

The transnational feature of religion is debated as one of the most important explanations for the development of jihadist groups in civil wars. Knowing the potency of the international constituency, the entrepreneurs seeking to initiate or prolong a conflict, have therefore strategically framed their conflict in religious terms, in order to generate support. For

example, the Islamization of the insurgency in Chechnya can be explained as driven by the need to appeal for external support (Bakke, 2014). Indeed, transnational jihadism has linked local conflicts to a global battle by activating external support such as training, funding, and foreign fighters (Crenshaw, 2017). Foreign fighters have played a particularly important role. Most of today's transnational jihadist groups are products of past foreign fighter mobilizations. In this sense, foreign fighters are "key to understanding transnational Islamist militancy." (Hegghammer, 2011:53). The transnational feature of Islamist rebels versus nationalist rebels can also help to account for variations in outcomes of governments' counter-insurgency. Islamist-based insurgency groups in Caucasus have been shown more difficult for the government to challenge, compared to nationalist-based insurgency groups, given that the former have access to transnational Salafi-jihadist networks of support and foreign fighters, making them less sensitive to the situation on the ground (Toft & Zhukov, 2015).

The transnational feature of jihadist groups in civil war can, however, also represent a disadvantage. The difference in recruitment and training due to international and regional outlook, for example, can be a weakness because it may make them seem alien to local customs and to the sense of nationalism (Byman, 2013). In fact, Islamist conflicts that have refrained from linking up to the transnational jihadist networks, such as for example the Islamist insurgency in Southern Thailand, have tended to remain local in ideological focus and scope, and the jihadist attacks have not escalated into full-blown civil wars (Finnbogason & Svensson, 2017).

This leads to the question of why religion becomes salient in some conflicts but not in others. One explanation has already been given in the previous paragraph: insurgent leaders may seek

external support by strategically employing religious rhetoric. Moreover, external actors

involvement may provoke radicalization, as has been the case in the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan and the US. Moreover, salience can be driven by intra-religious competition

where religious leaders in ethnic groups are incentivized to compete over adherents with other

religious leaders. Competition among religious leaders over different constituencies can serve

as a precursor to the mobilization of religious sentiment in conflict (Isaacs, 2017). The

outbidding between different religious groups may explain its radicalization (Toft, 2007).

The religious constituency can thus be functioning in a way that lead to fragmentation. Yet, a

contrary dynamic may also be at play. The religious constituency also bridges class divides

within a society, including overcoming clan-based cleavages, as seen in the case of Somalia

and al-Shabaab. Religion does then lead to fragmentation but rather unity (across other social

cleavages). For example, using its militant Islamic ideology, al-Shabaab has been able to

liaise with different Somali clans, but also attract foreign fighters and outside financial

support. Overall, the group has made instrumental use of a growing importance of religious

symbols in Somalia to gain strength, employing a religious discourse such as the promotion of

legal justice anchored in Islamic scripture (Hansen, 2013).

Whether variations in the intensity of intrastate conflicts fought over religious issues can be

explained by religious ideological factors, or organizational features, is debated. Some

research suggests that it is not religious ideologies or theology that explain dynamics of armed

conflicts, but rather the organisational features and goal structures of armed groups (Piazza,

2009). For example, leaders ordering suicide attacks seem not primarily to be driven by

religious or ideological motivations, but essentially organized campaigns to force foreign

occupiers out of militants' homeland (Pape, 2005). Attacks by religious groups who provide

local public goods, are both deadlier and more likely to be suicide attacks, which would call for policies that incentivize defection from violent groups, by providing viable alternatives on the outside and outcompeting violent groups' service provision (Berman & Laitin, 2008). Indeed, improved service provision reduces insurgent violence (Berman, Shapiro, & Felter, 2011). Yet, the type of ideology can account for variations in targeting: religious groups utilizing terrorist tactics in civil wars tend to focus on soft targets – including civilians (Polo & Gleditsch, 2016). Variations in the levels of conflict intensity can be explained by the religious character of the ideological claims of the disputants, as show in the study of the intensity of intrastate armed conflicts (Isak Svensson & Nilsson, 2018), and the the intensity of terrorist attack (Peter S. Henne, 2011).

Religious Institutions

Religious organizations and institutions can play different roles in conflicts: as conflict parties, bystanders and peacebuilders (Reychler, 1997). Leaders and their religious organizations can form a network which function as forms of "epistemic communities", influencing the political arena (Sandal, 2011). The most important of these is probably their ability to maintain cooperation between different religious communities. Religious institutions can create wide-ranging networks which can facilitate interactions between groups and mitigate against escalation of group-on-group violence into civil wars. By creating and maintaining reputation, sharing information, and utilizing sanctions against violations of cooperative norms within the same religious or ethnic group, so called 'in-group policing', inter-religious peace can be maintained over time (Fearon & Laitin, 1996). Religious institutions can also contribute to bridging institutions that can provide local communities with higher resilience against attempts by entrepreneurs to manipulate religious tensions (Varshney, 2002). Drawing on conclusions from the case of Indonesia, increasing density of

religious institutionalization seems to decrease levels of communal violence. In other words, areas with more local mosques, churches, and other forms of religious institutions, tend to suffer from less violence between different religious and ethnic groups, and higher chances for conflict resolution at the village level. Interestingly, the religious institutions do not have a similar type of pacifying effect once the conflict evolves around religious cleavages (De Juan, Pierskalla, & Vüllers, 2015). Thus, higher degree of religious civil society as manifested through religious institutions is associated with better chances for peace among groups from different social groups, but primarily in the context of conflicts that are not defined by religious cleavages.

This last point leads to a more general yet still tentative conclusion regarding the disconnect between religiously based peacemaking and conflicts evolving around explicit religious dimensions. Faith-based mediation, for example, tends to occur in conflicts in which parties share the same religious tradition, and where the issue at stake is not over religious incompatible claims (Johnstone & Svensson, 2013). In fact, "religiously motivated peacemaking efforts to date have had their greatest impact in conflicts in which religion is not an important defining characteristics" (Sampson, 2002:275). The efforts by the Catholic lay-community of San't Egidio in ending the Mozambique civil war can serve as an illustration of this.

Research has, in general, identified peace-promoting or violence-pacifying effects of religious institutions in conflict. But religious institutions can also serve as hubs for coordination and information exchange, facilitating the mobilization of groups by providing an opportunity to overcome the inherent collective action problems in mobilizing against a regime. An example is radical mosques or madrasas, which can provide recruitment centers in civil wars. For

example, teachers and students from Afghan and Pakistani *madrasas* were an important recruitment source for the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan in the anti-Soviet resistance of the late 1970s and 1980s. Later on, a group of *madrasa* teachers and students, under Mullah Muhammad Umar's leadership, created the Taliban movement (Rubin, 1999).

The Second Level: Relation to Other Religious Groups

Another set of clusters of religious explanations for civil war may be found in how different groups relate to each other. We then move the analysis above the content of the religious traditions themselves, to focus on the strategic interaction between various groups and how the religious group-composition in societies make them more or less risk-prone for civil war. Here we will review two scholarly debates: research on civilizational differences and research on religious diversity.

Civilizations

The most influential argument in relation to religious identities and armed conflicts, including civil wars, during the last decade has been made by Samuel Huntington, with his thesis of an emerging Clash of Civilizations (Huntington, 1996). According to Huntington, cultural identification has been growing in importance over time, and people tend to associate themselves ultimately with the largest possible cultural unit, which is civilization. The way civilization is conceptualized it overlaps largely with the major religious traditions. The Clash of Civilisation thesis implied an increase in the number of conflicts in which parties come from different civilisations, as well as an argument about the severity of this type of conflicts (more likely to escalate, less likely to be peacefully settled).

The argument has stimulated a lot of scholarly debate, and also led to a set of empirical examinations of the testable implications of his theory. Early studies, including Gurr (1994), Fox (2001), Russett et al. (2000), showed that there was little empirical bearing in this reasoning. Huntingson's response to his earlier critics was that his argument applied only to the evolving international scene after the end of the Cold War, and that data prior to 1989 could not be used to refute his thesis (Huntington, 2000). And some later studies do find support for *some* aspects of Huntington's claim: conflicts within civilizations are less likely to escalate into war during the post-Cold War period than during the Cold War period (Tusicisny, 2004). Yet, others scholars have examined exactly the post-1989 period, and the empirical picture that emerges stands mostly in contrast to the Clash of Civilisation theory. Thus, civilizational differences do not increase the risk for civil war onset among ethnic groups, after the 1989-time period (Bormann, Cederman et al. 2015), nor do religious identity conflicts tend to be less likely to be peacefully settled (Isak Svensson, 2007).

Although ethnic intrastate disputes over civilizational cleavages are more likely to escalate than intra-civilizational conflicts within states, it seems to be major cultural divisions rather than civilizational differences (as predicted by Huntington) that account for the intensity of intra-state conflicts (Roeder, 2003). In general, religious difference is not associated with higher risk for civil war. Intrastate conflicts are more likely to occur between linguistic dyads of ethnic groups, than between those ethnic groups divided by religion (Bormann, Cederman, & Vogt, 2015).

To summarize, conflicts after the end of the Cold war do not trend in the manner predicted by Huntington, and, moreover, civilizational conflicts are not, in general, more intense than conflicts that occur between ethnic groups from the same ethnicity (Fox, 2002). Thus,

empirical research on civil war has (with some exceptions) been able to refute the central tenants of Huntington's claims.

Religious Diversity

The debate about whether particular relationships between religious groups influence the risk propensity for civil war is broader than the debate about civilizational differences. There can be other constellations of religious demography which may influence why civil wars occur. Are religiously diverse countries more or less at risk for being embroiled in civil conflict? The extent to which religious diversity affects the propensity for civil war has been much debated. Focus in this field of research has been on the causes of civil war onset, whereas less attention has been given to whether religious demography factors influence dynamics or termination of civil wars.

Various forms of religious diversity have been examined: religious fragmentation, polarization, domination, and the presence of overlapping identities (Basedau et al., 2016). The relationship between different religious groups can create underlying power-balances that affect the incentives for groups to resort to violence, and thus influence the risk of civil war.

There are mixed findings when it comes to religious demography as an explanation for civil war. On the one hand, some research finds that societies' degree of religious fractionalization, measured in terms of the number of religious groups, cannot account for higher (or lower) risk for civil war (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Thus, the demographic size of religious groups does not matter (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004). In other words, countries with a higher degree of religious diversity seem not to be more at risk for civil wars than religiously homogeneous countries (Fearon and Laitin 2003).

Others do find that the demographic size of religious groups is an important predictor for civil war (Ellingsen, 2000; Reynal-Querol, 2002a). In religiously heterogenous countries, would-be rebels may face greater challenges for overcoming collective action problems, and therefore religiously homogenous countries may be more at risk for civil war (Reynal-Querol, 2002b).

Differences in measurements may account for the dissimilar results, as some studies also take into account the relative size of the group, as an indication of the extent to which other groups may be potential threats to the groups' interests. In these studies, the focus is on the demographic power-balance between religious groups, and the extent to which one group can dominate over the other. Thus, overall, there is no consensus on whether religious heterogeneity or homogeneity matter when it comes to explaining the outbreak of intra-state armed conflicts. One reason for why religious demography factors have not been found to be strong predictors may be because the measurements do not distinguish cases where the religious cleavages have high salience from those where the cleavages do not (Nordås, 2014). Measurements on religious demography have also largely not taken into account that it may be changes in religious demography (and the speed to which those changes occur) that account for why such cleavages become salient.

Another aspect of religious diversity is the extent to which the religious differences overlap with other group identities, for example, class, language, ancestry, or territorial bases (Selway, 2011). If religious cleavages overlap with other identity-cleavages in a society, there can be a greater risk for civil war as there are fewer integrative bonds and larger social distance that can bridge different groups. Differences in status or positions between the groups can be multiplied if they are reinforced by several layers of identity-cleavages.

Empirical research on this issue points in different directions. On the one hand, civil wars are more likely to occur when religious identity differences overlap with such group differences as language or economic cleavages (Basedau et al. 2016). On the other hand, cross-cutting differences do not increase the risk of civil war if we focus on the social cleavages in terms of language differences and religious dissimilarities only (Bormann et al., 2015). It is also important to recognize the other side of cleavages that cut across various dimensions of identities: religious identities can provide a basis for identity that can transcend particular national, ethnic or linguistic cleavages. It can serve as a bond, creating bridges between other types of social groups. Moreover, there are some indications that religious diversity may have a pacifying effect in terms of reducing the risk of violence. Again, the political power relations between different ethnic groups may be important in explaining this variation. Thus, the presence of politically marginalized ethnic groups increases the risk for religious defined violence – in this study, the focus is on Islamist violence particular (C. Dowd, 2015). Overall, then, the field has not reached any consensus and there are differences in the empirical results when it comes to the conditions under which religious diversity impacts the risk for civil war and there is still need to study to more clearly specify the conditions under which religious diversity affect risks for civil wars, as well as specifying the causal mechanisms that could be at work.

One particular sub-debate in relation to religious demography is the so-called 'Muslim exceptionalism' debate: whether (and if yes, in that case, why), Muslim-majority countries are associated with a higher risk of civil war. Some scholars have emphasized the prevalence of civil wars in Muslim-majority countries and/or the prevalence of Islamist rebel groups (Gleditsch & Rudolfsen, 2016; Toft, 2007; Toft & Zhukov, 2015; Wiktorowicz & Kaltenthaler, 2006). The Muslim world has not followed the general downward trends for

armed conflicts, and more civil wars tend to be located in the Middle East and the wider Muslim world (Pinker, 2011:362). Other scholars dispute the exceptionalism of Islam in terms of armed conflicts (Asal, Schulzke, & Pate, 2014; Hafez, 2003; Karakaya, 2015). The proportion of a country's population that is made up of Muslims do not account for a risk for large-scale intrastate violence (Fish, Jensenius, & Michel, 2010). Moreover, Muslim-majority countries are not more at risk for civil war when controlling for other important predictors for the outbreak of civil war, including the existence of a young population (youth-bulge), regime repression and oil-dependency (Karakaya, 2015).

The Third Level: Relationship to the State

The third, and last, level of analysis is the relationship between the religious groups on the one hand, and the state, on the other. The institutional relation between a state and a religious group can increase the risk of civil war. Overall then, the state-religion ties represent one of the most important fields of research when it comes to religion and conflict: an understanding of how religion influences the risk for civil wars cannot be reached without taking this institutional perspective into account. One of the fundamental conditions under which religion can influence the risk for armed conflicts is when religion has close ties with the state (Peter S. Henne, 2012; Toft et al., 2011). Thus, religious freedom can be an underlying condition inducing the chances for peaceful development; and by contrast, state favoritism for some particular religious groups over others can increase the risk for violence. State favoritism in terms of preferences and unequal treatment of different religious groups within a country can be a way one group can manifest its domination, and can create grievances that increase the risk of civil war (Grim & Finke, 2006).

When it comes to state-religion ties, there is a set of interesting and sometimes divergent empirical findings. In general, earlier research has found that religious discrimination shows

no relationship to civil war (Fearon & Laitin, 2003), yet this conclusion needs to be substantially modified in light of later research. In the context of *ethnic* conflicts, religious discrimination does increase the risk of violence (Akbaba & Taydas, 2011). Moreover, whether religious groups are excluded from political power, or downgraded from an earlier higher status of power, can increase their grievances and thereby increase the risk for civil war (Bormann et al., 2015).

When disaggregating the causal chain from grievances to civil war, the role of the religious factors can be nuanced. In fact, discrimination increases the probability that groups will express grievances, but religious grievances do not necessarily increase the risk of civil war (Basedau, Fox, Pierskalla, Strüver, & Vüllers, 2017). Minority rights are increasing and discrimination, including religious discrimination, is decreasing over time, which may account for why ethnic conflicts are decreasing in frequency (Cederman, Gleditsch, & Wucherpfennig, 2017). Moreover, if the focus is on religious civil wars, which can be either conflicts where parties have different religious identities and/or where the incompatibility is defined in religious terms, then moderately restricted religious rights in autocracies seem to be the most war-prone. Moreover, an increase in religious restrictions, in the context of authoritarian regimes, can also increase the risk of civil war over religious issues and/or identities (Kim & Choi, 2017).

The causal process, however, is disputed. Whereas grievances have been the focus in much of the debate on religious discrimination, the state's restriction on religion can also influence opportunities for participation in civil war (for example, by limiting ways in which religious actors can organize or mobilise), and this may explain the onset of civil wars and other forms of religious violence (Muchlinski, 2014). In addition, the causal story can run both ways.

Religious civil wars can lead states, especially non-democracies, to be more repressive of religious communities within their borders (Peter S Henne & Klocek, 2017; Sarkissian, 2015). This can, in turn, lead to more grievances and conflict in the future. For these reasons, religious civil wars seem to be at most risk of occurring when regimes are anocratic: the high levels of repression in autocracies and low levels of repression in democracies instead decrease the risk of religious violence. Thus, there may be a non-linear relationship between religious discrimination and the risk for intra-state violence, conditional on the difference in types of regimes.

The relationship between religious groups and states is in no way a one-way direction. So far, we have mostly discussed how states can create various institutional frameworks, influencing the space and motivations for religious communities. Yet, religious communities can also significantly affect state behavior. The influence by religious groups can also help to foster a spirit of cooperation, reconciliation and co-existence. Often, though, religious actors have soughts to influence how states pursue political conflict, provide ideological motivation for the pursuit of political violence against another religious group or communities, or sought to obstruct or spoil attempts towards their peaceful resolution. In fact, they are sometimes in a position to derail peace attempts, as can be seen in the cases of Jewish organizations and political parties in Israel, or Buddhist leaders and organization in Sri Lanka. In Israel, the religious settler movements in the Israel-Palestine conflict, including groups such as Gush Emunim (Bloc of the Faithful), have been driving in the settlement movement, which have served to undermine the prospect for a negotiated (two-state) solution to conflict. Moreover, religious parties on the Israeli side have not supported, or even voting against, various peace attempts, been able to influencing the politics through being minor political parties in larger government coalitions, and religious have been active in protest during the peace process.

Most visibly, the assassination of Prime-Minister Rabin shows the risk of religiously motivated individuals taking up violent action against key actors in the peace process (Rynhold 2007). In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist clergy (Sangha) played a central role in obstructing the peace process in Sri Lanka (Frydenlund, 2005). There have been several attempts of religiously based actors to influence state policies in the context of the civil war in the country (1983-2009). Religious political parties, for example, the JHU, an explicitly Buddhist-nationalist, monk-based political party, championed a hawkish and nationalist political program. In fact, the relationship between the political and the religious actors can be characterized as one of "reciprocal permeation" (Weiberg-Salzmann, 2014:306), where the religious actors and the political actors try to influence each other for different purposes. Thus, religious communities, through organizations, parties or religious leaders can take actions serving to spoil the process of resolving civil wars.

Conclusion

To conclude, it has previously been noted that "the jury is still out on whether conflicts involving religion are inherently more intractable than other conflicts, whether religious-ideological issues make it harder for warring elites to compromise without being seen as betraying their principles, and whether religious disputes have a zero-sum quality that other disputes lack" (Crocker, Hampson, & Aall, 2004:83). As I have shown above, empirical research is now at a stage where there is substantial evidence that conflicts involving religion are, indeed, particularly difficult from the perspective of conflict resolution. Yet, when it comes to explaining why, the jury is still out. Whereas research has established that religious civil wars are more intractable, the explanations for this relationship are yet to be explained. The answers may be found in the religious ideas and institutions themselves, or in how religious groups interact with each other, or how states interact with religious groups. Each of

these clusters of explanations have their merits, but we are still not at a stage where more firm conclusions about how religion influences civil wars can be drawn. As religiously defined conflicts are becoming more common (Isak Svensson & Nilsson, 2018) it is pivotal to understand more about the conditions under which religious factors influence civil wars' onset, dynamics, and termination. If this overview can be a basis to stimulate further research in this field, it has achieved its aspiration.

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