

Correlated Conflicts

The Independent Nature of Ethnic Strife

JONATHAN FOX

There is little agreement on the role of religion in ethnic conflict, or, for that matter, its role in politics and society in general. While some argue that it is a central factor, others claim that religion has little or no influence. The belief that religion is not important dominated the social sciences for most of the 20th century. Schools of thought such as modernization theory in political science and secularization theory in sociology had their origins in the formation of the social sciences as a basis for providing a rational and scientific basis for society and politics. These theories were supposed to replace the previous “primordial” religious and ethnic bases for society and politics. Only in the past two decades have social scientists begun seriously to question the assumption that modernity was causing religion to become an epiphenomenon.

Among those arguments that claim that religion is central, Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory is perhaps the most widely known. Huntington posits that the majority of conflicts in the post-Cold War era, including ethnic conflict, will be between several civilizations with differing religions. While Huntington’s specific theory is controversial, there are many other less disputed formulations that religion is important. This brief description does not nearly do justice to an extensive and varied literature, but it is sufficient to show that contradicting conceptions of the role of religion exist in the modern era.

One way to sort truth from misconception is to identify religion’s impact on a more narrowly defined aspect of modern politics and society: ethnic conflict. Too often are religion and ethnicity grouped together; to evaluate the importance of religion, each factor must be considered independently. Instead of using anecdotes, a systematic analysis of ethnic conflicts provides a better basis for analysis. This is done through a review of the general trends found in an extensive analysis of a data set gathered by Minorities at Risk (MAR), which contains information on 337 ethnic minorities which were politically active at some point in time between 1945 and 2000. While there are clearly more ethnic minorities in the world than this—some estimates run as high as 20,000—these 337 minorities represent all of those that have been politically active on a mass level and, therefore, all of those who have been involved in serious ethnic conflict. Unless otherwise noted, the analyses discussed here focus on the 1990 to 2000 portion of the data. It is important to note that the analysis presented here is a summary of

a considerably more extensive, in-depth analysis of the MAR data than can be presented in this context.

Religion’s influence on conflict can take one of four forms. First, conflicts can involve identity issues which, in turn, can be based in part on religion. Second, conflicts can involve religious issues like religious discrimination, complaints over that discrimination, or the demand by a minority for more religious rights. Third, religious institutions can involve themselves in a conflict directly. Fourth, religion is often used by either or both sides of the conflict to legitimize their actions.

It is important to clarify some terms that frequently arise in such discussions. The term ethno-religious refers to those ethnic minorities that belong to different religions or denominations than the majority group in their state. Religious discrimination refers to restrictions on religious practices, not political or economic discrimination against religious minorities. Religious grievances are complaints about religious discrimination. Demands for more religious rights refer to demands that are not related to religious discrimination, such as demands for privileges not given to other religions.

The basic argument presented here is that while religion influences ethnic conflict in a number of ways, it is not the primary driving factor behind ethnic conflict. These results can be broken up into eight general trends.

In Ethnic Conflict, Religion Is a Factor, Not a Cause

Of the 337 minorities in the MAR data set, 53 percent belong to the same religion and denomination as the majority group in their state. Another 11 percent belong to different denominations of the same religion as the majority group. Thus, most ethnic conflicts do not even have the potential to involve issues of religious identity. In addition, most ethno-religious conflicts do not involve religious issues. Among a sample of 105 ethno-religious minorities, for which more detailed data is available, in only 12 cases is religion an issue that is of equal or greater significance than other issues. In an additional 27 cases, religion is a significant issue but is less important than other issues. Combining this with the fact that only a minority of ethnic conflicts are between groups who belong to different

religions means that religion is a significant issue in only about 17 percent of ethnic conflicts. This trend of religious conflicts being a minority of ethnic conflicts is consistent throughout the 1945 to 2000 period, with little change over time.

However, religious factors are present in a majority of ethno-religious conflicts. During the 1990s, of the sample of 105 ethno-religious minorities, 43 percent experience religious discrimination, 69 percent complain of past or present religious discrimination, 22 percent demand more religious rights in their state, and 72 percent live in states where the use of religion in political discourse is considered legitimate. Overall, only 18 percent of these conflicts do not involve at least one of these factors. In short, while most ethnic conflicts are not primarily about religion, most ethno-religious conflicts involve some religious factors.

Ethno-Religious Conflicts Occur in Ethnic Conflicts

The mere fact that a conflict involves an ethno-religious minority changes the dynamics of the conflict. Ethno-religious conflicts tend to involve higher levels of discrimination and grievances over political and cultural issues, both of which are important causes of ethnic protest and group mobilization. They are also more likely to involve issues of self-determination, which, as discussed below, is a primary cause of ethno-religious conflict.

Self-Determination Causes Ethnic Conflict

One of the most dramatic results from the analysis of the MAR data is that, unless an ethno-religious minority expresses a desire for self-determination, it rarely engages in terrorism, guerrilla warfare, or civil war. The only exceptions to this during the 1990s are the Shi'a minorities in Bahrain and Afghanistan and the Maronite Christian minority in Lebanon. The other 45 ethno-religious minorities that engage in this level of violent conflict all express some desire for autonomy during the 1990s. Even those groups that suffer from the highest levels of religious discrimination but do not express a desire for self-determination, like the Ba'hai minority in Iran and the Christian minorities in Egypt and Iran, do not engage in any of these forms of organized violence.

However, among those ethno-religious minorities who do express a desire for self-determination, the average level of political violence is considerably higher during the 1990s. During the late 1990s, ethno-religious-separatist conflicts were 67 percent more violent than were other separatist conflicts. Furthermore among ethno-religious-separatist conflicts, those in which the minority expressed religious grievances were 52 percent more violent than those in which no such grievances were expressed.

The only conclusion possible from this set of results is that ethnic conflict is not caused by religion, but rather by self-determination. But once the potential for conflict exists because of a minority's desire for self-determination, religion

significantly exacerbates that conflict. Self-determination is also an important element in non-ethno-religious conflicts: among non-ethno-religious groups, those that express a desire for self-determination engage in violence almost twice as often as those who do not.

“The only conclusion possible is that . . . ethnic conflict is not caused by religion, but rather, by self-determination.”

However, it is important to emphasize that religion and self-determination are not the only causes of ethnic violence. Ted R. Gurr, the founder of the MAR project, in an analysis of the entire MAR data set, found that the factors that most contribute to violent ethnic rebellion are persistent protest in the past, repression against the minority, mobilization by the minority, instability in the state in which the minority resides, international support for the minority group, self-determination, and the spread of conflict across international borders.

Role of Religion Can Expand in Ethnic Conflict

The relationship between religion, self-determination, and rebellion described above was not always the case. Between 1945 and 1979, among ethnic minorities who expressed a desire for self-determination, the average level of rebellion for ethno-religious minorities was about the same as the average for other ethnic minorities. Only in the early 1980s did religious factors begin to exacerbate ethnic conflicts. This exacerbation increased steadily during the 1980 to 2000 period; those who predicted that modernity would eventually make religion an epiphenomenon apparently got it backward. Since 1980, at least as far as ethnic conflict is concerned, religion's impact has been increasing.

Religion Can Facilitate and Inhibit Ethnic Conflict

Religious factors do not always exacerbate ethnic conflict; sometimes they inhibit it. In fact, some religious factors have both effects under different circumstances. For example, while religious grievances exacerbate rebellion, they inhibit ethnic protest. That is, the more an ethno-religious minority is upset over religious discrimination against it, the less they protest. This relationship remains constant even when controlling for other factors including regime type, repression, self-determination, grievances expressed over political, economic, and cultural discrimination, economic variables, international intervention, and the spread of conflict across borders. In fact, no variable in the entire MAR data set can explain away this relationship. The only explanation is the argument of scholars such as

ANNUAL EDITIONS

René Girard that violence is an intrinsic element of religion because religion provides a way for people to express their psychological need for violence in a socially acceptable manner through rituals, ceremonies, and belief systems that incorporate violent imagery. For this reason, violence is preferred, at least subconsciously, over peaceful protest.

Another example of religion's dual role in violence is the role of religious institutions in mobilization. When religious grievances are low, religious institutions cause protest to drop over 40 percent, but when religious grievances are high, these institutions can double protest. In other words, religious institutions tend to benefit from the status quo and thus support it, but when religion is involved in a conflict, they tend to support mobilization for that conflict.

Religious legitimacy also occupies a dual role in the formation of ethnic grievances. When religion is not a major issue in the conflict, grievances over secular issues more than double. However, when religious issues are significant, the presence of religious legitimacy is associated with a 27 percent drop in grievances over secular issues. Regardless of whether religion is a key issue in a conflict, religious legitimacy is associated with an 85 percent rise of religious grievances.

This dual role that religious institutions and legitimacy play in ethnic conflict represents a deeper trend of religious elites using religion to benefit religious institutions. In the case of religious institutions and mobilization, most religions benefit from government support or at least an absence of government interference. It is only worth risking this status if the religion itself is at risk, as is likely the case if a minority is expressing religious grievances. In the case of religious legitimacy, casting a religious light on grievances expressed by a group over other issues is a good way to increase the relevance of religious institutions within that group. However, if religious issues are at stake, the priority is to defend the religion rather than use resources on other issues.

International Intervention Is Influenced by Religion

The MAR data set contains information on two types of international intervention in ethnic conflicts between 1990 and 1995. The first type is political intervention, which includes the following activities by a foreign state on behalf of a minority: giving ideological encouragement, providing non-military financial support, providing access to external markets and communications, using peacekeeping units, and instituting a blockade. The second type is military intervention by a foreign state on behalf of a minority, which includes: providing funds for military supplies, making direct military equipment donations or sales, providing military training, providing military advisors, carrying out rescue missions, engaging in cross-border raids, providing cross-border sanctuaries, and sending in-country combat units.

The impact of religion on intervention can be seen in two ways. First, political intervention occurs more often on behalf of ethno-religious minorities. Political intervention by foreign

states benefits 60 percent of ethno-religious minorities as compared to 39 percent of other ethnic minorities. However, religion seems to have little impact on whether ethno-religious minorities benefit from military intervention. Second, states who intervene do so most often on behalf of minorities religiously similar to themselves. Interventions by states that were religiously similar to the minority group on whose behalf they intervened represent 76 percent of political and 78 percent of military interventions. This trend is even stronger for Muslim states, 92 percent of whose political interventions and 89 percent of whose military interventions are on behalf of Muslim minorities, as opposed to 70 percent and 78 percent respectively for intervention by Christian states on behalf of Christian minorities.

World Conflict Has Not Become More Civilizational

Samuel Huntington predicted that with the end of the Cold War, world conflict, including ethnic-conflict, would become more civilizational. For the purposes of the MAR data set, this means that the percentage of ethnic conflicts that are civilizational should increase, and civilizational ethnic conflicts should become more violent in comparison to non-civilizational ethnic conflicts. Neither of these predictions, in fact, came true. During the Cold War, 37 percent of ethnic conflicts could be termed civilizational, which increased slightly to 39 percent in 2000. However, this slight increase is nowhere near the paradigmatic shift Huntington predicted. In fact, the mean level of ethnic rebellion in civilizational conflicts was lower than the mean level of rebellion in non-civilizational conflicts from 1950 until 2000.

Furthermore, all the quantitative studies of Huntington's theory of which I am aware unanimously contradict his predictions. In addition to analyses of the MAR data set, this includes analyses of the Uppsala and State Failure data sets on domestic conflict, the Militarized Interstate Dispute data set, the International Crisis data set, and both the domestic and international conflict versions of the Correlates of War data set. These data sets together constitute the majority of the most widely recognized data sets on conflict in political science and international relations. The unambiguous and consistent refutation of Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis is as clear a refutation of the theory as is possible using such data.

This opens the question of how religion is shown to influence conflict while Huntington's concept of civilizations, which is largely based on religion, does not. (The overlap between the two in the MAR data is between 78.5 percent and 82.8 percent, depending on how it is measured.) The answer is in the nature of the claims made. The claim made here is that religion is not the primary cause of ethnic conflict, but it does have an influence. Huntington makes the more ambitious claim that his civilizations will become the defining factor in world conflict. The evidence falls short in proving Huntington's paradigmatic claims but is more than sufficient to prove the less extreme claims made here.

Civil Conflict

Huntington uses the term “civilization” to refer to the broadest grouping of people. A person living in Rome can be counted as a Roman, an Italian, or a Westerner. The grouping “Westerner” refers to his “civilization” because one cannot generalize beyond that. He posits that the future source of conflict will primarily be due to “civilization” rather than ideology for six reasons:

- I. Differences in civilization are deeply rooted because they define the way humans view the world.
- II. Globalization has led to increased interaction between different civilizations, intensifying hostilities between groups.
- III. Globalization has caused individuals to identify less with the nation in which they reside in and more with the cultural group to which they belong.
- IV. Western nations dominate the global arena, inspiring jealousy and anti-Western movements.
- V. Ideological values can be altered (e.g. China’s move toward the free market), while basic cultural ideas cannot.
- VI. Regional blocs are caused by a reinforced unity of civilization (e.g. the Baltic states’ inability to be accepted for NATO membership).

Foreign Affairs, September 1993

Furthermore, in head-to-head comparisons of the impact of religion and civilization on ethnic conflict, religion usually provides a better explanation than civilization can. Huntington’s civilization thesis falls short even as a surrogate variable for religion.

Religion Is More Important in Muslim Conflict

Another of Huntington’s claims, among others, is that Muslim groups will be more violent. There is some statistical evidence for this assertion. During the 1990s, Muslim minorities engaged in higher average levels of rebellion than did other ethnic minorities. They are also more likely to be involved in ethnic conflict than groups of other religions when taking their proportion of the world population into account. In addition, religion is more important in ethnic conflicts involving

Muslims. Religious discrimination by Muslim majorities is 4.7 times the average level by Christian majorities, and religious legitimacy in Muslim states is 1.7 times that in Christian states. Also, Muslim minorities’ demands for more religious rights are 3.4 times higher than those of Christian minorities.

However, even these results are not fully in line with Huntington’s predictions. There was little change in conflict patterns involving the Islamic civilization with the end of the Cold War. During the Cold War, Islamic groups constituted 24 percent of all groups involved in conflict. While this rose to 28 percent in 2000, this is hardly the increase in conflict one would expect of groups said to have increasingly “bloody borders.” Furthermore, during the Cold War, 52 percent of conflicts involving Muslims could be considered civilizational, this dropped to 47 percent by 2000. Therefore, while Islamic groups may be disproportionately violent, this is not new to the post-Cold War era, and much of this violence is intra-civilizational.

Religion As a Prevailing Factor

Four decades ago, Karl Deutsch warned of the dangers of relying upon “introspection, intuition, and insight” in order to analyze social phenomena. He believed that this anecdotal approach often resulted in people seeing what they expected or wanted to see rather than what is actually there. In any case, such a methodology is not verifiable among researchers. The exceptionally large differences of opinion over the role of religion in conflict, including the vigorous debate over Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory, show that in this case Deutsch’s fears have been realized.

Deutsch proposes systematic quantitative analysis as the solution to this problem. The methodology applied here shows that the truth regarding ethnic conflict, as best as it can be determined from the MAR data, is somewhere between the predictions of religion’s demise and the predictions that it will be the defining factor in world conflict. This brief review of the larger body of analysis shows that while religion is not the defining factor for ethnic conflict, neither is it absent. Rather, it influences ethnic conflict in a number of ways. In some cases religious factors exacerbate conflict and in others they inhibit ethnic conflict. Also, Muslim and Christian groups have different conflict patterns. Thus, while ethnic conflict cannot be fully understood without taking religion into account, religion cannot provide the sole explanation for ethnic conflict.

JONATHAN FOX is professor in the Department of Political Studies at Bar Ilan University, Israel. He is also the author of *Ethnoreligious Conflict in the Late 20th Century: A General Theory*.

From *Harvard International Review*, Winter 2004, pp. 58–62. Copyright © 2004 by the President of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission.