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Religious Dimensions of Political Conflict and Violence

Rogers Brubaker[1]

Abstract

This paper seeks to develop a nuanced and qualified account of the distinctive ways in which religion can inform political conflict and violence. It seeks to transcend the opposition between *particularizing* stances, which see religiously informed political conflicts as sui generis and uniquely intractable, and *generalizing* stances, which assimilate religiously informed political conflicts to other forms of political conflict. The paper specifies the distinctively religious *stakes* of certain political conflicts, informed by distinctively religious understandings of right order, as well as the distinctiveness of religion as a rich matrix of interlocking *modalities and mechanisms* that—in certain contexts—can contribute to political conflict and violence even when the stakes are not distinctively religious. At the same time, the paper shows that many putatively religious conflicts are fundamentally similar to other conflicts over political power, economic resources, symbolic recognition, or cultural reproduction.

Keywords

religion, ethnicity, conflict, violence

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing public and academic interest in the religious dimensions of political conflict. Prompted by such high-profile developments as the Iranian Revolution, the rise of politically active fundamentalist movements in all major religious traditions, the prominent implication of religion in a spate of civil wars and terrorist campaigns, and the resurgence of "public religion" in a range of settings in which religion had been prevailingly understood as a private matter, political scientists—long strikingly uninterested in religious phenomena—have "found religion" with a vengeance, while sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of religion, as well as others in the field of religious studies, have become increasingly interested in political conflict and violence.[1]

That religion matters is clear; yet *how* it matters—and whether it matters in ways that require attention to distinctively religious forms and dynamics—is anything but. Debate has been structured by the opposition between what I will call particularizing and generalizing

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[1] University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Rogers Brubaker, Department of Sociology, UCLA, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551, USA.
Email: brubaker@soc.ucla.edu

stances. Particularizing stances treat religiously grounded political conflict as sui generis. Religious identities, ideologies, and organizations are held to generate or transform political conflicts in ways that other identities, ideologies, and organizations do not. Religious conflict and violence—religious nationalism, religious civil wars, or religious terrorism, for example—have a logic or causal texture of their own that sets them apart from other forms of conflict and violence. They therefore require analysis on their own terms; they cannot be subsumed under more general analytical rubrics.

Generalizing stances reject the idea that religious conflict or violence is sui generis (Cavanaugh 2009). Religious identities, ideologies, and organizations are held to work like other identities, ideologies, and organizations; and religiously inspired or informed political conflict and violence are best subsumed under political conflict and violence in general. Religion does not require special analytical treatment; indeed, to define one's object of analysis as "religious conflict" or "religious violence" is to take problematic categories of practice, drawn from public discourse, as one's categories of analysis.

Yet particularizing and generalizing stances need not be mutually exclusive. "Religion" is a theoretically as well as practically contested category, but on almost any definition, it designates a vast and heterogeneous universe of phenomena. Proponents of particularizing and generalizing stances focus selectively on aspects of religion that fit their respective analytical strategies. A broader, less one-sided treatment of religion can bring into analytical focus both the distinctiveness of religiously informed political conflict and the ways in which many conflicts involving religiously identified claimants—conflicts over political power, economic resources, symbolic recognition, or cultural reproduction—are fundamentally similar in structure and dynamics to conflicts involving other culturally or ethnically defined claimants.

I begin by discussing the generalizing stance. I devote most of the paper, however, to pursuing a qualified particularizing strategy, by seeking to specify some distinctive ways in which religion is implicated in political conflict. I do so not because I believe the particularizing stance is superior but because I believe it is less well developed and needs more work. The generalizing stance is clear and well defined; the particularizing stance is not. The strongest and clearest particularizing statements, moreover—those that propose the strongest forms of religious exceptionalism—are simply untenable.[2] (Ironically, such strong particularizing stances are not particularizing enough: they make excessively sweeping general claims about religion per se.) The challenge is to develop a more nuanced account of the distinctive ways in which religion can enter into political conflict.

THE GENERALIZING STANCE: RELIGION AS A FORM OF ETHNICITY

The generalizing treatment of religion as one of a number of functionally equivalent bases of identity, difference, social organization, mobilization, and claims-making developed in the context of the study of ethnicity.[3] Two strands of work can be distinguished. The first was inaugurated by anthropologist Fredrik Barth's (1969) enormously influential introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Barth called for redirecting attention from objectively observable patterns of shared culture to the subjectively meaningful categorical distinctions that organize and channel social interaction and thereby constitute practically effective ethnic boundaries. The nature and dynamics of such boundaries could be studied without regard to what Barth rather dismissively—and to his later regret[4]—referred to as the "cultural stuff," that is, patterns of cultural similarity and difference. "The critical focus of investigation . . . becomes the ethnic *boundary* that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (Barth 1969:15).

The second strand of work, focused on politicized ethnicity, emerged from efforts of the 1970s and 1980s to make sense of the welter of mobilization and claims-making on the basis of putatively "primordial" identities—language, race, religion, caste, tribe, kinship, region, indigeneity, customary way of life, or nation—that spectacularly challenged the models of political development, national integration, and civic nation-statehood that had been propounded by midcentury modernization theory.[5] Ethnicity was constituted as an object of study in this line of work by abstracting from the specificities of language, religion, and other ascriptive markers, such as phenotype, region of origin, and customary mode of livelihood, and reducing these to their common denominator as markers of identity and difference and bases of solidarity. This is clear from two field-defining works: Joseph Rothschild's (1981) *Ethnopolitics* and Donald Horowitz's (1985) *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. For Rothschild, it would be pointless to "separate out the notion of ethnic consciousness, solidarity, and assertiveness from religious, linguistic, racial, and other so-called primordial foci of consciousness, solidarity, and assertiveness." If this were to be done, "it is difficult to see what precisely would be left to, or meant by, the residual notion of ethnicity and ethnic groups" (Rothschild 1981:9). The "ethnic significance of these marker-criteria [is determined] *not by their content, but by their social and political context*" (Rothschild 1981:86; emphasis added). After considering a series of criteria, including race, kinship, religion, language, customary mode of livelihood, region, and political experience, Rothschild notes that "ethnic consciousness and assertiveness do not flow automatically" from any of these differences, but are the "products of political entrepreneurship" (Rothschild 1981:96). Crucially, whether political entrepreneurs mobilize along the lines of "religion or language or race is intrinsically irrelevant, since *any and every one of them can be sacralized into a symbolic focus of ethnic mobilization and politicization, and this process is more or less the same whichever marker-criterion is selected*" (Rothschild 1981:98; emphasis added). Donald Horowitz takes a similar stance in his magisterial *Ethnic Groups in Conflict*. Though Horowitz emphasizes durable and deep-seated group antipathy rather than (as Rothschild does) political entrepreneurship, he too favors "an inclusive conception of ethnicity that embraces differences identified by color, language, religion, or some other attribute of common origin" (Horowitz 1985:41).[6]

These lines of work developed independently of one another: the former was concerned with social organization, the latter with political mobilization and claims-making. But both lines of work treated ethnicity as a culturally "empty," that is, culturally nonspecific, form. For Barth (1969), ethnicity was an "organizational vessel" (p. 14) defined by its form—by the fact of socially consequential categorization of people in terms of their "basic, most general identity, presumptively determined by [their] origin and background" (p. 13)—not by its cultural content. Politicized ethnicity, too, was conceptualized as a culturally empty form (or set of related forms) of claims-making, grounded in putatively primordial forms of solidarity. Both lines of work discounted culture: what mattered was not how difference and identity were culturally construed but how they were socially organized and politically expressed.

Some more recent works have integrated the Barthian perspective on boundaries with the analysis of politicized ethnicity (Chandra 2012; Posner 2005; Wimmer 2013).[7] These works continue to focus on boundaries rather than "cultural stuff" (in Barth's terms) and on context rather than content (in Rothschild's terms). But they model ethnicity more explicitly as a multidimensional identity space constituted by multiple more or less independent axes of division, including "race, religion, sect, language, dialect, tribe, clan, caste, nationality, and physical differences" (Chandra 2012:109) and focus more explicitly on explaining which particular boundary, cleavage, or identity from the set of available possibilities will become politically salient (Posner 2005:2; Wimmer 2013:81). Posner expressly rejects the idea that one kind of identity might be more intrinsically compelling than another; rather, the choice between identities in a repertoire "is made purely instrumentally . . . by weighing which identity will secure them access to the greatest share of political and economic resources" (Posner 2005:138).[8]

The works discussed so far share a strategy for studying the social organization and political expression of cultural difference under the generalizing rubric of ethnicity. Religion figures under this rubric as one possible marker of membership, source of solidarity, or form of identity alongside other, functionally equivalent, markers of membership, sources of solidarity, or forms of identity. Strictly speaking, however, these works do not represent a generalizing strategy for studying *religion*; they represent a generalizing strategy for studying *ethnicity.* This strategy subsumes religion—along with race, caste, kinship, region, language, indigeneity, and nationality—under the abstract, culturally empty rubric of ethnicity. It thus represents a generalizing *stance* toward religion; but since religion is not a central focus of concern, it would be misleading to speak of these works as developing a generalizing *strategy* for theorizing the religious dimension of political conflict. These works do not start with politicized religion and then seek to subsume it under a broader conceptual or theoretical rubric; they start with ethnicity, which they define broadly enough to embrace religion. Religion is never at the center of analytical attention.

In the remainder of the paper, I will start from politicized religion rather than from politicized ethnicity, and I will consider some possibly distinctive ways in which religion can inform and inflect political conflict. I consider first how religion can define the *stakes* of conflict and second how it can shape the *modalities and mechanisms* of conflict.

STAKES: THE SUBSTANTIVE REGULATION OF PUBLIC LIFE

Conflicts involving religiously identified *parties* or *claimants* need not involve religiously defined *stakes*. They may be conflicts over political power, economic resources, symbolic recognition, cultural reproduction, or national self-determination. This is what makes it possible and fruitful to subsume religion, for certain purposes, under the rubric of politicized ethnicity. Though the parties are often identified as "Catholics" and "Protestants," for example, the stakes of the conflict in Northern Ireland are not religious; the same holds for the conflict between Muslims, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats in the former Yugoslavia.[9] This is not to say that religion has not figured in these conflicts in significant ways; but the parties in these conflicts are not struggling *over* religion, and the conflicts are not fundamentally *about* religion (Jenkins 1997; McGarry and O'Leary 1995).

Even where the parties are struggling over religion, it may nonetheless be fruitful to underscore the commonalities between certain forms of religious and ethnopolitical conflict. The intense conflict between proponents of secular and religious schooling in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a case in point. Here the conflict—between ascendant liberals on the one hand and Calvinists and Catholics on the other—was fundamentally about the place of religion in public life. Yet the struggles of Calvinists and Catholics to secure full state funding for religious schools—an aim realized in the constitutional compromise of 1917—are structurally similar to struggles for autonomy in the name of ethnolinguistic or ethnonational minorities, in that both are struggles to secure the conditions of cultural reproduction. In theological terms, of course, Catholics and Calvinists did not see themselves as simply seeking to reproduce a group-specific culture. But in political and social-organizational terms, they were doing just that. And the Dutch system of "pillarization"—under which not only schools but universities, hospitals, old-age homes, social welfare agencies, recreational associations, newspapers, radio stations, and labor unions were organized in parallel Catholic, Calvinist, and to a lesser extent also socialist and liberal segments for the first two thirds of the twentieth century—fostered nonterritorial, group-segmented cultural reproduction in a way similar to that envisioned at the turn of the twentieth century by Karl Renner, the Austro-Marxist theorist of national cultural autonomy, as a strategy for resolving endemic ethnopolitical conflict in the Habsburg Empire (Renner 2005).[10]

In other contexts, however, it is not possible to assimilate religious to ethnopolitical conflict. Here we should distinguish between the *boundary-defining* or *diacritical* (in Barth's term) aspect of religion and the *normative ordering power* intrinsic to many forms of religious life. While the former allows religion to be treated, for certain purposes, as a form of (politicized) ethnicity, the latter alerts us to the distinctively religious stakes and dynamics of certain political conflicts.

Religious understandings of right order exist at personal, familial, communal, societal, and cosmic levels. Considered separately, visions of right order at the personal, familial, and cosmic levels—and in some respects at the level of the religious community as well—may be compatible with understandings of religion as a differentiated and largely privatized sphere of activity. But in many traditions of more serious or demanding religiosity,[11] forms of order (or disorder) at individual, familial, communal, societal, and cosmic levels are understood to be closely interconnected.[12] Such an understanding is likely to generate forms of public religious claims-making and to challenge understandings of religion and politics as sharply differentiated spheres.

Claims-making arising from religious understandings of right order cannot be subsumed under a paradigm of politicized ethnicity (or any other group conflict paradigm). At issue here are not simply claims for power, resources, recognition, reproduction, or self-determination in a context of cultural pluralism. At stake, rather, are *distinctively religious understandings of right order*, especially insofar as these understandings of order not only concern the individual, family, and religious community but are held to be binding for all in the wider society and polity.

Political conflicts informed by such distinctively religious understandings of right order differ fundamentally from politicized ethnicity. The distinction does not turn on the *intensity* of political conflict; it turns on the *substantive content* of conflict. When politicized ethnicity takes a nationalist form, the intensity and the stakes of the conflict can be high: nationalist conflicts can challenge the basic structure and territorial integrity of the state. Yet nationalist conflicts turn in the first instance on the *form of the state* in a specific sense—seeking to establish a congruence between state (or autonomous polity) and nation—not on the *substantive regulation of public life*. Religiously informed political conflict differs from politicized ethnicity (including nationalist forms thereof) insofar as it involves claims to substantively regulate public life in accordance with religious principles, not simply the question of who can control (or share in the control of) the resources, recognition, and opportunities for cultural reproduction that flow from having a state or autonomous polity of one's own or a share in political power. Ethnic identities may be as thick, robust, and deeply felt as religious identities, but they are normatively thin, with few implications for the substantive regulation of public life.

The most salient religiously driven political conflicts over the substantive regulation of public life turn on claims for the implementation of shari'a, which have been central to political contestation throughout much of the Muslim world since the 1970s. "Shari'a politics"—struggles over the "place and authority of the shari'a in society"—assume widely varying forms, as do understandings of what shari'a means in contemporary contexts. But the regulation of gender, sexuality, and family is almost always at stake in such conflicts, as are questions of religious freedom and relations between Muslims and non-Muslims (Hefner 2011).[13] Outside the Muslim world, religiously driven political conflicts likewise pivot on the regulation of gender, sexuality, and the family (Friedland 2002). Conflicts over the substantive regulation of public life arise from the Christian Right's efforts to ban abortion, prohibit gay marriage, restrict access to contraception, restore school prayer, and require the teaching of creationism or intelligent design in school. And they arise from ultraorthodox Jewish demands in Israel that public buses not operate, and that roads in their neighborhoods be closed, on Saturdays; that sex segregation be observed in public spaces in their neighborhoods; that sex-segregated bus lines serve their communities; and that sex segregation be preserved at the Western Wall.

Religion is of course not the only source of claims about the right ordering of public life. The exhaustion of communism and fascism has reduced the salience of conflict driven by comprehensive secular ideological commitments, but moral crusades, social movements, and other forms of political contestation continue to be driven by secular as well as religiously informed moral commitments and understandings of right order (Jasper 1997). Still, religion is a distinctively comprehensive and durable source of politically relevant understandings of right order. And this potent normative ordering power is what distinguishes political conflict with distinctively religious stakes from fundamentally ethnopolitical and ethnonational conflict, even where the parties to such conflict are identified in religious terms.

The distinction can be blurred, to be sure, where ethnicity or nationhood is understood as informed or even constituted by religion. But note the ambiguity in what it means to be informed or constituted by religion. In a weak sense, this can mean simply that religion serves as the key diacritical marker of membership, as in the former Yugoslavia (to return to the example noted above), where Serbs and Croats, speaking essentially the same language, were distinguished by (often merely nominal) religious affiliation. Here the distinction is not blurred. It begins to blur only where nationhood is informed or constituted by religion in a stronger sense that envisions the substantive regulation of public life in accordance with religious principles.

MODALITIES AND MECHANISMS

I argued in the previous section that some religiously informed political conflicts are distinctive by virtue of their religiously defined stakes. I want now to consider the question of whether religiously informed political conflicts—regardless of whether the stakes are distinctively religious—are distinctive in their modalities and mechanisms. In particular, I will consider the modalities and mechanisms of violent religiously informed political conflicts. Is there anything distinctively religious about these modalities and mechanisms? Or are they indistinguishable from the modalities and mechanisms of violent political conflicts that do not involve religion?

Arguments about the connection between religion—or certain forms of religion—and violence have a long history. But they have been given new impetus by data suggesting that religion (and Islam in particular) has become increasingly implicated in political violence in recent decades—and specifically in civil wars (Fox 2004; Toft 2006), suicide bombing (Moghadam 2008), and the mobilization of foreign fighters for participation in distant campaigns (Hegghammer 2010). The most developed accounts of the connection between religion and violence are macroculturalist on the one hand and microrationalist on the other (Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu 2013; cf. Brubaker and Laitin 1998). My strategy here follows Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu's (2013) call for more attention to intervening mesolevel mechanisms and processes. I identify a set of modalities and mechanisms involved in cases of violent religiously informed political conflict, and I consider whether, and in what sense, they are distinctively religious. My argument, to anticipate, is that while none of the key violence-enabling modalities and mechanisms is uniquely religious, religious beliefs, practices, structures, and processes nonetheless provide an important and distinctively rich matrix of such modalities and mechanisms.

A potential objection to this analytical strategy is that "religion" and "religious" are hopelessly inadequate as analytical categories. They are better understood as essentially contested categories of practice. On this understanding, religion per se does not exist. What exists—and what may sustain, enable, or justify political violence in certain contexts—are particular practices, discourses, and structures that are understood by at least some practitioners as religious, though in some cases their religious legitimacy may be vehemently denied by others claiming religious authority.

I am sympathetic to this position, and I believe that a fuller and more rigorous treatment would have to forego the use of "religion" or "religious" as categories of analysis or at least be much more self-reflexive about defining and using these categories. Given the exploratory nature of this discussion, however, I am willing to work here with a relatively casual and imprecise notion of "religion," on the understanding that this designates not a unitary "thing" but a loosely related set of practices, discourses, and structures for which religious sanction is claimed.

I consider here six classes of modalities and mechanisms: (1) the social production of hypercommitted selves; (2) the cognitive and affective construction of extreme otherhood and urgent threat; (3) the mobilization of rewards, sanctions, justifications, and obligations; (4) the experience of profanation; (5) the translocal expandability of conflict; and (6) the incentives generated by decentralized and hypercompetitive religious fields. Two caveats should be noted. First, this enumeration is neither systematic nor exhaustive; it is exploratory and illustrative. Second, these are not specific mechanisms; each designates a broad class of modalities, mechanisms, and processes.

The Social Production of Hypercommitted Selves

By hypercommitted selves, I mean selves constituted by radical and uncompromising forms of commitment to a political, moral, or religious cause. The cause is understood as an unconditional and absolute value, not as one good among others. This stance is what Weber called a *Gesinnungsethik*, an "ethic of conviction" or "ethic of ultimate ends," which he distinguished from an "ethic of responsibility." A *Gesinnungsethik* is defined by an exclusive concern with the intrinsic and absolute value of the end or intention and an indifference to the consequences of action, as illustrated by the maxim "the Christian acts rightly and leaves the outcome to God" (Weber 1978b:82). In the analytical idiom of *Economy and Society*, this involves a purely *wertrational* or "value-rational" orientation of action on the basis of a "conscious belief in the unconditional, intrinsic value [*Eigenwert*] of some ethical, aesthetic, religious or other form of behavior as such, independently of its consequences" (Weber [1922] 1964:17; Weber 1978a:24–25) rather than the weighing of costs and benefits and likely consequences of alternative lines of action characteristic of *zweckrational* or instrumentally rational action.

Hypercommitment need not entail violence; the cause to which one is committed may even expressly repudiate violence. But there is nonetheless an affinity between hypercommitment on the one hand and intransigence and violence on the other. The indifference to consequences that is constitutive of a hypercommitted self facilitates both the *suffering* and the *inflicting* of violence. It does so by suspending ordinary forms of moral accounting, and ordinary forms of sensitivity to risk and harm, in the name of an overriding concern with the one thing that matters. The radical discounting of consequences may go so far as to entail indifference to the possibility or even certainty of one's own death, or indifference to the deaths of others. The discounting of consequences is the source of the extreme moral ambivalence of hypercommitment, which can enable both self-sacrificing forms of moral heroism and self-righteous forms of morally sanctified violence.[14]

There is of course nothing uniquely religious about radical and uncompromising commitment to a cause. The paradigmatic *Gesinnungsethik*, for Weber, was religious; but in "Politics as a Vocation," delivered as a lecture in January 1919 in the context of the turmoil of the November Revolution, Weber was more concerned with secular forms, notably revolutionary syndicalism (Weber 1946:120–21). And all high-risk secular collective action requires commitment and the discounting of risks.[15]

Still, religion's formidable socializing and world-defining powers make it a distinctively robust and productive source of hypercommitted selves (and, more generally, of *wertrational* action). The power to shape selves and subjectivities and to define reality comes into focus most clearly in the case of conversion to a new and more demanding and integral form of religious engagement.[16] Conversion can involve a fundamental shift in identity, a rupture in the way of seeing and experiencing the world, a relativization and devaluation of existing social ties, and a powerful cognitive, emotional, moral, and bodily resocialization. Obviously, certain secular organizations and movements also employ techniques of resocialization in their efforts to produce highly committed members, and commitment can emerge, intensify, and crystallize in the context of unfolding struggles (Calhoun 1991). But religion is a particularly potent matrix of the profound and durable reorganization of the self.

The reorganization of the self through conversion, to be sure, need not produce a hypercommitted self. Religious commitment shades over into hypercommitment only at the extreme endpoint of a continuum. But the logic of "heroic" or "virtuoso" religiosity, premised on an implicitly comparative and competitive frame within which claims can be made for exceptional status on the basis of exceptional religious performance, makes hypercommitment—and with it a disposition toward uncompromising, high-risk, and sometimes violent forms of political action—an immanent and ever-recurring possibility.[17]

The Construction of Extreme Otherhood and Urgent Threat

The construction of otherhood is a general sociocultural process that is in no way distinctively religious. Moreover, while religion is implicated in the construction of otherhood, it is also involved in overcoming otherhood, transcending divisions, and constructing universalistic forms of solidarity (Stamatov 2013). Yet this pluripotentiality of religion—the much-remarked "ambivalence of the sacred" (Appleby 2000)—should not blind us to the fact that religion affords a distinctively rich, potent, flexible, authoritative, renewable, transposable, and mutually reinforcing set of resources—at once symbolic, discursive, ritual, and organizational—for constructing extreme forms of otherhood that can facilitate and legitimize violence.

As authoritative systems of classification, many religious traditions contain specifically religious categories of extreme otherhood: heretic, apostate, infidel, and so on.[18] They specify procedures (such as excommunication or *takfir*) for placing persons in these categories.[19] And they justify and authorize violence, in certain contexts, against members of these categories. Of course all religious traditions are internally contradictory, and justifications of violence stand in tension with other provisions. But categories of religiously legitimated extreme otherhood, and justifications for violence against such others, remain available as a potent discursive resource.

Religious traditions also contain elaborate and distinctive resources for constructing urgent threats and mobilizing and legitimizing action against them.[20] Idioms of sacralization and profanation, of cosmological good and evil, of divinely sanctioned mission or holy war, and of imminent catastrophe or millenarian transformation can be enlisted to raise the stakes (Juergensmeyer 2000; Wessinger 2000). Judgments pronounced by religious authorities can enjoin action—including violent action—to respond to the threat.

More generally, religious understandings of transcendent reality offer powerful leverage for radically devaluing the existing social and political order,[21] and for legitimizing programs of radical reconstruction, which may be understood as requiring violence.[22] Michael Walzer (1965) famously characterized Puritanism as the template for all forms of social revolution, while S. N. Eisenstadt (2005) similarly traced the origin of totalistic, Jacobin forms of radical politics to the transposition of the transcendental religious visions generated by axial-age civilizations from restricted and marginal spaces into the center of politics. More generally still, the charismatic or prophetic moment in religion—like charismatic authority in general—is intrinsically disruptive and even “revolutionary” (Weber 1978a:244).

Mobilization of Rewards, Sanctions, Justifications, and Obligations

Rewards, sanctions, justifications, and obligations are of course generic social processes. Yet religious entrepreneurs and organizations—or political entrepreneurs who speak the language of religion—may be able to mobilize an additional layer of rewards, sanctions, justifications, and obligations beyond those available to their secular counterparts. This is suggested most clearly by the spectacular surge since 2000 in religiously legitimated or rationalized suicide attacks. As political scientists have noted, the strategic and tactical rationality of the great majority of such attacks can be analyzed without reference to the religious idioms in which they are justified (Berman and Laitin 2008; Gill 2011; Pape 2005). But Pape’s (2005:4) much-quoted assertion that “there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism” strains credibility.[23] There can be little doubt of the importance of specifically religious rewards and justifications in the recruitment of suicide attackers, even though such rewards and justifications are neither necessary (as shown by the antireligious Tamil Tigers’ extensive use of suicide bombing) nor sufficient (as shown by the fact that suicide attacks are overwhelmingly concentrated in a small number of theaters of conflict). Religious justifications can transform such attacks from religiously prohibited “suicide” into religiously sanctioned “martyrdom,” rewarded in the afterlife, in which the sins of the martyr, who has “die[d] for the sake of God,” will be washed away (Moghadam 2008:59). Martyrdom, to be sure, has become a secular category (Smith 2008), and in some contexts (notably, Israel, the occupied territories, and Lebanon), strong social support for suicide bombers has led to their celebration as heroes. But while suicide bombing in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been intensively studied, that conflict accounts for only 4 percent of post-2000 suicide attacks. In Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, where more than 80 percent of post-2000 attacks have occurred, specifically religious rewards for “martyrdom” would appear to count for more in recruitment, especially in Pakistan and post-2011 Iraq, where suicide bombing does not involve the struggle against foreign occupation that Pape emphasized (Moghadam 2008:53–54).

Political scientists have tended to discount such religious rewards and justifications. For most political scientists, religion provides an ex post rationalization and justification of conduct that can be explained in nonreligious terms. If our aim is to explain organizational strategies, there is much to be said for such skepticism. If our aim is to understand individuals' willingness to volunteer for suicide missions, however, dismissal of religion is less persuasive. The rationality and intelligibility of suicide bombing for organizations are one thing; its rationality and intelligibility for individuals who volunteer to sacrifice themselves are quite another. The religious legitimations that may serve as ex post rationalizations and justifications for organizations may be ex ante motivations—or at least ex ante forms of sense-making that give suicide missions a larger meaning and purpose—for individuals. What is opportunistically employed, or even cynically manipulated, by organizations may be deeply and sincerely felt by individual recruits and may be constitutive of their selfhood and identity.

The Experience of Profanation

If one takes the categories sacred and profane in a broad Durkheimian sense, then sacred objects (including, on Durkheim's account, the individual person in modern times) are simply those that are set apart and that must be treated with special respect. And profanation is simply an experienced or claimed violation—whether intended or not—of the required respect. Such "profanation" in the broadest sense—in the form of perceived affronts to respect, dignity, and honor, and perceived disrespect toward special objects, places, times, or activities—can generate a violent response in a wide range of contexts that are not substantively religious.

In addition to profanation in this broad and diffuse Durkheimian sense, profanation in a narrower, more substantively religious sense may be a flashpoint for violence. Violence may be triggered by a "ritual of provocation" (Gaborieau 1985) that deliberately desecrates the central symbols of another religion, such as Florida pastor Terry Jones' burning of a Qur'an in March 2011,[24] or the repertory of techniques, often connected with public processions and celebrations, that regularly triggered violence between Catholics and Protestants in early modern Europe (Davis 1973; Kaplan 2007). But a religious profanation may be *experienced* without having been *intended* as such. This need not lead to violence: outrage at a perceived profanation may be channeled into peaceful protest or institutional politics. But it may take extra-institutional and violent forms, as in the threats to Salman Rushdie's life and the bombing of bookstores after the publication of *The Satanic Verses* and in the riots in response to the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that were published by a Danish newspaper in 2005. Occurring many months later, the latter were of course organized, not spontaneous. But the sense of injury and outrage over such profanation (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:16; Mahmood 2009)—nursed and cultivated by political entrepreneurs, to be sure, but not created by them—can serve as a potent if volatile political resource.

Translocal Expandability

As a powerful form of imagined community that often cuts across state boundaries, religion can serve as a vector of conflict expansion through which "outside" forces can become involved in "domestic" conflicts.[25] The most spectacular recent instance of this has involved the participation of substantial numbers of Muslim foreign fighters in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, and Syria.[26] Five things are worth underscoring about this mobilization. The first is its global rather than merely regional nature.[27] This distinguishes foreign fighter mobilization analytically from—even though it is intertwined empirically with—the intervention of outside parties to pursue proximate interests. The second is the bottom-up mobilization of foreign fighters. They may be tolerated or encouraged—or even supported in modest ways—by interested states, but their bottom-up mobilization distinguishes their participation from primarily state-led or state-supported transborder interventions.[28] The third is the salience of ideal rather than material interests. Most foreign fighters are not paid—at least not very much—and cannot expect opportunities for looting or for desirable positions in the case of victory (Hegghammer 2010:64).[29] This lack of material selective incentives distinguishes most of today's foreign fighters from medieval Crusaders, for whom material as well as ideal interests were often at stake.[30] The fourth is the discursive figuration of transborder fighting as an individual religious duty by certain influential clerics, invoking the classical distinction in Islamic jurisprudence between matters that are obligatory for each Muslim individually and those that are obligatory for the community of believers as a whole. This is a conspicuously minority position among Muslim clerics, but it has been an important resource for those otherwise inclined to get involved and receptive to the new pan-Islamist discourse that has highlighted the urgent existential threat faced by the global Muslim *ummah* or community of believers (Hegghammer 2010:73–85). The last is the willingness to fight rather than simply contribute financially at a safe distance. This distinguishes foreign fighters from ethnic diaspora financial support for distant nationalist movements and insurgencies, such as the Tamil Tigers, PKK, and IRA (Chalk 2008). The contemporary mobilization of foreign fighters, in short, draws on a deeply (though of course unevenly) felt sense of personal religious obligation to defend the global imagined community of the *ummah* against an alleged and vividly felt existential threat.

The Structure of Religious Fields

Decentralized and hypercompetitive religious fields can generate incentives for radicalization that can facilitate and legitimize intransigent and sometimes violent forms of religious and political action. In the post-Reformation Wars of Religion in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, a fragmented, anarchic, and hypercompetitive religious field was intertwined with turbulent political fields on multiple scales in ways that promoted the sometimes violent politicization of religion and the violent religionization of politics. A similar dynamic may be at work in the equally fragmented, anarchic, and hypercompetitive field of contemporary (especially Sunni) Islam. The field of Sunni Islam has always been decentralized, but fragmentation and struggles over authority have intensified in the last half-century as mass education and new media have undermined the authority of the *ulama* (legal scholars) and created space for large numbers of new interpreters to claim the right to speak with authority in the name of Islam (Anderson 2003; Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:131–32; Krämer 2006; Krämer and Schmidtke 2006).

In Bourdieusian perspective, fields generate incentives for different kinds of *position-taking* for those in different *positions* (by virtue of possessing different amounts and kinds of capital) (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:94–115). Those who possess little of the most consecrated forms of field-specific capital—in the field of Sunni Islam, the deep jurisprudential knowledge of the *ulama*—seek to valorize new forms of capital that do not depend on such knowledge. They are structurally disposed toward *heteronomy*, that is, toward opening the religious field to forms of capital and principles of valuation derived from other fields: to political or even military capital on the one hand and to the capital of notoriety, fame, or media exposure on the other. They are also structurally disposed toward strategies of *outbidding*,[31] in which they claim to be more truly Islamic than others, and toward strategies of *provocation*, intended to gain visibility and recognition. New entrants to all fields, not just religious ones, are disposed toward heteronomy, outbidding, and provocation: lacking consecrated forms of field-specific capital, they seek to valorize new forms of capital, and they may challenge the nature and boundaries—the fieldness—of the field. But in the fragmented, hypercompetitive field of Sunni Islam, with no structures in place for the authoritative regulation or moderation of internal conflict and competition, these general structural tendencies are greatly accentuated.[32]

Structural incentives for heteronomy, provocation, and outbidding in the religious field can articulate with structural incentives for heteronomy in the political field.[33] In a regional (especially Middle Eastern) context marked in some cases by dual exclusion, at once religious (on the part of repressively secularist regimes) and ethnoreligious (on the part of substantively ethnocratic regimes), and by what can be represented as the neoimperial involvement of "Christian" powers, there are strong incentives to religionize political competition and conflict. There are few and ineffective institutional arrangements to protect politics from religion, just as there are few and ineffective institutional arrangements to protect religion from politics, and specifically, from entanglement in struggles for control over the means of violence.[34]

CONCLUSION

None of the modalities and mechanisms I have discussed is unique to religion. Yet religion provides a distinctively rich and interlocking matrix of such modalities and mechanisms. Strong forms of religious exceptionalism are easily rejected, but the strongly generalizing counterclaim that there is *nothing* distinctive about religiously informed political conflict and violence is equally unsatisfactory. Religion can define reality, constitute communities, nurture powerful emotions, generate commitment, resocialize and reorganize the self, radically devalue the existing order, impose obligations, offer rewards and sanctions, furnish justifications, and intensify threats and dangers. It links cognitive definitions of ultimate reality with structures of feeling and obligation. In so doing, it can authorize, legitimate, enable, and even require violent action in the face of urgent threats, profanations of sacred symbols, and extreme otherhood.

That religion *can* do so does not of course mean that it *will* do so. And the very mechanisms and modalities that can enable religiously informed political conflict to turn violent can also enable powerful forms of nonviolent solidaristic or humanitarian social action (Stamatov 2013). The social production of hypercommitted selves can nurture moral heroism; the construction of urgent threats can radically delegitimize social evils, such as exploitation, slavery, or even war itself; the mobilization of religious rewards, sanctions, justifications, and obligations can motivate and sustain commitments to the welfare of distant others; transnational religion can serve as a vector of expansion of humanitarian campaigns, such as the antislavery movement; and fragmented and hypercompetitive religious fields may generate stances (such as that of the Quakers) that categorically reject violence.

There is, then, no intrinsic connection between religion and political violence. But religion does provide a potent assemblage of moral, ideological, and organizational resources that can, *in certain contexts*, inform, legitimate, or sustain violent conflict, just as they can inform, legitimate, or sustain the most admirable forms of moral and political engagement. The analytical challenge, for students of conflict and violence, is to specify the conditions and contexts in which particular religious practices, discourses, fields, organizations, and structures of sentiment can contribute to the production, reproduction, and transformation of political conflict and violence. Taking up that challenge is beyond the scope of this paper. Doing so would require a different mode of analysis, at once historical, comparative, and contextual, geared toward specifying when, where, how, and why the modalities, mechanisms, and dynamics outlined here are activated in ways that play into political conflict and violence.

My aim in this paper has been a more modest one: to contribute to the development of a more nuanced and qualified particularizing account of the distinctive ways in which religion can enter into political conflict and violence. Such a qualified particularizing account, I have suggested, should be understood as a complement to, not as a substitute for, a generalizing account. We should be attuned to the distinctively religious stakes of certain political conflicts, informed by distinctively religious understandings of right order that are expressed in claims for the substantive regulation of public life in accordance with religious principles; and we should also be sensitive to the distinctiveness of religion as a rich matrix of interlocking modalities and mechanisms that can—in certain contexts—contribute to political conflict and violence even when the stakes of the conflict are not distinctively religious. Yet at the same time, we should recognize the ways in which many putatively religious conflicts—or conflicts in which the parties are identified in religious terms—are fundamentally similar in structure and dynamics to other conflicts over political power, economic resources, symbolic recognition, or cultural reproduction.

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NOTES

1. On fundamentalism, see from a large literature Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2003); Bruce (2000); Marty and Appleby (1995); and Riesebrodt (1993). On the implication of religion in recent civil wars, see Toft (2007). On public religion, Casanova (1994) is magisterial. On the recent surge of interest in religion in political science, see Grzymala-Busse (2012); Philpott (2007, 2009); Toft (2007); Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011); and Wald, Silverman, and Fridy (2005). For recent attention to political conflict in the sociology of religion, see Edgell (2012), Friedland (2012), and Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu (2013). For anthropological discussions of religion and violence, see Eller (2010); Faubion (2003); and Handelman (2011); for history, see Kaplan (2007). Indicative of the burgeoning transdisciplinary interest in the connection between religion and violence are four recent anthologies: the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Juergensmeyer, Kitts, and Jerryson 2013), the *Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence* (Murphy 2011), *Princeton Readings in Religion and Violence* (Juergensmeyer and Kitts 2011), and *Violence and New Religious Movements* (Lewis 2011).
2. See Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu's (2013:196–97) cogent critique of sweeping arguments about the connection between monotheism and violence and still more sweeping arguments about the intrinsic connections between religion per se and violence.
3. One might trace the generalizing strategy back to Max Weber's fragmentary but powerful observations on social closure. There is a certain irony here: Weber's monumental analyses of religion are particularizing, not generalizing; they take seriously both the distinctive content of religious ideas and the distinctive forms of religious organization. Yet Weber's notion of social closure as a culturally empty form was an important inspiration for generalizing treatments, such as those of Tilly (1998) and Wimmer (2013). The recurrent process of closure, involving the monopolization of material and ideal opportunities, is independent of the substantive cultural content of insider or outsider groupings:

   > Ordinarily some externally identifiable characteristic of a subset of the (actual or potential) competitors—race, language, religion, geographic or social origin, descent, place of residence, etc.—is taken by the others as the occasion for seeking to exclude them from competing. What characteristic this is in individual cases is irrelevant: whatever most readily presents itself is utilized. The joint action on the part of the one [set of competitors] that comes into being in this way can call forth a corresponding joint action on the part of the other [set] against whom it is directed. (Weber [1922] 1964:260; cf. Weber 1978a:342)

   (As the translation is misleading, I have provided my own.)
4. Looking back on his 1969 piece a quarter century later, Barth (1994:17) suggested that "the issue of cultural content *versus* boundary, as it was formulated, unintentionally served to mislead."

5. Many variants of modernization theory, it should be noted, were considerably more sophisticated than their critics allowed. Far from being baffled by politicized ethnicity, sophisticated modernization theorists, such as Karl Deutsch, Ernest Gellner, and especially the young Clifford Geertz, developed powerful if incomplete explanations of it. For a brief reappraisal, see chapter 7 in Brubaker (2015).
6. Significantly, while Horowitz (1985:42ff) spends several pages criticizing the claim of *racial* singularity—the argument that "color-group relations necessarily differ in kind from other types of ethnic-group relations" in that they are "capable of arousing uniquely intense emotions and loyalties" and are "unusually reliable signs of individual identity"—he feels no need even to address the claim of *religious* singularity, which has become current only in the last two decades.
7. On religion as (partially) analogous to ethnicity and nationalism, see also Brubaker (2012).
8. Posner's specific contribution to instrumentalist theorizing on identity choice turns on the logic of the "minimum winning coalition" (Posner 2005:2). For a critique of Posner's and Chandra's emphasis on the "fungibility" of religious identities, see Grzymala-Busse (2012).
9. To a considerable extent, this holds also for the conflict between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq. Overlaid, however, on this conflict over "who owns the state" (Wimmer 1997) is a conflict with distinctively religious stakes, pitting some religiously militant Sunnis against other Sunnis as well as Shiites.
10. Renner himself highlighted the analogy between religious and ethnonational communities (Renner 2005:20, 29–30).
11. I don't mean here particular *religions* but particular *forms* of all major religious traditions.
12. Common to "fundamentalisms" in a variety of religious traditions, for example, is the argument that disorder in the family (attributed to feminism, unregulated sexuality, divorce, or lack of respect for parental or specifically paternal or husbandly authority) contributes to disorder in wider communal, societal, and political spheres (Friedland 2002; Hawley 1994). Hence the priority accorded, in these traditions, to restoring right order in the sphere of family and sexuality.
13. The quotation is from p. 22.
14. Millennial ideology may function similarly to suspend ordinary forms of moral accounting.
15. Hypercommitment is of course a matter of degree. Short of complete indifference to consequences, less extreme forms of hypercommitment may entail a markedly heightened willingness to take risks (to oneself or others).
16. I should underscore that by "conversion" I do not mean conversion from one religious affiliation to another, but rather from one mode of religious engagement to another, more demanding one (Snow and Machalek 1984).
17. The notion of "virtuoso" religiosity was central to Weber's sociology of religion: see for example Weber (1978a:538–41).
18. In addition, political otherhood can be intensified by being given a religious gloss: "Crusaders," "Great Satan," "axis of evil," and so on.
19. On the intensely contested category of *takfir*—a procedure by which one Muslim declares another (nominal) Muslim to be an unbeliever or infidel and thereby (in certain circumstances) a legitimate target of violence—see Hafez (2011). On the Jewish legal category of *rodef*, referring to a Jew who endangers the life of other Jews and may therefore legitimately be killed in certain circumstances—a category implicated in the murder of Prime Minister Rabin by Yigal Amir in 1995—see Appleby (2000:81–85) and Pedahzur and Perliger (2009: chap. 5).
20. On religious constructions of emergency and existential threat, see Appleby (2000:82).
21. This includes radically delegitimizing existing political authorities. Those who claim to rule in the name of a religious tradition are particularly vulnerable to such delegitimation.
22. Religious understandings of transcendent reality, to be sure, may also be mobilized *against* challenges to the existing social and political order; they may be used to legitimize the violent repression of challenges and challengers.
23. According to the CPOST database at the University of Chicago, nearly 3,500 suicide attacks, accounting for more than 35,000 deaths, occurred between 2000 and 2013, compared with 147 between 1982 and 1999. Of the post-2000 attacks, the overwhelming majority have occurred in conflicts defined in significant part by politicized Islam (the only significant exception is Sri Lanka, which accounts for less than 2 percent of the attacks and less than 2 percent of the deaths). Iraq accounts for 45 percent of the post-2000 attacks, Afghanistan 25 percent, and Pakistan 12 percent.

See http://cpostdata.uchicago.edu/search_new.php. Of attacks with known perpetrators, the large majority between 2001 and 2007 were carried out by Salafi-Jihadist groups (Moghadam 2008:70). Of those with unknown perpetrators, three quarters were carried out in Iraq, where, according to Moghadam (2008:64), "the vast majority of organizations conducting suicide bombings are known to be Salafi jihadist." Pape's analysis was based on data collected before the spike of the mid-2000s.

24. Jones succeeded in provoking a violent response in Afghanistan (though his more intensively publicized plans to burn large numbers of Qur'ans on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks in 2010 and 2013 remained unrealized).
25. The political science literature on the transnational dimensions of civil war has neglected religion, focusing instead on outside states and nonstate actors, such as refugees, diasporas, or neighboring coethnic populations (Byman et al. 2001; Cederman et al. 2013; Gleditsch 2007; Salehyan 2008; Sheffer 1994). A growing political science literature does address the religious dimension of international politics generally (Desch and Philpott 2013; Philpott 2009; Rudolph and Piscatori 1997; Snyder 2011; Thomas 2005), but it has not focused specifically on the question of the expandability of violent conflict (though see Toft 2007:103–105).
26. The number of foreign fighters involved in each of these has been estimated at greater than 1,000. Smaller numbers of foreign fighters (in the hundreds) have also been involved in conflicts in Tajikistan, Chechnya, and Somalia (Hegghammer 2010; for Syria, Hegghammer and Zelin 2013). Only two other twentieth-century conflicts attracted large numbers of foreign volunteer fighters: the Spanish Civil War, which mobilized tens of thousands of international volunteers, and the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, in which some 3,500 overseas Jewish volunteers participated (Hegghammer 2010:90). Many of the former, as Hegghammer (2010:59) notes, were supported by the Soviet Union through the Comintern. My account in this paragraph relies primarily on Hegghammer (2010).
27. A December 2013 study estimated that as many as 11,000 foreign fighters from 74 countries have fought in Syria, including 1,000 to 2,000 from North Africa and between 400 and 2,000 from western Europe (Zelin 2013).
28. The primary exception here concerns the Shiite foreign fighters defending the Assad regime in Syria, whose participation has been organized and sponsored to a considerable extent by Iran (Zelin 2013). As Hegghammer (2010:62) notes, the foreign fighter mobilization in Afghanistan during the 1980s was private: the United States amply supported the Afghan mujahedeen but not the (mainly Arab) foreign fighters.
29. ISIS and some other jihadist groups in Syria and Afghanistan have paid modest stipends to foreign fighters, but opportunity for enrichment does not seem to be a primary motivation (Carter, Maher, and Neumann 2014).
30. For a nuanced account of the mixed motives of Crusaders, see Kostick (2008). Hegghamer (2010:64) concedes that a sense of adventure may have motivated many foreign fighters but notes that it cannot explain why adventure seekers would be channeled into this particular form of adventure.
31. For a different analysis of outbidding in connection with religious violence, see Toft (2007).
32. Kalyvas (2000) and Casanova (2005) have underscored, in differing contexts, the paradoxical political significance of the contrast between the fragmentation of authority in Sunni Islam and the centralization of authority in Catholicism. Kalyvas analyzes the strategic dilemma facing illiberal or aliberal religious political movements that are poised to win sweeping electoral mandates in emerging democracies. He compares a Catholic movement in late-nineteenth-century Belgium and an Islamist movement in late-twentieth-century Algeria, each divided between moderates and radicals. In order to forestall a preemptive move by secular incumbents to exclude them by force from the political game, such movements must credibly commit to accepting the secular, liberal democratic order; they must credibly signal that they will not seek to implement their maximalist program. Moderate Catholics in the Belgian movement were able to do this with the decisive help of the Belgian Catholic Church, which—with support from the Pope—decisively intervened against radicals in the movement. The fragmented, decentralized religious field of Sunni Islam, however, prevented moderate Muslims in the Algerian movement from doing the same. Democratization, ironically, was "facilitated by a hierarchical and autocratic religious structure and hindered by a decentralized and democratic religious structure" (Kalyvas 2000:393). Casanova notes a similar paradox: the Catholic aggiornamento—the striking and rapid shift toward accepting liberalism, democracy, and modernity associated with Vatican II—was decisively facilitated by the hierarchical and centralized structure of the Church. The pluralization and

democratization of the religious sphere in Sunni Islam, on the other hand, have ambiguous implications for political liberalism, pluralism, and democracy (Casanova 2005:100–101).

33. This is consistent with the suggestion of Gorski and Türkmen-Dervişoğlu (2013:204) that religious nationalism involves the "synchronization of 'principles of vision and di-vision' across the religious and nonreligious fields, such that the religious and national principles became more salient and more closely aligned . . . [as a result of] strategic alliances between elite groupings across the relevant fields." For a field-theoretic analysis of religion and politics in Saudi Arabia, see Lacroix 2011.
34. On the variable institutionalization of the "twin tolerations" that protect the autonomy of religion vis-à-vis politics and the autonomy of politics vis-à-vis religion, see Stepan (2001: chap. 11). On the connection between the consensual or conflictual integration of religion and politics and religiously informed political violence, see Toft et al. (2011).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Rogers Brubaker is professor of sociology and UCLA Foundation Chair at the University of California, Los Angeles. He has written widely on social theory, immigration, citizenship, nationalism, ethnicity, and (more recently) religion. His most recent book is *Grounds for Difference* (Harvard, 2015). He is working on a book provisionally entitled *Religion, Language, and the Politics of Difference*.