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# **Religion**

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Lessons on Religion and Conflict Resolution  
Based on Empirical Studies of Religion and Conflict  
Dr. Jonathan Fox

**An Empirical Approach**

The role of religion in conflict has, of late, been attracting increasing attention in academic, media and policy-making circles. Academic literature on the topic can well be called a growth industry. As is the case with the academic literature on other aspects of conflict, the study of religion and conflict is dividing itself in two: the causes of conflict and how to resolve conflict. Despite some rare exceptions such as Appleby (2000), seldom do those who address one of these branches of the field also address the other. For a discussion of why the social sciences have ignored these issues see Fox (2001d). This is clearly not an ideal situation for the pursuit of knowledge on so important a topic.

This essay seeks to build a bridge between those who study why conflicts occur and those who study how to solve them. It focuses on lessons learned from empirical studies on religion and conflict. These are a particularly important source of information for two main reasons. First, they are generally based on hundreds of cases and, thus, reflect general trends rather than individual idiosyncrasies. This gives us greater confidence in the results, which are less subject to a coincidence of factors due to studying a small number of cases. Nevertheless, the idiosyncrasies of individual cases remain important in resolving specific conflicts.

Second, two observers of the same conflict, using the comparative approach, can come to exactly opposite conclusions (Deutsch 1963):

Introspection, intuition [and] insight [are] processes that are not verifiable among different observers... But even though we can understand introspectively many facts and relations which exist, it is also true that we can understand in our fertile imagination very many relations that do not exist at all. What is more, there are things in the world that we can not understand readily with our imagination as it is

now constituted, even though we may be able to understand them... in the future, after we have become accustomed to the presuppositions of such understanding. We can, therefore, do nothing more than accept provisionally these guesses or potential insights... If we want to take them seriously, we must test them. We can do this by selecting... data, verifying them [and] forming explicit hypotheses as to what we expect to find... And we then finally test these explicit hypotheses by confrontation with the data... In the light of these tests we revise our criteria of relevance, we get new and revised data and we set up new methods of testing.

Unlike the comparative method, the more rigorous standards of empirical studies force researchers to define their variables before examining a case and to code those variables based on pre-determined criteria. In addition to enforcing a higher level of objectivity and consistency, it also makes it impossible for a single case to be interpreted differently when situationally convenient. Accurate empirical information is thus essential to resolving conflicts, because an understanding of the true causes of a conflict provides the best basis for resolving it. There is no room for potentially inaccurate predispositions and preconceptions. The discussion provided below shows that many such inaccuracies exist and must be dispelled in order to allow efforts at conflict resolution to focus on the true core causes of a conflict.

It is important to note that the majority of the studies cited here are studies of the influence of religion on *ethnic* conflict. Unless otherwise noted, they are based on the Minorities at Risk (MAR) dataset which contains information on 275 ethnic conflicts worldwide. (Some studies are based on an earlier version of the MAR data which contained 267 cases.) Many of these are ethnoreligious conflicts, in which the two sides are distinct both ethnically and religiously. The unit of analysis in the MAR data is an ethnic minority within a state. Thus the same minority maybe coded in several states, as is the case with the Kurds who are coded for Iran, Iraq and Turkey. The same state may also contain several minorities, as is the case with Lebanon. While the MAR dataset contains information on ethnic conflict from 1945 to 1998, most of the data on religion is limited to the 1990s. Accordingly, most of the studies discussed here focus on this more narrow timeframe.

This dataset is particularly useful since it is the most comprehensive available and contains all groups which are politically

active and/or suffering from high levels of discrimination. Furthermore, supplemental data collected separately for use with the MAR dataset provides the most detailed data on religion and conflict available in any empirical format at this time. Details on the MAR dataset and the variables contained in it, as well as a copy of the dataset itself, are available at the project's website at [www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar](http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/mar). The supplemental data on religion and details on the variables contained in it are available at the MAR website [links](#) under the heading of Jonathan Fox, "Ethnoreligious Conflict Dataset for Use with the Minorities at Risk Dataset." Our latest findings, based on our analysis of the MAR dataset, are reported below.

### **Lesson #1: Most Ethnic Conflicts are *not* Primarily about Religion**

The majority of ethnic conflicts are not between groups that are religiously differentiated. Of the 275 cases in the newer MAR dataset, 101 (36.6%) are between groups of different religions and an additional 32 (11.6%) are between groups who belong to different denominations of the same religion. Thus 142 cases (51.2%) of ethnic conflict involve minorities that are not at all religiously distinct from the majority group in their state.

Furthermore, studies of an earlier MAR dataset focusing on a subset of 105 cases of ethnic conflict in which the minority group is religiously distinct from the majority group shows that, even then, in the majority of these cases religion is *not* the primary issue. In fact, religion was among the primary issues in only 12 of these 105 cases; and it was a secondary but significant issue in only 27 of those cases. Thus, religion was a significant issue in only 37.1% of these ethnoreligious conflicts. In the other 62.9%, it was either not an issue at all or only a marginal issue (Fox 1997). However, only 18 (17.1%) of these 105 cases involve none of the following factors: religious discrimination, religious grievances or religious legitimacy. Furthermore, all 18 of these minorities had some form of religious institution. Thus, while religion is a significant issue in only a minority of ethnoreligious conflicts, religious factors are present in almost all ethnoreligious conflicts. This is especially the case for conflicts involving Islamic groups (Fox 2000a, 2001).

This has two implications for solving ethnoreligious conflict. First, while religion can be a primary issue in an ethnoreligious conflict, this is only true in a minority of cases. Thus, one cannot assume a

conflict is about religion, just because the two groups involved belong to different religions. Rather, the basic causes of the conflict need to be examined closely before any determination is made. If it is determined that religion is, in fact, a cause of the dispute, then it should be addressed as such. If, however, religion is not a basic cause, putting religious issues onto the negotiating table are likely only to complicate the process.

Second, while most ethnoreligious conflicts are not caused by religion, they generally take place in settings where religious legitimacy and religious institutions play a significant role in society. Whether or not religion is an important aspect of a conflict, these are resources that could be tapped in order to resolve conflicts.

### **Lesson #2: Self-Determination Causes Ethnoreligious Violence and Religion Intensifies It**

Examinations of the causes of ethnoreligious “rebellion,” using several different methodologies, have all come to the same conclusion: religion is not a cause of ethnoreligious violence but, rather, only an exacerbating factor. More specifically, no ethnoreligious minority engaged in terrorism, guerilla warfare or protracted civil war between 1990 and 1998 (the years for which data are available) unless they also made active demands for some form of self-determination. This pertained even to groups which suffered from the highest levels of religious discrimination. A rule with no exceptions is a very rare occurrence in the social sciences, thus the confidence level for these particular results is very high. These results also hold up when controlling for multiple other factors including regime type, repression and the level of mobilization of the ethnic minority (Fox 2000d; Fox and Squires 2001).

However, among those groups desiring some form of self-determination, religious factors do increase the level of violence. The mean level of rebellion by minorities expressing both a desire for self-determination and grievances over religious issues, on average, is about double that of those expressing only a desire for self-determination. Furthermore, a variable including both self-determination and religious issues is a better predictor of ethnoreligious rebellion than either of the two factors alone or in simple combination (Fox 2000d; Fox and Squires 2001).

All of this can lead to only one conclusion: ethnoreligious conflicts do not get violent unless self-determination issues are involved; and religious issues alone are not enough to cause ethnoreligious violence, although they can considerably exacerbate a conflict. Thus, although the combination of religion and self-determination is a potentially explosive mixture, it is unlikely that removing religion from the equation could eliminate the violence.

This implies that addressing only religious issues will not solve a violent ethnoreligious conflict. In fact, ignoring religious issues and focusing on self-determination issues is arguably the best tactic for solving such a conflict. Should the self-determination issues be adequately addressed, there would be no potential for violence which religious factors could intensify. Also, as difficult as self-determination issues are to resolve, they are arguably less difficult to resolve than religious issues; and they are clearly easier to resolve than the combination of the two.

### **Lesson #3: Ethnoreligious Violence is Rarely Due to Economic Deprivation**

Observers of many ethnoreligious conflicts have often argued that ethnoreligious minorities rebel because of poor economic circumstances, both in absolute terms and in comparison to the majority group in a state. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is given as a prime example. While there may be some truth to this when addressing peaceful political movements – those that use tactics such as political lobbying and peaceful protest – the empirical evidence with regard to violent conflict directly contradicts this assumption.

One analysis of all ethnic conflicts (Gurr 2000), found that the factors that most contribute to violent ethnic rebellion are: persistent past protest, repression of the minority, mobilization by the minority, instability in the state in which the minority resides, international support for the minority group, past minority autonomy (a self-determination variable), nationalism (another self-determination variable), and the spread of the conflict across borders. He explicitly tested economic discrimination and deprivation variables, but found them not to be important when taking these other factors into account. Similar tests, which also included religious factors and focused on ethnoreligious conflicts produced similar results (Fox 2000d).

This implies that attempts to solve economic problems, while laudable for humanitarian reasons, will not solve violent ethnoreligious conflict. Ethnic and ethnoreligious violence are not caused by economic deprivation. Unlike religion, economic deprivation does not appear to even exacerbate ethnoreligious conflict. However, these studies do show that factors like repression, instability and international support for the minority do exacerbate ethnoreligious conflict, so addressing them will help reduce, if not eliminate, the level of violence.

#### **Lesson #4: Ethnoreligious Conflicts are Different from other Ethnic Conflicts**

While the above findings show that most ethnic conflicts are not religious ones and that religion is not a cause of ethnic conflict, ethnoreligious conflicts are different from other ethnic conflicts. Conflicts involving an ethnoreligious religious minority also involve higher levels of political and cultural discrimination and grievances. They are also more likely to involve self-determination issues, the prime cause of ethnoreligious violence (Fox 1997). While regime type (whether the state is democratic or autocratic) influences the extent of discrimination against ethnoreligious minorities, it does not seem to be a relevant factor for other ethnic minorities (Fox 2000b). Religious minorities also suffer from higher average levels of discrimination and repression than do other ethnic minorities (Fox and Sandler, unpublished). Finally, in a study based on different data, Rummel (1997) found that the more religious minorities are present in a state, the greater the extent of ethnic violence and Henderson (1997, 1998) found that states with different religions are more likely to go to war with each other.

Religious factors also influence how ethnic grievances are formed, how groups mobilize for conflict and the extent of international intervention in ethnic conflicts. They also increase the extent of discrimination against ethnic minorities (Fox 2000b).

This implies that, although the causes of ethnoreligious conflict are rarely religious ones, religion influences the dynamics of these conflicts in many ways. That ethnoreligious conflicts are different from other ethnic conflicts, even when controlling for religious factors, implies that efforts to measure religion's impact on these conflicts have not been wholly successful. This provides further encouragement that

efforts to use religion to resolve conflict can have positive results by mitigating the level of violence, even if not fully eliminating it.

#### **Lesson #5: International Intervention is Influenced by Religion**

Religion seems to motivate international actors more strongly than it does domestic actors. For example, international intervention in an ethnic conflict is far more likely when an ethnic minority is not of the same religion as the majority group in its state. Such intervention occurs in about 39.1% of all cases in which the majority and minority group are of the same religion; but it occurs in about 60.4% of those cases where the two groups belong to different religions. Foreign states tend to intervene on behalf of minorities of their own religion: 75.6% of foreign political interventions and 78.0% of foreign military interventions were by states of the same religion as the minority group they supported. All of these and the following statistics on intervention pertain to ethnic conflict during 1990 to 1995 period, based on Fox (2001e, 515-531) as well as a new reexamination of the same data.

This trend is particularly strong for Islamic states. While only 70.2% of political interventions and 78.4% of military interventions by Christian states are on behalf of Christian minorities, 92.1% of political interventions and 89.3% of military interventions by Islamic states are on behalf of Islamic minorities (Fox 2002a). However, the lower figures for Christianity partially reflect the activity of the United States, which often intervenes on behalf of non-Christian groups (Fox, 2001e, 524).

This commonality effect is not limited to religious affinity. Davis, Jagers and Moore (1997), Davis and Moore (1997), and Saideman (2002) found that ethnic affinities between one state and a minority living in a second state lead to increased international intervention on behalf of the minority and international conflict between the two states. Brecher and Wilkenfeld (1997) found that 35% of international conflicts between World War I and 1988 were triggered by ethnic factors. However, none of these findings regarding ethnicity are nearly as strong as those regarding religion.

The end of the superpower rivalry of the Cold War era has removed that many of era's structural barriers to intervention; and humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping missions have gained greater acceptance in the past few decades. The very nature of



sovereignty is changing and domestic conflicts are increasingly becoming the subject of international attention (Fox 2001e, 515).

Religious conflicts are most likely to attract intervention and this intervention is most likely to be by a state religiously and ethnically similar to the minority group involved in the conflict. Thus, international intervention in ethnoreligious conflicts tends to be biased on behalf of minority groups. On one hand, this may level the playing field, limiting a state's use of force against minorities and enabling a peaceful resolution. On the other hand, international intervention on behalf of a minority can make a majority government seem to bow to foreign pressure, which could make a state less willing to compromise.

Either way, international intervention is on the rise and must be dealt with. Any attempt at conflict resolution by a foreign power should avoid the appearance of religious bias and must deal with, or make use of, intervening states. The first solution is simplest, but is difficult to implement, especially when the intervention is a political (as opposed to a military) one. The latter solution would probably increase the chances of a successful resolution of the conflict; but it would be even more difficult to implement. Simply dealing with state interventions as they occur, while probably the least desirable of choices, will most often be the only available option.

#### **Lesson #6: Religion has a Dual Role in Conflict**

That religion can both support and hinder opposition movements is not a new concept. For example, Lewy (1974, 550-551) describes religion as a double-edged sword which can be used to both support a government and to revolt against it. Lincoln (1985, 268-281) similarly discusses how religions can, under different circumstances, both support the status-quo or seek to overturn it. Appleby (2000, 25-55) argues that this occurs because the ambiguities of life lead to ambiguities in the sacred. People often need justifications for both peace and violence and this leads to multiple, and often paradoxical, interpretations of religious doctrine, a phenomenon known as "internal pluralism." Lewy (1974, 555-556) alternatively describes this phenomenon as an ambivalence over religious doctrine which leads to divergent interpretations. Thus, it is not surprising that several statistical studies also found that religion has a dual role in conflict.

Classic examples of this include studies by Marx (1967a, 1967b) and Alston *et al.* (1972). In a 1964 survey of attitudes among U.S. blacks, Marx found that, even when controlling for education, age, region, sex and denomination, low religiosity among blacks led to heightened levels of militancy. Thus, in 1964, religion was associated with lower levels of violence among U.S. blacks. However, Alston found, based on a newer survey taken in 1969, this relationship no longer held. Thus, in the space of five years, religion's role in inhibiting violence had changed.

The MAR data also point to the dual role of religion as both a supporter and inhibitor of conflict. Religious institutions are associated with lower levels of organized protest when religious grievances are low and when religion is not an important element in a conflict. However, they are associated with higher levels of organized protest when religious grievances are high and religion is an important issue (Fox 1999a, 129). This implies that the key factor in determining whether religious institutions will facilitate or inhibit protest is whether the religion itself is at risk. When it is at risk, they support protest; but when it is not, they prefer not to rock the boat and support the status quo.

The relationship between religious institutions and rebellion is similar to the relationship between religious grievances and rebellion. When there is no demand for self-determination there is little rebellion, but when such a demand exists, religious institutions tend to facilitate it (Fox, 1999a, 130). Thus ethnic demands for self-determination seem to be more important than a religious institutions desire to support a beneficial status-quo.

The relationship between religious legitimacy and the formation of ethnic grievances also reveals the dual role of religion in conflict. The key factor in this case is also whether religion is an important issue in a conflict. When religious issues are not important, the legitimacy of the use of religion in political discourse is associated with higher levels of non-religious grievances. When religion issues are relevant to a conflict, religious legitimacy is associated with lower levels of non-religious grievances. Regardless of whether religion is an important issue in a conflict, religious legitimacy is associated with higher levels of religious grievances (Fox 1999b). Thus, religious legitimacy can and is used in order to facilitate secular grievances unless religious issues are at stake (when it causes an ethnoreligious minority to focus on religious issues at the expense of secular ones).

Perhaps, when religion is not an important issue, it is in the interest of religious groups to facilitate other types of grievances. This allows them to be active in the community and seem sympathetic to issues important to their ethnic group. This could increase their importance in the community and, in the long run, their own membership and political strength. However, these goals are not as important as defending the religion itself. When under attack, religion must be defended and all other issues de-emphasized.

This dual role of religion in conflict has several implications for conflict resolution. First, it is best if religious issues are de-emphasized as central issues. That is, the focus should be on non-religious issues, since precisely when religious issues are at stake, religion tends to make conflicts more violent and intractable. Second, while it is important to emphasize other issues, it is also important to tap into those aspects of religion that emphasize peace. While, as Gopin (2000) notes, the violent aspects of religion are the ones that are most often emphasized, the peaceful aspects can be useful for conflict resolution.

#### **Lesson #7: World Conflict is not Civilizational**

While it is in all probability a side issue, no discussion of quantitative studies of religion and conflict would be complete without dealing with the debate over Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory. Huntington (1993, 1996) posits that, in place of the East-West conflict of the Cold War era, the post-Cold War era is defined by a conflict between several major civilizations. These civilizations include the Western, Confucian/Sinic, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin American, Japanese and African civilizations. All of these civilizations, except the African one, are wholly or in part defined by religion; and Huntington is unsure whether the African example is, in fact, a civilization. The extensive debate over whether Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory is correct is thus, in part, a debate over whether post-Cold War conflict is primarily defined by religion.

We will not survey this extensive debate, since it is probably peripheral to our study of what lessons regarding religion and conflict resolution can be found through quantitative studies. Furthermore, while there is a strong overlap between Huntington's "civilizations" and religion, the two are not synonymous. In fact, a head-to-head comparison of religion and "civilizations" as explanatory factors in

ethnic conflict found that the overlap between religion and civilization was only about 80% and that, in one of every five cases of ethnic conflict, religion and civilization do not coincide (Fox 2001f).

Almost unanimously, empirical studies of Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory refuted it, including those based on the MAR data. First, there is no evidence that civilizational or religious cleavages are becoming more important as a source of violent ethnopolitical conflict (Gurr 1994). Second, while the end of the Cold War brought a temporary rise in both civilizational and non-civilizational conflict, the average level of rebellion remained higher in non-civilizational conflicts throughout 1985-1998 (Fox 2002b). Third, in a head-to-head comparison, religion variables proved to be a better explanation than civilizational ones, although neither were found to be the primary cause of ethnic conflict (Fox 2001f). Fourth, the distribution of ethnic conflicts between civilizational and non-civilizational, as well as the participation of individual civilizations in ethnic conflict, is virtually the same for the Cold War and post-Cold War eras and, in both eras, intra-civilizational ethnic conflicts are more common than inter-civilizational ones (Fox 2001b). Fifth, focusing on the Middle East, nationalism and self-determination variables provide a better explanation for ethnic rebellion than do either civilization or religion variables (Fox 2001a).

Ellingsen (2001), using a combination of the Correlates of War dataset and the Wallensteen and Sollenberg dataset, similarly found that the dynamics of ethnic conflict did not change with the end of the Cold War. Studies on the civil war section of the Correlates of War dataset found that political factors are more influential than cultural ones (Henderson and Singer 2000).

Studies of international conflict also unanimously contradict Huntington's theory. Cultural and civilizational factors do not have any consistent influence on international war (Henderson 1997, 1998, 2002); and wars within "civilizations" are more likely than wars between them (Russet, Oneal and Cox 2000; Henderson and Tucker 2001). If anything, international conflict has waned with the end of the Cold War (Russet, Oneal and Cox 2000); and U.N. voting behavior between 1979 and 1996 was not influenced by civilizational factors (Ellingsen 2002). Huntington's fears of Islamic wars against the West were also regarded as unfounded (Russet, Oneal and Cox, 2000), although this finding was reported before the events of September 11, 2001. All of this further

confirms the findings presented in *Lesson #1*, that ethnic conflict is not primarily about religion.

### Conclusions

The above studies have three major implications relevant to the potential role of religion in conflict resolution. First, they demonstrate that religion is, most often, neither a primary issue in ethnoreligious conflict nor the basic cause of ethnoreligious violence. Economic deprivation is also not a cause of ethnoreligious violence. Rather, the basic cause of ethnoreligious violence is the desire for self-determination, and any attempt at conflict resolution that does not address this issue is most likely to fail.

Second, that being said, religion is not irrelevant to ethnoreligious conflict. Religious issues can exacerbate a conflict and clearly influence it multiple ways at multiple points in the process. Unfortunately, it is unclear whether addressing religious issues during efforts at conflict resolution will help or hinder the process. On one hand, since religious issues exacerbate the level of ethnic violence, addressing them could theoretically lower the level of violence (although it is unlikely it could eliminate it). On the other hand, since the core issue is self-determination, why should resources and time be spent on an issue that does not have to be addressed in order to actually end the conflict? Second, there is considerable evidence that when religion becomes an issue in a conflict it makes that conflict more intractable. Thus, openly addressing religious issues could actually *lower* the chances that other issues, more central to the conflict, could be resolved.

The third and final implication is that religion, nonetheless, is a potentially useful tool for conflict resolution. Religion clearly influences the behavior of people, including decision-makers at both at the domestic and international levels. Furthermore, some studies show that, under certain circumstances, religious factors and (more clearly) religious institutions can reduce the level of conflict. This can occur whenever religion of the group is not seen to be at stake. Thus, if people can be convinced that there is no threat to their religion, religious institutions, and other religious factors, may be useful in mitigating violence.

In conclusion, as long as the basic causes of a conflict are not ignored, religion can be a powerful auxiliary tool for resolving

ethnoreligious conflicts. This implies that it can be similarly used to help solve other types of conflict as long as two basic rules are followed. First, the basic causes of a conflict must be discovered and addressed. Second, the perception that the well-being of any of the participants' religions are at risk must be avoided.

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