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Bloody, Intense, and Durable: The Politics of ‘Religious Conflict’

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Abstract

A growing number of scholars argues that we are witnessing a resurgence of religion in world politics, accompanied by an increase in religiously inspired conflict. Empirical studies demonstrate that religious conflicts are more violent, more intense, more durable, and more difficult to resolve through negotiated settlements than their secular counterparts. In this paper, we argue that these conclusions are unreliable, because they fail to provide convincing criteria for separating religious conflicts from non-religious ones. Our main concern is with the categorization problem. What characteristics or factors make a conflict party, conflict issue, or identity religious, and what characteristics or factors frame a conflict party, conflict issue, or identity as non-religious? A basic assumption behind much of this research is the contested idea that religion is a universal phenomenon embodied in various forms such as Islam and Christianity. The majority of scholars simply assume a sharp division between religion and the secular without problematizing or justifying such a distinction. In this article, we argue that religious conflict is an ideologically charged concept, and that the study of the religion-conflict nexus reinforces the neoliberal status quo and current systems of power.

Keywords: religious conflict, secular conflicts, identity, conflict issue, critical analysis, neoliberal status quo.

There is a growing recognition that there has been a resurgence of religion in world politics over the last four decades (e.g. Juergensmeyer 2008; Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011), and that this resurgence has been accompanied by an increase in religious conflicts (e.g. Juergensmeyer 1997; McTernan 2003;

Fox 2004a; Toft 2006; Basedau and Koos 2015). Monica Duffy Toft (2013), for instance, claims that the percentage of civil wars with a religious dimension more than doubled between the 1960s and the 1990s. In a study of the role of religion in ethno-nationalist conflicts and revolutionary wars between 1945 and 2001, Jonathan Fox argues that the role of religion 'changed over time, from religion being unimportant or even a negative influence on conflict at the start of the period to becoming an increasingly significant cause of conflict either in 1965 or the early 1980s, depending on which dataset is analyzed' (Fox 2004a, 715). A global study of religion and domestic conflict from 1960 to 2009, based on the Political Instability Taskforce dataset, demonstrates that '[r]eligious conflict began increasing around 1977 with the beginning of the Iranian revolution and became a majority of all conflict in 2002' (Fox 2012, 155). In light of this, it is not altogether surprising that one author concludes that '[r]eligion is central to much of the strife that is taking place in the world today. Whether it is the root cause of a conflict, as it appears to be in the Middle East, where there are competing claims for the same piece of territory, or merely a mobilizing vehicle for nationalist and ethnic passions, as has typically been the case in the Balkans, religion's potential to cause instability at all levels of the global system is arguably unrivalled' (Johnston 2003, 3f.).

Some scholars, such as Hector Avalos (2005), René Girard (1977), and Walter Burkert (1992), argue that violence is intrinsic to religion. In empirical studies, scholars of religion and conflict demonstrate that religious conflicts are more violent (Basedau, Pfeiffer, and Vüllers 2016; Breslawski and Ives 2019; Toft 2007; Henne 2012b; Hoffman 1998), more intense (Bercovitch and DeRouen 2005; Fox 1999; Henderson 1997; Pearce 2005; Roeder 2003), more enduring (Horowitz 2009; Toft 2007; Tusicisny 2004), and more difficult to resolve peacefully than their secular counterparts (Hassner 2009; Svensson 2012; Toft 2007). However, these conclusions rely on their ability to provide convincing criteria for distinguishing religious from non-religious conflicts. Are these scholars successful in this regard?

This study, informed theoretically and methodologically by William T. Cavanaugh's critical examination of the literature on religious violence (Cavanaugh 2009), aims to ascertain the research implications and validity of the concept of religious conflict as distinctly different from non-religious counterparts. Through a critical analysis of the social scientific literature on religion and conflict we examine the historical, social, political, and economic settings in which this concept is used. We argue that the distinction between religious and secular conflict is highly questionable and often

misleading, because research consistently fails to provide coherent criteria for distinguishing religious from secular conflicts and often ignores the political dimensions of conflict. Finally, we argue that religious conflict is an ideologically charged concept, and that scholarly engagement with the religion-conflict nexus reinforces the neoliberal status quo and current systems of power.

We begin by unpacking the categorization and definitional problem of conflict as religious or secular, and the identities attached to such conflicts. Next, we problematize the very definition of religion, the term's supposed essence, and the scholarly implications of casually defining religion in terms of common-sense knowledge. Finally, and in regard to Cavanaugh's scholarly findings, we conclude that this definitional ambiguity offers secular liberal states a convenient justification to use force to neutralize those who challenge the hegemony of the prevailing political status quo.

Conceptualizations of religious conflict

It is impossible to draw the boundaries of the concept of religion without simultaneously drawing the boundaries of the concept of the secular, which by itself is the foundation of the idea that there are two different types – or categories – of conflict: religious and secular. Thus, religious and non-religious conflicts are in some vague sense out there, and we only need to be more precise about their characteristics and functions to study them. Students of religion and conflict proceed from this assumption when they conceptualize religious conflict either in terms of identity or as a conflict issue.

Conflict can be defined as 'a social situation in which a minimum of two actors (parties) strive to acquire at the same moment in time an available set of scarce resources' (Wallensteen 2012, 16). Religious conflict is typically operationalized as religious differences between combating adversaries. Identity-based conceptualizations categorize a conflict as religious when the conflicting parties have different religious/denominational identities (e.g. Christians vs Muslims or Catholics vs Protestants), regardless of the depth and intensity of the combatants' religious beliefs and practices, and regardless of whether or not these identities have an impact on the conflict. Identity-based conflicts occur across religious boundaries, but they are typically not fought over religious issues. Religion thus functions primarily as a marker of difference, but it may also have an impact on conflict dynamics (Toft 2007; Fox 2004a; Ellingsen 2005), for instance, by serving as an instrument of mobilization (De Juan 2008).

Most scholars of religion and conflict believe that religious identities are essentially (or substantially or functionally) different from secular identities (e.g. Fox 2000; Reynal-Querol 2002; Ellingsen 2005; Grzymala-Busse 2012) because, according to at least some scholars, they are 'connected to particular religious ideas' and therefore 'hardly subject to negotiation and compromise given the accepted supernatural origin' (Basedau, Strüver, Vüllers, and Wegenast 2011, 754).

For example, Kristian Berg Harpviken and Hanne Eggen Røislien, who contend that 'religion is a multifaceted phenomenon, impossible to pin down in a single definition' (Harpviken and Røislien 2008, 352), argue that religion has a peculiar tendency to form strong exclusive identities that divide people into *us* and *them*, making religious identities particularly prone to generating conflict.

Religious belief systems have a particular identity-forming potential. Religion is not just *individual*; it is also *social*, offering each believer a sense of belonging to a community of fellow believers. With its reference to a transcendent source of truth and codification of shared norms, religion serves as a compass for the individual and the religious community alike, locating all believers within an extended ontological setting. An identity with a religious source may, therefore, be exceptionally robust: religion tells you where you belong and where to proceed (Harpviken and Røislien 2008, 354, emphasis in original).

Here, as in most definitions of religious identity in the field, the conceptualization of religious identity is based on a substantive understanding of religion – religious identity refers to a 'transcendent source of truth and [a] codification of shared norms'. Thus, what distinguishes a religious identity from a non-religious one is described in terms of the content of religious belief. However, the criterion used to distinguish between religious and secular identities – the transcendent – is so vague that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to exclude identities normally understood as secular from the category of religious identity, such as ethnic or nationalist identity. Indeed, most scholars fail to provide a convincing criterion for distinguishing religious identities from non-religious ones. Without a coherent distinction between religious and secular identities, how can we know what scholars are talking about when they make claims about identity-based religious conflicts?

Religious identities, in other words, are represented as separate and distinct from secular identities, even though the boundary between them is

arbitrary and shifting. The unreflective use of the terms religion and secular casts doubt on their conclusions about religious – and secular – identities and their influence on human behaviour. Functionalist approaches are virtually non-existent in this context, which is not particularly surprising, since they would make the category of religious identity so all-encompassing and inclusive as to be of little analytical value.

The fact is that no sound and well-established definition of religious identity has yet been found in the religion-and-conflict literature. It is often unclear why, for instance, a Muslim identity is categorized as a religious identity, while a nationalist identity is categorized as a non-religious identity (e.g. Svensson and Nilsson 2018). Is it because Muslims and nationalists say so themselves? Or is it simply taken for granted as common-sense knowledge? Whose identity are we talking about: that of the elites or that of the rank-and-file combatants? On what grounds can we privilege the identity of one social category over the other? For instance, how should we define the United States and the United Kingdom during the war in Iraq? The leaders of both countries at the time were confessional Christians, and they were ‘reported to have prayed together in 2002 at [Bush’s] ranch at Crawford, Texas – the summit at which the invasion of Iraq was agreed in principle’ (MacAskill 2005). Why are the United States and the United Kingdom rarely if ever classified as religious conflict parties in the research literature?

Identities – whether religious or secular – are relative, fluid, context-dependent, ‘and patrolled on account of [their] porosity’ (Hughes 2015, 8). Timothy Fitzgerald has rightly noted that the ‘policing of the boundaries between religion and politics is a matter of state power and even a contributory excuse for war’ (Fitzgerald 2011, 191). It is typically the liberal secular state that affirms what a secular identity is, and what a (tolerable as well as intolerable) religious identity is. Religion-and-conflict scholars tend to reproduce and thereby sanction binary classifications of identity that, to borrow an apt phrase from Noam Chomsky, ‘serve the interests of state and corporate power’ (Chomsky 1989, 10). Deciding what counts as religious identity and what counts as secular identity is never indisputable, but always contested and negotiated, and thus political and ideological. How religious identity is defined, what is included or excluded from the definition, depends on the underlying arrangements of power and the interests of those defining it (see also Cavanaugh 2009). We suspect that many actors defined as religious (or non-religious) in the literature may be religious (or non-religious) only because scholars categorize them as such.

Interreligious conflicts are often described as binary conflicts between unitary and bounded factions, but conflicting parties are rarely homogeneous groups. In the interreligious conflict in Maluku (1999–2004), for instance, the conflicting parties – Muslims and Christians – were divided into several subgroups such as Muslim vigilance groups and Christian vigilance groups, and Muslim criminal gangs and Christian criminal gangs. Members of these subgroups, recruited from a wide range of social categories, used violence to achieve multiple, overlapping, and sometimes mutually contradictory goals (Lindgren 2014). Religious identity labels therefore tend to obscure the plurality of identities that exists within the parties to the conflict. Even if it could be demonstrated that a conflict group were religiously homogeneous, it would be by no means clear that religious beliefs were the reasons for their conflict behaviour (Lindgren 2018).

In sum, while it is possible to conceptually distinguish religious identities from non-religious ones, it seems impossible to coherently separate them, as evidenced by attempts to do so in the research literature. Indeed, religious identities can never be separated from other domains of social, cultural, and political life. To understand a particular religious identity, we must take into account the contextual factors and processes through which that identity is constructed and maintained over time (Schwedler 2001). Moreover, religious identities are ephemeral phenomena that depend on what counts as religion in particular historical contexts. The widespread (and Protestant-informed) assumption, shared by most scholars of religion and conflict, that everyone has a singular religious identification is patently false, as many people do not identify as adherents of any particular religion (as it is colloquially understood) but follow more than one religious path at a time (Fitzgerald 2000; Smith 2000).

At the heart of every conflict is an incompatibility of goals between the parties to the conflict (Galtung 1996). Issue-based conceptualizations categorize conflicts as religious when the ‘issues at stake between conflicting groups are religious in nature’ (Isaacs 2016, 212). This means religion can be an issue in the conflict, but not necessarily the only or even the most important one, as in conflicts over sacred spaces. Religion, in other words, is part of the incompatibility of a conflict when belligerents make religious claims. In contrast with identity-based conflicts, issue-based conflicts mainly occur within religious boundaries (Svensson 2012). The idea that a conflict issue can be religious in nature raises questions about what it is that makes conflict issues religious, and how to separate religious issues from non-religious ones. Some scholars of religion and conflict have grappled with

these questions on the surface. Fox, for instance, who considers religious beliefs to be core issues in many conflicts, defines religion in terms of the supernatural. Accordingly, it is the supernatural that marks the crucial distinction between religion and non-religion. Fox writes:

Religion seeks to understand the origins and nature of reality using a set of answers that include the supernatural. Religion is also a social phenomenon and institution which influences the behavior of human beings both as individuals and in groups. These influences of behavior manifest through the influence of religious identity, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, religious beliefs, and the codification of these beliefs into authoritative dogma, among other influence (Fox 2018, 6).

Based on this definition, Fox argues that attributions to supernatural sources make religious worldviews qualitatively distinct and different from – functionally equivalent – secular worldviews, which are attributed to human sources. Fox thus assumes that religion is a distinct and substantive reality that manifests itself in beliefs, identities, institutions, legitimations, as well as dogmas, doctrines, or theologies, which influences behaviour, and contributes to intergroup conflicts (Fox 2018, 57; see also Fox 2004b; Fox and Sandler 2005). Why it is important to distinguish between religious and secular worldviews, particularly when they, as he writes in an article on the impact of religion on domestic conflicts, ‘can perform the same social functions’ and ‘similarly contribute to conflict’ (Fox 1998, 48), remains a mystery.

There are several problems with Fox’s attempt to distinguish religion from non-religion by reference to a dualistic view of reality. First, defining religion in terms of the supernatural raises the question of what this concept, which Fox takes for granted, really means. The supernatural is such a notoriously open-ended concept that it becomes impossible to exclude systems of meaning that are colloquially understood to be non-religious from the category of religion, for example, nationalism – which has been aptly described as ‘a lingering trace of transcendence in a secular world’ (Eagleton 2005, 94). Second, when the supernatural is conceptualized as a being or an entity, it excludes systems of meaning that most people – Fox included – would consider religious, such as Theravada Buddhism.

In a somewhat tautological fashion Isak Svensson conceptualizes religious incompatibility conflicts as ‘conflicts where at least one side has made explicit claims relating to the religious sphere’ (Svensson 2012, 19). (Similarly, ‘a religious conflict’ is conceptualized by Svensson as ‘a conflict where at least one

side has raised explicit demands [...] relating to religious issues' [Svensson 2013, 412]). Religious incompatibility is thus defined by the religious sphere (and a religious conflict is defined by religious issues). But what is the meaning of the religious sphere (and religious issues), and how do we separate religious spheres (and religious issues) from secular ones? The problem is that Svensson provides no convincing answers to these questions. His definition of religion, 'a system of thought and practice aimed at giving basic meaning to existence, invoking conditions beyond strictly human affairs' (Svensson 2012, 6), is so broad that it encompasses a whole host of beliefs and practices that are not typically categorized as religion, such as neoliberalism. What counts as a religious issue and what does not is most likely based on common-sense conceptions of religion, which are typically too vague to be analytically productive. The argument that religious beliefs define or frame conflict issues presupposes that religion is distinguishable from non-religion. As far as we know, no one has been able to offer a definition that clearly separates religious meaning systems from secular meaning systems. Students of the concept of religion like Talal Asad argue that all attempts at a universal definition of religion are doomed to fail, 'not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes' (Asad 1993, 10).

Even if scholars of religion and conflict could find a coherent way to distinguish between religious and non-religious issues, we doubt that this distinction would tell us anything of value about the conflict issues categorized as such. The real challenge, after all, is not to conceptually distinguish between religious and secular issues, but to separate them from each other – as one scholar notes: 'most religious terrorists promote a mixture of religious and material objectives' (Stern 2003, xx). Armed conflicts are complex social processes, and the issues in contention, which are rarely singular or unambiguous, can always be described in both secular and religious terms, depending on the perspective of the observer. The very act of challenging the state's monopoly on morally sanctioned killing has political significance, even when the motivation is cast in religious terms. The issues that motivate religious parties to conflict are thus as much political as those of any secular party.

'Religion' and religious conflicts

If one argues that religious conflicts are more violent and intractable than other conflicts, one should be clear about what religion is. However, a brief

review of the research literature reveals that the most frequent and common practice is to simply use the term religion without ever defining it, as if the meaning of the term is self-evident (e.g. Breslawski and Ives 2019; Fox 1997; Isaacs 2017; Pearce 2005; Roeder, 2003 Selengut, 2003; Svensson 2007; Svensson and Harding 2011; Wellman and Tokuno 2004), or to cite one of the standard – typically substantivist – definitions of religion at the beginning of the text, sometimes placed in a footnote, and then effectively overlook the implications of the chosen definition in the remainder of the text (e.g. Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers 2016; Henne 2012a; Horowitz 2009; Tusicisny, 2004).

Ron E. Hassner, for instance, who argues that religious conflicts are more intractable than secular ones, writes in *War on Sacred Grounds* that he has ‘dodged altogether the responsibility of grappling with the definition of “religion”’ (Hassner 2009, 5). How are we to know what he counts as a religious conflict, and what he counts as a non-religious conflict if he does not provide a definition of religion? By what criteria are ‘actors’, ‘leaders’, ‘rivalries’, and so on considered either religious or secular? Where is the thin line that separates religion and politics (and vice versa) in statements such as ‘the religious elements of [conflicts over sacred spaces] are inextricably intertwined with their political elements’ (Hassner 2009, 3), and ‘religion and politics are inextricably intertwined’ (Hassner 2009, 5)? The conclusion that ‘the concentration of religious, political, and economic resources at or near temples creates significant temptations for violence’ (Hassner 2009, 27) assumes that religion pre-exists in the world and is somehow separate and distinct from politics and economics. Where is the boundary between them? (To be fair, in another publication Hassner defines religion as ‘a system of beliefs, a collection of symbols and practices, and a social structure’ [Hassner and Horowitz 2010, 204], but this definition hardly solves the problem of distinguishing between religious and non-religious conflicts, or between religion and politics/economics.)

Mattias Basedau, Georg Strüver, Johannes Vüllers and Tim Wegenast, acknowledging the complexity of the definitional question and explicitly stating that they have no intention of solving the problem of defining religion, assert, without giving particularly good reasons, that ‘it is useful to distinguish between different dimensions of religion’ (Basedau, Strüver, Vüllers, and Wegenast 2011, 754). They then rush into examining these dimensions as if they were, in the words of Russell T. McCutcheon, ‘self-evidently meaningful realities that exist outside the scholar, much as ripe fruit sits on the tree waiting to be picked’ (McCutcheon 2001, 87). Indeed, the very talk

of religion in terms of dimensions that is common in the literature points to a dubious reification and essentialization of religion (Fitzgerald 2000).

In an oft-cited study of the role of religion in civil wars Toft offers a definition of religion inspired by William P. Alston's polythetic definition:

Definitions [of religion] typically include some of all of the following elements: a belief in a supernatural being (or beings); prayers and communication with that being; transcendent realities that might include some form of heaven, paradise, or hell; a distinction between the sacred and the profane and between ritual acts and sacred objects; a view that explains both the world as a whole and a person's proper role in it; a code of conduct in line with that worldview; and a community bound by its adherence to these elements (Toft 2007, 99).

In another work on religion and politics, co-authored with Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah, in which Toft uses the same definition, she adds: 'Though not every religion includes all of these elements, all religions include most of them, such that we understand that religion involves a combination of beliefs, behavior, and belonging in a community' (Toft, Philpott and Shah 2011, 21). Furthermore, Toft asserts that 'all religions by definition seek understanding of, and harmony with, the widest reaches of transcendent reality – the quality that distinguishes them from political ideologies such as Marxism and secular nationalism that are sometimes thought to be functionally equivalent to religion' (Toft, Philpott, and Shah 2011, 21).

There are some fairly obvious problems with this definition and her arguments, for instance, the Western (Protestant-informed) bias to conceptualizing religion in terms of beliefs, and the use of highly controversial, contested, and inherently vague terms such as supernatural being, sacred, and transcendent. It is unclear, at least to us, how belief in something transcendent such as a divine being is essentially different from belief in the invisible hand of the market. Moreover, Toft provides no good reasons why the listed religion-forming features are important characteristics of religion. Most critically, the proposed definition of religion does not provide delineation principles, which is indeed acknowledged by Alston (1972). To claim that religious conflicts are essentially different from non-religious conflicts would undermine the fundamental idea behind a polythetic definition of religion. Without a clear delineation of religion from non-religion how can we know, as Toft claims, that religious conflicts are more violent and more durable than secular conflicts?

The study of religion and conflict is in fact, and perhaps surprisingly for some, thoroughly saturated with theologically loaded concepts and ideas (primarily of the liberal kind) such as the sacred (e.g. Appleby 2012; Hassner 2009; Jones 2008), the transcendent (e.g. Harpviken and Røislien 2008; Toft 2007), world religions (e.g. Appleby 2000; Bormann, Cederman, and Vogt 2017; Svensson 2007; 2012), Abrahamic religions (e.g. Toft 2007), and even the contested ecumenical idea that Jews, Christians, and Muslims 'believe in the one and same God' (Svensson 2013). However, scholars rarely move beyond a common-sense understanding of the concept of religion and turn to a more critical analysis of the term. As recent advances in the study of the concept of religion demonstrate, the concept is a social construct with a great deal of ideological baggage (e.g. Arnal and McCutcheon 2013; Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 2007; Smith 1998). The concept of religion would certainly not exist without the specific historical and sociopolitical conditions in which it emerged. It is a product of social practices, discourses, and shared agreements. As a social construction, religion requires human subjectivity to exist, but as an intersubjective construction, it exists independently of what any individual believes (Schilbrack 2010). The same argument is equally relevant to the concept of religious conflict. It is a product of human creativity and sociopolitical processes. The concept was invented by people for specific purposes and is maintained through convention, performance, and language. As social constructions, religious conflicts are real – if only for those who recognize them as such.

Religion is an ideologically charged concept, invented to serve the interests of those who need it. Academic study of the concept of religion has shown that it has been used extensively as a legitimization of Western imperialism (e.g. Chidester 2014; Fitzgerald 2000; Josephson, 2012; King 1990). 'Defining religion is thus not innocent or apolitical but grows from and serves material interests' (Schilbrack 2010, 1116). The concept of religious conflict is also an ideological construct that has been used – and continues to be used – to assert and advance power interests. To label a conflict religious is to arbitrarily isolate it from other types of conflict that are usually seen as more rational, pragmatic, and benign – perhaps even constructive and civilizing (Mamdani 2004). The mere identification of some conflicts as religious is itself a political move in a post-Cold War era in which, according to one author, 'religion has become too critical to Western interests to permit its continued marginalization in the policymaker's calculus' (Johnston 2003, 5).

Discussion

Consistent with Cavanaugh's findings in his study of the literature on religious violence, we show that scholars of religion and conflict are unable to make a coherent distinction between religious and secular conflicts. The definitional ambiguity reflects and reinforces – some would say confirms – conventional wisdom about 'the dark alliance between religion and violence' (Juergensmeyer 2017, xiv). As a result, claims that so-called religious conflicts are particularly vicious, brutish, and intractable are unreliable. It is bewildering that the observed similarities between religious and non-religious conflicts and the difficulty in clearly distinguishing them (e.g. Appleby 2000; Fox 2012; Philpott 2007; Stern 2003; Svensson 2012) do not lead to a serious questioning of the assumed difference between religious and non-religious conflicts.

To us most of these studies look like concealed ideological enterprises that aim to make the secular state appear necessary to tame, discipline, and domesticate those actors who challenge the state's monopoly on violence and the neoliberal hegemony – or the 'new world order' (Hardt and Negri 2004). The concept of religious conflict implies a link between religion and conflict, and many scholars of religion and conflict rhetorically reinforce the popular notion that religious conflicts somehow emerge from religious beliefs and sectarian identities. However, the literature fails to demonstrate a causal relationship between adherence to (radical/extreme or moderate) religious beliefs (whatever that may mean) and violent conflict behaviour (see also Basedau, Strüver, Vüllers, and Wegenast 2011; Sageman 2017).

Academic and non-academic discourses on religious conflict typically portray combatants as driven by uncompromising (extreme, radical, or totalitarian) beliefs, heavenly rewards, fanaticism, extremism, status, thrill, or friendship, rather than rational political motivations. The violence perpetrated by religious actors is thus portrayed not only as particularly bloody, intense, and enduring, but also as meaningless, because it cannot be rationally justified. Prioritizing religion effectively removes politics from conflicts and reduces them to personal predispositions and/or social processes such as beliefs, emotions, and group dynamics. Although most of those involved in religious conflicts are (also) motivated by political objectives such as liberation from foreign occupation (e.g. Karakaya 2015; Pape 2005; Pape and Feldman, 2010; Roy 2004), the literature typically defines them as religious rather than political actors. The focus on disembodied religion, reflecting the assumption that all conflict groups labelled religious are essentially the same, also downplays the sociopolitical context and obscures the role

that state agents – and corporate and state-sponsored global capitalism – have played and continue to play in violent intergroup conflicts around the world (e.g. Chomsky 2004; Chomsky and Herman 2015; Chomsky and Waterstone 2021; Herman and Peterson 2012; Hook and Ganguly 2000; Illas 2016; Klare 2002; Mills and Miller 2017; Mueller 2007; Rogers 2016). Religion and conflict studies thus tend to overlook how the interaction between state and non-state actors influences their choice of means, tactics, and strategies.

The study of religious conflicts is enmeshed in a variety of social, economic, and political forces that pull it in certain directions, including, of course, the politics of research funding, such as state and military funding of research projects, which has an impact on the kind of research that is done, and the kind that is not done (see also Sageman 2017), and the politics of publishing, which affects the kind of research that is published, and the kind that is not published (see also Kundnani 2015). The ‘view from nowhere’ that many of the scholars explicitly or implicitly profess is in fact a ‘view from somewhere’, since most of them take a problem-solving approach, and therefore take ‘the world as [they find] it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and institutions into which they are organized, as the given framework for action’ and strive to ‘make these relationships and institutions work smoothly by dealing effectively with particular sources of trouble’ (as Robert W. Cox [1981, 128-129] puts it). This – conscious or unconscious – obedience to those in power is, in the words of Stanley Milgram, ‘the psychological mechanism that links individual actions to political purpose’ (Milgram 1974, 3). In a secular context the distinction between religious and non-religious conflicts functions as a rhetorical device – or a sociopolitical management technique – to delegitimize some actors – those labelled religious – and legitimize others – those labelled non-religious, particularly liberal secular states. Since religious combatants are portrayed as especially violent and unwilling to negotiate, the study of religion and conflict provides secular states with a convenient justification to use force to neutralize religious actors who challenge the political status quo.

To conclude, most studies of the religion-conflict nexus reinforce the prevailing status quo and current power systems of power – even if the individual scholar has no such goal in mind. Some scholars are more eager than others to assist liberal states in the project of creating a ‘new world order’. Hassner, for instance, advises US military commanders in Iraq to ‘carefully consider the time and date chosen for military action’, because believers ‘will respond with greater vehemence to attacks that display a lack of sensitivity to prescribed times of prayer, dates of fasting and celebra-

tion, anniversaries, and holy days, regardless of whether congregants are actually present at the mosque when military operations commence' (Has-sner 2006, 158). In a world, then, where, as Talal Asad puts it, 'cruelty is an indispensable technique for maintaining a particular kind of international order' (Asad 2007, 94), scholars of religious conflict tend to focus on how to solve problems for the dominant elite at the expense of liberation from the political status quo. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the research on religious conflict has grown tremendously since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003.

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