Introduction

The scholarship on religion and war draws on two historical moments. The first is the mythologized memory of the crusades, imagined as the ideal type of a war motivated by religion. In this account of the crusades, medieval armies embarked on wars of conquest in which the identities of participants, their motivations, goals, and rewards were defined by religion. The reality was quite different: European rulers were motivated by power politics, primarily the threat posed by the Seljuq Empire to the Byzantine Empire, and internal European power struggles (Stark, 2010). Some knights may well have joined the enterprise due to pious motives (or so their chroniclers would later insist), but most were drawn east by the allure of adventure and greed, attacking not only Muslims but European Jews and fellow Christians. Muslim imperialism in southwestern, southern, eastern, and central Europe was far more frequent, forceful, successful, and enduring than the one-hundred-year-long crusader mini-kingdom. Nonetheless, the folklore surrounding the crusades has exerted a powerful hold on the imaginations of European and Middle Eastern people alike. They have forged a disparate series of skirmishes of moderate intensity, scattered across three hundred years, into a uniform phenomenon called “the crusades” that serves as the atavistic model for the causes, characteristics, and outcomes of religious wars.

The second influential moment is far more recent. It consists of the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11), and subsequent Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. In pitting Middle East Muslims against Christian Westerners, the conflicts evoked their mythical medieval precursors, adapted to modern times. In these new crusades, states engaged in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency efforts against non-state actors who employed terrorism and guerrilla tactics. Policy-makers emphasized that only the terrorists and insurgents were motivated by religious zeal, a claim echoed by Islamist leaders of these organizations. Scholars, consequently, focused on the role that extremist religious ideas had played in recruiting, mobilizing, and organizing these non-state actors. They devoted far less attention to the religion of soldiers and conventional armies, to the role of moderate religious beliefs, and to the enabling and constraining functions that religion could play after the initiation of violence.

Two decades past 9/11, the scholarship on religion and war is gradually working to correct the preconceptions imposed by these crusading models, old and new. Scholarly emphasis continues to privilege non-state actors, especially extremist non-state actors motivated by Islam.
At the same time, social scientists have increasingly employed quantitative analysis to seek novel and surprising patterns in the interaction between religion and war. Their qualitatively focused colleagues have begun exploring religions other than Islam, and have noted the significance of religious practices, and not only abstract and radical ideas, on the behavior of conventional militaries.

This has yielded no grand theory of religion and war that can compete with the crusade cliché. But, as the following pages document, it has led to important insights about religion and the causes and conduct of war. Research on religion as a cause of war has explored the role of religion in identifying the parties to conflict, mobilizing combatants, and organizing them into combat units (Klocek and Hassner, 2020). Research on religion and the conduct of war has explored the contribution of religion to discipline and unit cohesion, and the opportunities and constraints that religion places on military operations.

Religion as a cause of war

Whether or not religion is a factor, let alone a primary cause, of contemporary conflict remains hotly debated. Competing teams of researchers have used statistical evidence to show that religious identity is and is not a primary predictor of conflict, that wars with a religious element are and are not deadlier and longer lasting, and that the domestic repression of religion is positively and negatively correlated with conflict (Fox, 2000; Fox, 2004; Lai, 2006; Pearce, 2007; Toft, 2007; Henne, 2012; Kim and Choi, 2017; Henne and Klocek, 2019; Deitch, 2020; Zellman and Brown, 2022).

This uncertainty rests, in large part, on the difficulties inherent in treating religion as a variable. Setting aside fruitless disputes on whether or how religion should be defined, scholars disagree on how fine-grained the religious unit of analysis should be. It is not obvious whether religious identity is an individual, group, or organizational variable or how the salience of that variable should be assessed in a given community. Nor is it clear whether the religious significance of a given war should be measured in terms of the religious identities of participants, the religious issues at stake, or the symbols that accompany the conflict. Thus, some scholars use differences between the religious identities of leaders as a proxy for the religiousness of a war, while others closely analyze the frequencies with which religious rhetoric is employed.

Dominant theories on the causes of war in international relations suggest that religion ought to play a secondary role in war. Wars are costly, and states are reluctant to engage in conflict unless the benefits exceed the costs. When they do fight, states strive for power, resources, territory, or survival, not to convert their enemies or capture their sacred relics. Religious “goods” provide few of the material rewards that states are interested in.

If religion has not now, or in the past, played a primary role in motivating conflict, then what is its function in the lead-up to war? It has three distinct functions: it provides a source for group identity, it can mobilize participants in war, and it can shape the organizations that engage in war. In addition, some scholars argue that particular religious movements are uniquely war prone.

Identifying combatants

Religious identities, like other cultural attributes, provide clear boundaries that demarcate who belongs to a particular group and who does not. These distinctions are established and strengthened by shared myths, creeds, moral frameworks, rituals, dress, and even dietary restrictions. Tragically, war is not only the product of these identities but also their engine, producing a
Religion on the battlefield

vicious cycle. Once sectarian instincts have propelled groups into battle, tragedy and loss may drive religious identities even further apart.

When groups fear for their safety, group distinctions become more salient, and stronger boundaries develop. Myths of persecution, stories of martyrdom, and memories of collective exile all grow particularly relevant in the face of threats. These promote a positive affinity for ingroup members and prime individuals to be sensitive to their survival. Consequently, communities, which were previously only loosely connected, may develop into unitary actors with a common identity (Gagnon, 2004).

Out-group derogation intensifies when communities feel threatened. This may be because religious differences inhibit effective communication and lead to misunderstandings and violence (Johnston, 2001). Fears of group extinction can also lead to a deep psychological distrust and enmity toward out-groups (Huntington, 1996). The destruction of the nearly 500-year-old Babri mosque in Northern India by Hindu nationalists in 1992 and the ensuing intercommunal riots across the country illustrate how antipathy between groups can persist for generations (Hassner, 2009). Hindu extremists have also targeted Christian communities in India, whom they associate with the Western political order and the threat of privatized religion (Bauman, 2020).

When religious identities intersect with other cleavages in society, they amplify these effects. Ethnic and religious differences, for instance, can reinforce one another, leading each to become more salient. Religious discrimination may overlap with political, economic, and other social inequalities. These cross-cutting grievances can deepen trust among co-religionists and serve as an organizational platform for political mobilization, as with Catholics in Poland during the Soviet period or Sikh communities in India during the 1980s.

Religious grievances have linked communities across borders and across the globe. When a religious group forms a majority in one state but constitutes a politically repressed minority in another, tensions can result in pressure to intervene in other states through multiple channels. Individual leaders may feel a duty to act in defense of their suffering co-religionists in foreign lands. Domestic groups may exert pressure on government officials to intervene. International norms can drive states to assist specific religious communities far from the homeland (Finnemore, 1996). During the nineteenth century, for example, nearly all cases of state intervention to protect people other than their own nationals involved the defense of Christians from Ottoman Turks, such as French intervention in Lebanon on behalf of Maronite Christians. At the turn of the century, the Great Powers of Europe sent troops to China following the massacre of Protestant missionaries during the Boxer Rebellion. A similar pattern characterizes Iran’s intervention on behalf of Shiite populations in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. At other times, states produce narratives of religious and ethnic affinity in order to justify interventions that serve a primarily political objective (Huang and Tabaar, 2021).

Are some religious identities more war prone than others? Several scholars have followed Samuel Huntington in espousing an essentialist view on Muslim identity and conflict. Huntington famously argued that “Islam’s borders are bloody and so are its innards” (Huntington, 1996, p. 298). Huntington’s broader claims on the clash between religious blocks have come under significant scrutiny (Haynes, 2019). Recent wars have occurred as often within religious lines as they have across religious lines. Statistical analyses of interstate conflicts suggest that geographic proximity, alliances, state power, and authoritarianism are better predictors of conflict than Huntington’s civilizational groupings (Chiozza, 2002). The most significant wars of the past decade, mostly in the Middle East, have pitted Muslim combatants against other Muslim groups and subgroups in far greater numbers than Muslims against non-Muslims.
Nonetheless, the war-proclivity of Muslim-majority states continues to be a topic of debate in the literature. Between 1940 and 2000, violent actors identifying with Islam were involved in more than 80% of civil wars in which religion was a primary factor. These “religious civil wars” are becoming more frequent, and they are more destructive and prolonged than other civil wars (Toft, 2007; Toft, 2021). Toft offers historical, geographical, and structural factors to explain Islam’s higher representation in these wars, primarily the tendency of Muslim political leaders to frame threats in religious terms in order to outbid their rivals (see also De Juan, 2015). These dynamics are most pronounced in civil wars that involve Arab Muslim participants but not in civil wars that involve Arab Christian participants. Toft’s claims align well with quantitative patterns explored by Nilsson and Svensson (2021) who show that civil wars are 73% more likely to recur when they involve Islamist aspirations. Islamists invoke transnational ideological framing, drawing in foreign fighters and governments, which creates uncertainty around the capabilities and intentions of the participants to civil wars.

Some scholars are sceptical about the relationship between Islam and violence. Even those who recognize that Muslim-majority states are disproportionately engaged in violence argue that the cause may not be religion. Poverty, oil dependency, state repression, autocracy, and demography exhibit a more statistically robust relationship to violence than Islam (Karayaka, 2015). Colonial history, great power intervention, and lack of economic and political development offer competing explanations for the relationship between Muslim-majority states and war (Gleditsch and Rudolfsen, 2016).

### Mobilizing Combatants

The second role that religion can play in promoting war is mobilizational. European powers justified colonial efforts as a noble struggle to spread Christianity across the globe. Contemporary Islamist movements from Nigeria to Syria to Afghanistan profess religious goals. Religion can, of course, justify both violent and non-violent political mobilization. Political elites achieve the former by exploiting the “ambivalent” nature of the sacred (Appleby, 2000; Philpott, 2007). They emphasize the bellicose tenets of a faith, while simultaneously downplaying the peaceful ones. Both the ideas and institutions of faith traditions provide ample tools for this instrumental use of religion.

The religious ideas that underpin violence are often drawn from the sacred texts or narratives of a community. When leaders invoke holy writings, followers may perceive hostile action as a sacred duty (Juergensmeyer, 2000). The status and charisma of religious elites enable them to interpret sacred texts with authority and to increase the odds of violence by engaging in aggressive religious discourse (Basedau et al., 2016). A recent survey experiment, with eight thousand participants across religious communities, demonstrates that pro-violence quotes from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur’an can raise support for religious violence, especially among fundamentalist audiences (Koopmans et al., 2021). Freedman has analyzed thousands of pamphlets written by leading Israeli rabbis for their followers, noting the combination of nationalist and religious language that leaders used to highlight conflicts of religious significance (Freedman, 2019). Extremist Buddhist monks in Myanmar use inflammatory religious rhetoric to foment violence against Rohingya and Muslim communities (Ramakrishna, 2020). In Sri Lanka, in contrast, Buddhist monks are careful not to invoke violence directly but employ religious rituals to convey “implicit militarism” (Frydenlund, 2017).

Political elites can draw on similar religious ideas, though they tend to focus more on myths than on holy texts. These foundational moments in a religion become influential points of reference that make certain courses of action seem more justified, even imperative. Christ's
religion, for example, served as a powerful metaphor during the Easter Rising in Ireland. Slobodan Milosevic frequently referenced the Ottoman victory at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 to stoke tensions between Serbian Orthodox Christian and Bosnian Muslim communities during the Yugoslav Wars.

In addition to theological justifications, the material resources and organizational capacity of religious groups can bolster support for war. Religious structures, for example, offer clear focal points for gathering, especially in the absence of mass communication. A Congregational church in Boston, Old South Meeting House, served as a center for mass protests and meetings by American revolutionaries in the 1770s. Similarly, some Jewish insurgents used the Great Synagogue in Tel Aviv to meet and store arms caches during their struggle against the British (Kloeck, 2016). The protest marches that Lutheran leaders initiated after prayer services in East German churches culminated in the fall of the Berlin Wall. Contemporary Islamist groups have been known to recruit from madrassas in, among other locales, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Religion can mitigate collective actions problems in other ways. Shared religious networks lower coordination costs and offer both the opportunity and motive for joint action and recruitment (Berman, 2009). Combatants have an easier time organizing when they enjoy overlapping religious, geographic, and regional identities (Toft, 2005). Participation in religious practices can enhance a sense of “group consciousness” (Masoud et al., 2016).

Religious organizations can also provide the material resources needed to mobilize. The Islamic Republic of Iran provides funding, weapons, training, and instructions to Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthi rebels in Yemen. Saudi religious institutions support rebel groups in Chechnya and Syria. The Cypriot Orthodox Church directly channeled funds to the insurgent group EOKA (Ethniki Organosis Kyprion Agoniston) during the 1950s. Social networks can provide further funding via charitable giving and volunteering for both religious and non-religious causes. One clear example of this phenomenon is the sizeable contributions from Roman Catholics in the United States to the Irish Republican Army during The Troubles. Much of this revenue was collected and channeled through local church networks.

**Organizing combatants**

The third and final role that religion plays prior to war is to shape the organizations that employ violence. Religious structures, resources, and practices affect the combatants who make up these organizations and who partake in those practices.

Non-state violent Islamist groups tend to be the focus of these organizational analyses. For example, several scholars have noted the unique methods that Islamist groups use to organize, recruit, and fundraise. Because they are decentralized, and characterized by fragmented hierarchies, they are less susceptible to attacks on their leaders (Byman, 2013). Indeed, further repression of these groups may drive them out of the domestic sphere and lead them to embrace international terrorism. Once they adopt a global identity, they encounter fewer obstacles for recruiting (Ahmad, 2016). Islamists who rely on an ethnic or tribal identity are more prone to group fragmentation since they have to take important local groups into account. Global Islamists, on the other hand, are better able to retain group cohesion by appealing to the global imagination of their adherents and through frequent and unrestrained purging of dissenters within the group. They may be less susceptible to government coercion than nationalist rebels because they can draw on global support structures, whereas nationalist rebels rely heavily on the local population (Toft and Zhukov, 2015).

More recently, scholars have started shifting their focus onto the role of religion in conventional military organizations (Hassner, 2016a). All military organizations, even those employing
Ron E. Hassner

broad conscription, select recruits from specific sectors of the national population. The distribution of religions in the military thus distorts the distribution of religions in society at large, with implications for religious practices in the military. In some instances, rare among modernized militaries, membership in a religious group constrains promotion across ranks. More commonly, decision-makers select religious adherents into military units and into positions of command so as to enhance unit cohesion and reduce incidents of insubordination either by forming religiously diverse or religiously uniform units. The religious composition of units, in turn, will constrain the geographic areas in which they can operate and in the tasks they can assume, particularly if those require contact with civilians. Both India, in choosing the units to confront Muslim and Sikh insurgents in Kashmir and the Punjab, and Israel, in selecting the units that would forcibly relocate Israeli settlers from Gaza, made difficult choices regarding the religious identities of soldiers in those units.

The effects of religion on military organizations and on soldiers prior to battle often reflect political contention over constitutional issues in society. Freedom of religion debates tend to arise in connection to religious symbols, clothing, and grooming, the freedom to preach and proselytize, the freedom from religion, and the accommodation of religious needs. Society scrutinizes how these thorny issues are worked out in the pressure cooker that is the military. Struggles over religious rights and freedoms in the armed forces then spill back into the broader society, creating a feedback loop. As a consequence of this back and forth, religious accommodation in the military remains in a constant state of flux, never reaching a comfortable equilibrium.

Religion and the conduct of war

Long before social scientists began to grapple with the effects of religion on the conduct of war, theologians and scholars of religion proposed theoretical religious criteria for evaluating, justifying, and constraining wars. The Just War tradition has its roots in theology and religious thought, and its branches reach into contemporary laws of war (Johnson and Kelsay, 1990). Alas, modern scholars of Just War theory have contributed little empirical work on the implementation of this theory in practice. Their work remains abstract, with little interest in the feasibility or effects of their theories on the conduct of armies. The glaring exception that proves the rule is Michael Walzer's work (Walzer, 1977) that seeks to establish a secular theory of Just War.

There are, however, two other research programs that have successfully combined theoretical and empirical analyses of the impact of religion on the conduct of war. The first deals with religion, discipline, and unit cohesion. The second evaluates the tactical and strategic opportunities and constraints that religion poses on the battlefield.

Discipline and unit cohesion

Shared beliefs and practices can increase unit cohesion and discipline if they offer a common rallying point. At the individual level, they can help soldiers as they struggle with the psychological effects of battle. Some research on the mental health of soldiers and veterans suggests that high levels of religiosity, a close-knit religious community, and meditative religious practices can mitigate the effects of trauma both prior to battle and immediately following exposure to violence (Hassner, 2016a). That violence, in turn, also shapes the religiosity of soldiers in fundamental ways. It tends to empower the religiosity of soldiers who enter battle with a strong religious foundation, but it tends to weaken the faith of soldiers with a fragile sense of religious belonging. As a consequence, soldiers in this latter group can suffer a double psychological blow
in response to trauma: a loss of faith and the loss of the mental health benefits that this religiosity would have provided.

The concomitant rates of depression and suicide among soldiers who experience this process of disillusionment may explain why militaries have always invested significant resources in training and deploying chaplains. Consistently across history and across militaries, these religious leaders in uniform have doubled as sources of encouragement and hope, a cross between cheerleaders and psychiatrists. Though their formal role tends to include an advisory capacity to the commander, potentially restraining combat where ethical or legal lines are about to be crossed, in reality chaplains have performed no constraining function. They employ sermons, religious rituals, private sessions, and group prayer to prepare troops for battle, heal the psychological wounds of battle, and prepare combatants for the next round of fighting. In the Syrian civil war, Russian Orthodox priests motivated Russian troops, worked to enhance unit cohesion, and decreased post-combat stress (Adamsky, 2020). In Russia itself, the priesthood is present at all levels of military command, including Russia’s nuclear forces. It consecrates weapons, influences the symbols and rituals of the nuclear forces, and legitimizes Russia’s national security strategy (Adamsky, 2019).

At the unit level, soldiers partake in a plethora of religious and semi-religious group rituals, ranging from the formal to the superstitious. The focus and intensity of these ceremonies tend to rise as the day of battle nears as well as in the immediate aftermath of the fighting. Soldiers routinely pray and participate in ceremonies together. Beliefs and rituals can increase the resilience of units in the face of stress or help sustain morale in the face of significant setbacks. For example, battle cries are meant to both intimidate the enemy and increase the esprit de corps of a unit. Soldiers also find encouragement in the various symbols or devotional items they wear or carry into battle. Collective religious experiences, such as miracles and visions, are not infrequent at times of crisis, be it in the trenches of the Great War or during counterterrorism operations in the Gaza Strip (Jenkins, 2015; Rosman, 2018).

There are good reasons to suspect that just as religious groups employ rituals to define and unite their communities, so military units may benefit from group rituals. Shared faith, values, and ceremonies may play a role in enhancing the cohesion of military units. Research on this front is anecdotal at best, but if it is indeed the case that shared religious beliefs and practices are correlated with unit cohesion, then religion may contribute indirectly to combat effectiveness. By routinely participating in communal activities, such as prayer services, soldiers build stronger relationships and improve communication with one another. Some militaries have leaned on the moral teachings of religion in the conviction that it would improve soldiers’ character and obedience. In addition to providing encouragement, religious ideas about the afterlife can shift individual- and group-level calculations about the utility gained from continuing to fight. Soldiers with such beliefs may be able to absorb more costs as they discount the present for future benefits (Horowitz, 2009).

**Religious opportunities and constraints during war**

Few soldiers in modern professional militaries fight due to religious motivations. Yet most soldiers are members of religious communities, and most armies have to contend with the presence of other religious communities on the battlefield and observing the battle from near or far. These communities reward individuals for abiding by religious regulations that safeguard the sacred and penalize them for religious transgressions, penalties that are viewed as both social and divine. These religious regulations, drawn from the religion of soldiers or the religion of locals, shape the incentive of military decision-makers by creating both opportunities and constraints
Those incentives are particularly powerful in wars of occupation that include a “hearts and minds” component: safeguarding indigenous religious values can earn the trust of a local community, while defying those values will cause offense at the local, regional, or even global level.

These religious regulations can pertain to sacred places, times, peoples, objects, rituals, and discourses. Following religious rules can enhance the confidence, reputation, or freedom of movement of a military unit, thus acting as a force multiplier of sorts. Units fighting in times or locations considered religiously auspicious, or enjoying the encouragement that chaplains, ceremonies, group and individual prayer, religious garb, benedictions, or amulets provide, can be expected to fight with greater assurance and enthusiasm. Soldiers expected to desecrate sacred places or holy days, endanger religious leaders, or forego soothing rituals may fight haltingly or not at all, as exemplified by the reluctance of US Civil War generals to initiate battles on Sundays or the Allied hesitation prior to assaults on Monte Cassino, Rome, and other locations rife with Christian shrines during World War II.

Similarly, exploiting the constraints that religious practices place on enemy units can act as a force multiplier unless that exploitation provokes the wrath of a broader religious community. North Vietnamese troops attacked American and South Vietnamese units in 1968 during the feast of Tet, and Arab armies attacked Israel in 1973 on Yom Kippur, in the expectation that these holidays would hamper the mobilization and combat readiness of their opponents. Insurgents in Iraq, Afghanistan, Israel, India, Pakistan, and Thailand have used sacred shrines as bases of operations, confident in the knowledge that counterinsurgents would hesitate to desecrate these sites for fear of regional and global repercussions. These insurgents have also targeted the sacred shrines, holidays, and processions of their religious opponents with the intention of provoking outrage and escalating conflict.

This means that religion is present on the battlefield even when the pretext for war is far removed from religion and even when the parties to conflict exhibit next to no religious discord. Religion is a permanent element in the environment of war, like topography or the weather, not to be ignored even when it is not the underlying cause of the fighting. Professional armies are thus well advised to gather intelligence on religion just as they would on any other environmental factor. Decision-makers must familiarize themselves with their opponent’s religious proclivities, the preferences of local communities on or near the battlefield, as well as their own soldiers’ religious needs and capabilities.

This “religious intelligence” is difficult to obtain: it is highly local and contextual. Information on pertinent religious practices, their salience, and specifics cannot be gleaned from official religious sources, let alone ancient scripture. Practices may vary from locale to locale and from year to year and will diverge significantly from formal doctrine, often veering into syncretism and superstition. Because acquiring this knowledge requires time-sensitive regional expertise, the US military has begun experimenting with the deployment of social scientists into theaters of operations in order to study local cultural, ethnic, and religious practices. This enterprise is in its early stages and has met with mixed success. Military organizations remain yet more reluctant to study the religious preferences and practices of their own soldiers, thus exposing themselves to dangerous blind spots regarding both unexpected religious constraints and undesired bursts of religious enthusiasm. They may underestimate their own biases in managing disputes with a religious dimension, and they may over- or underestimate the religious identities, ideas, and practices of their opponents.

Scholars of religious practices on the battlefield have now started collecting such information, focusing on insurgents and terrorists. Some scholars adopt an ideational approach and study the intersection of religion and culture, including jihadist poetry, music, visual culture,
Religion on the battlefield

and even dreams (Hegghammer, 2017). For example, Nanninga (2019) explores the notions of purity and pollution in jihadi culture, proposing that Islamist insurgents view acts of violence as acts of purification designed to cleanse society. These acts of purification include the destruction of cultural heritage, targeting of non-Muslim minorities, and punishing of alleged sinners. Revkin and Wood (2021) study the conditions under which the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has targeted specific communities with sexual violence.

The bulk of research on religious insurgent behavior during war, however, seeks to understand how religion affects tactics and strategy, such as the timing of insurgent attacks to coincide with religious holy days (Hassner, 2011; Toft and Zhukov, 2015; Reese et al., 2017). Skeptics, in contrast, argue that religious insurgents have the same goals and engage in the same calculus as secular insurgents. Comparing jihadist groups to Marxist rebels, Kalyvas (2018) concludes that both are driven by opportunism and strategic imperatives, not ideological and religious motivations. Islamist ideologies are often flexible and can be tailored, post hoc, to particular needs and circumstances (Nejad, 2022).

Conclusion

Recent research on religion and war has started down the path of correcting for early biases. Scholars have developed an interesting range of mid-level theories about the different ways in which religion can influence conflict, before and during wars, civil wars, and insurgencies. Now that this subfield has started shedding some of its preconceptions and has started normalizing and standardizing the study of religion and conflict, research opportunities abound. One of the largest questions that awaits answers relates to the role of religion at the conclusion of conflicts.

Because the literature on religion and war was shaped by salient cases in which religion was perceived as a primary cause, scholars have paid less attention to religion’s role during conflict, and they have paid almost no attention at all to its role in the aftermath of conflict. In El Salvador, Colombia, and Rwanda, religion was not a source of identity, mobilization, organization, or constraint, yet it played a role in bringing the conflict to an end. The actors involved in halting the fighting, negotiation, disarmament, and reconciliation can include clergy and faith-based organizations (Johnston and Sampson, 1995; Little, 2007; Patterson, 2014). These often work behind the scenes to broker peace deals or rebuild communal trust. They make for less spectacular topics of analysis than extremist insurgents and suicide bombers, but their contribution to war and peace is no less significant.

Religion can also obstruct peace and inhibit negotiation efforts. Some scholars argue that religious conflicts are difficult to resolve because of the challenge posed by bargaining over indivisible issues (Svensson, 2007; Hassner, 2009). When belligerent demands are anchored in a religious tradition, claims become less flexible, and cannot be easily divided or substituted, compromise becomes less likely. In Sri Lanka, for example, Buddhist nationalists refused to consider ceding territory to the Tamil Tigers because they viewed the whole territory of the country as sacred. Similarly, Fazal (2018) argues that “religionist rebels”, who draw on the divine as their source of legitimacy, tend to adopt unlimited war aims. Because they reject the modern state system, they refuse to negotiate with state actors.

Others have argued that religious rebels are less likely to compromise because they enjoy longer time horizons than their non-religious counterparts (Toft, 2006; Horowitz, 2009). If pious combatants discount the present for future benefits, they can absorb higher costs during a conflict. As a consequence, it becomes more difficult to compel rebels to the negotiating table because they are willing to continue their struggle even after material benefits cease. Moreover, even where insurgents are willing to negotiate, they are often misperceived as
extremist and uncompromising by counterinsurgents, who typcast them as religious fanatics (Klocek, 2016).

The literature on religion and war is growing in leaps and bounds. The collections of the digital library JSTOR under the subject headings “religion” and “war” alone have grown by 5% to 10% per year since the library was founded in 1995. In the 1990s, scholars produced roughly 20 books or articles per year that referenced religion and war in their abstracts. In the decade after 9/11, the publication volume reached 50 a year. Today, according to JSTOR, that number is closer to 75 publications per year, with entire book series and journals dedicated to the topic. There is much left to study: what scholars know about religion on the battlefield continues to be dwarfed by what they have yet to discover.

References


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