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Chapter 3

Approaches to the Measurement of Religious Violence

Robert Brathwaite

Religion is gaining increasing traction as an explanatory factor in understanding a host of political and social issues of concern in a number of different disciplines. In particular, religion’s influence on issues in international politics is a growing field of research. This development is illustrated by the proliferation of sections focusing on the study of religion and international politics in academically orientated professional organizations like the International Studies Association and the increasing focus on religion and international affairs among grant-awarding organizations like the Henry Luce Foundation. The issue of religious violence is a topic that gets particular attention, partially due to renewed academic interest, but this attention is also being driven by contemporary events associated with the “War on Terror.” This is reflected in the number of publications associated with religion and conflict that have increased dramatically in the last fifteen years. Hassner notes that leading journals, such as *International Security*, publish more than three times the number of articles referencing religion and conflict then the previous decades of the 1970s and 1980s and that more books have been published on the relationship between Islam and war since the 9/11 attacks than had ever occurred previously in the academic literature (Hassner 2010, 2011).

In addition to changes from an academic perspective, the issue of religious violence is getting more attention due to increasing incidences of it being reported and the destruction it causes. Reports from the battlefields of Syria, repression in Myanmar, and growing concerns regarding discrimination and violence in places like India, the United Kingdom, and the United States highlight that religious violence is a growing issue of concern for policy-makers, regardless of whether a state is undergoing large-scale civil or interstate conflict. Given these developments, understanding and measuring different aspects of religious violence is increasingly important for scholars and policy makers alike.

This research note focuses on the concept of religious violence, with particular attention to issues associated with its measurement and conceptualization. The discussion of the conceptualization of religious violence focuses on issues pertaining to identification of this type of violence and how one approaches capturing different levels of intensity. In addition, I discuss different approaches to the measurement of religious violence and identify their specific benefits and trade-offs. In particular, I focus on studies that view religious violence in the context of intra-state conflict and from a more communal perspective (violence involving those who are not organized armed actors). The final section of this study provides some specific examples of datasets addressing religious violence and future research avenues associated with the measurement of this concept.
Conceptualizing Religious Violence

There are two issues that stand out in discussing the conceptualization of religious violence. Identification deals with whether an activity that leads to violence is religiously motivated, while conceptual issues associated with intensity deal with how religious motivations lead to specific acts of violence and/or persecution. Examination of violent acts that have a religious motivation needs to start with an understanding of the utility of violence in a social context. Violence is associated with the use of force, typically involved with a dispute or conflict (Bruck et al. 2010: 18–19). In addition, numerous scholars have discussed the need to differentiate between the motivating factors for various forms of violence that occur (political, ethnic, etc.). This is partly associated with the need to identify root causes of outbreaks of violence, but also because the intensity of violence may vary based on the underlying grievance with which it is associated (Bruck et al. 2010: 18–19; Fearon and Laitin 2003: 75–90; Davenport and Stam 2009; Verpoorten 2012, 44–56).

The motivating factor behind religious violence is triggered by attachment to sectarian identity or religious traditions and/or symbolism (Juergensmeyer and Kitts 2011: 1–3). Simply stated, religious violence is defined as the use of force or coercion that is primarily motivated by attachment to a specific religious identity, traditions, and/or symbolism. Given this conceptualization, religious violence is identified when there is a reported religious incompatibility between the perpetrator who initiates a violent act and victim who experiences it. This operationalization is consistent with previous attempts to measure religious violence in a systematic fashion (Svensson 2007: 930–49; Svensson 2013: 411–30; Toft 2007, 97–131; Vullers, Pfeiffer and Basedau 2015: 857–81).

Harder to capture are varying levels of intensity associated with religious violence. Specifically, the need to determine what range of violent actions are tied to religious motivations is an important aspect of the measurement of religious violence that has been difficult to capture. More typically, religious violence is operationalized dichotomously (attack or not or fatalities occurred or not), which does not account for differing levels of intensity. Specifically, it conflates different levels of violence and coercion, with the practical implications for measurement being the inability to distinguish between violent acts such as murder, assault, or property damage that are tied to either religious identity, traditions, or symbolism. This predicament is mostly due to the limitations of the source data that often do not contain more fine-grained information.

I would argue that future attempts to measure religiously-motivated violence should be conceptualized as a continuous measure associated with a spectrum of violence rather than from a dichotomous perspective in order to better capture variation in intensity. Variation in intensity is important to capture since certain actions, for example murder, are qualitatively different than actions such as attacks against personal property. Table 3.1 below represents a conceptualization of religious violence that captures different variations in intensity that is being utilized in some preliminary research by the author. Utilizing the literature on intra-state conflict and repression, four distinct dimensions of...
religious violence are identified along with the specific violent or coercive actions that serve as constitutive elements of those dimensions: threats to physical integrity, threats of sexual violence, threats to personal property, and threats of discrimination/dignity (Davenport and Stam 2009: 9, 18).

### Table 3.1 Dimensions of religious violence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threats to physical harm</th>
<th>Threats of sexual violence</th>
<th>Threats to personal property</th>
<th>Threats to dignity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kill</td>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>Arson</td>
<td>Discriminate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>Sexual Violence</td>
<td>Burn</td>
<td>Strip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torture</td>
<td>Sexual Assault</td>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assault</td>
<td></td>
<td>Destroy</td>
<td>Enslave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beat</td>
<td></td>
<td>Destroy Property</td>
<td>Atrocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disappear</td>
<td></td>
<td>Destruct</td>
<td>Humiliate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massacre</td>
<td></td>
<td>Destruct Property</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rob</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dacoity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Banditity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Approaching the conceptualization of religious violence in this manner is appropriate given that some violent actions may entail greater social costs or legal penalties that discourage their widespread use. In addition, the destruction of property and inflicting bodily harm on an individual are fundamentally different acts, so a measurement strategy that can disaggregate these actions is useful. For example, the destruction of personal property typically garners less attention and legal sanction from authorities than murder, so it is important to capture this difference when attempting to measure religious violence since some perpetrators may be motivated by the propensity for severe consequences to follow their involvement.

This discussion highlights that there is some convergence in the literature on the conceptualization of religious violence from an identification perspective. In particular, numerous studies identify religious violence when there is an underlining incompatibility between perpetrator and victim. However, issues associated with capturing different levels of intensity associated with the operationalization of religious violence still need attention to open the “black box” and examine a range of potential violent acts that may be motivated by religiosity. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the term “religious” itself may have inherent biases and the labeling of something as “religious,” violence or
otherwise, may be susceptible to political and social manipulation (Hurd 2015: 117). Hurd (2015: 115–18) argues that we should reexamine the legitimacy of the use of “religious” as a category of explanation due to the inherent politicization of religion itself.

Given these concerns, I utilize the term religious violence for this study cautiously and take an agnostic view on what might be the motivating factors that lead to outbreaks of religious violence. However, a brief discussion of explanations of religious violence is warranted to clarify some theoretical issues and assumptions. Specifically, this study rejects the notion that occurrences of religious violence are reflective of existing primordial fault-lines that exist between different religious identities. Rather, I would argue that more attention needs to be focused on viewing religious violence as a consequence of political manipulation of spiritual belief and religious identity. This should not be interpreted as a claim that the supporters (or potential supporters) of elites that utilize religious identity or symbolism as a rallying cry follow blindly any leader that utilizes demagogic appeals to religion. It is likely that the use of religious identity to mobilize political support may be salient only to specific religious or social groups (Smith and Walker 2013: 399–413). One unintended consequence of this could be that leaders who utilize religious identity or symbolism to mobilize their supporters may instead mobilize their opposition due to fears of the overt sectarian appeals being promulgated, resulting in increased incidents of religious violence and conflict (Garretson 2014: 280–92). In addition, some have argued that in democratic societies, increased religious violence is a function of conflicts between those who want society to be more religious and those who want to keep it secular, which could be an indication that fear of the loss of the salience of religion in politics, not greater intercommunal social cleavages is driving religiously motivated violence (Fox 2015). In short, this study rejects the view that religious violence is a function of specific religious traditions or that those who have fervent spiritual beliefs are in some way more prone to violence or animosity towards followers of different religious traditions. Rather, I argue that more research needs to look at micro-level causes of religious violence that highlight the role of political competition and the manipulation of religious identity.

Measuring Religious Violence

Existing data on the measurement of religious violence can be grouped into two different categories; religion as a peripheral or primary factor in the context of civil war, and religion as a motivating factor associated with communal violence. The former examines religious violence in the context of intra-state violence by combatant actors, while the latter takes a broader viewpoint and attempts to capture religiously motivated violence that is communal in character and perpetrated by those not classified as domestic challengers to the state. In examining studies that focus on religion in the context of civil war, two different approaches stand out. The first approach views religion more from an
identity perspective that marks the religious affiliation of armed actors as an explanatory factor for various conflict dynamics. For example, some have argued religion makes civil wars more durable and increases the level of violence (Tusicsny 2004: 485–98; Collier, Hoeffler, and Soderbom 2004: 253–73). Others focus on how religion makes conflicts more difficult to settle or creates negotiation obstacles due to the perception of indivisibility on issues that arise out of religious motivations (Harpviken and Roislien 2008: 351–73; Pearce 2004: 333–52; Hassner 2003: 1–33). This discussion highlights how some measures of religious violence only seek to capture how religion influences specific conflict dynamics associated with civil war onset, duration, intensity, and termination. The influence of these studies can be seen in the inclusion of measures for “religious fractionalization/polarization” in a number of civil war datasets (Querol 2002: 736–56; Fearon and Latin 2003: 75–90), but do not attempt to provide a broad measure of religious violence in the context of civil war.

Other scholars focus on whether religion plays an instrumental role in the context of civil war. These scholars are focused on whether religious incompatibility was a primary factor in driving the behavior of actors involved in armed conflict. Toft (2007) is one example of this approach. She examines 42 cases of religious civil war from 1940–2000 and focuses on testing the impact of religious outbidding on civil war dynamics (Toft 2007). Svensson’s work also examines religion being a primary motivator for violence in the context of armed conflict from 1989–2003 for 217 conflict dyads in 73 different countries. However, he focuses on a different unit of analysis with a dyadic approach, includes conflicts whose intensity may not meet the threshold for classification as a civil war, and also examines whether there may be regional effects with a concentration on the North Africa-Middle East region (Svensson 2007, 2013). Similarly, Nordas (2014) focuses on religion in the context of civil war with a comparative case-study that examines religiously motivated violence in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire. Nordas’s work takes a more qualitative focus to the relationship between religion and civil war and provides a particularly rich account of potential causal dynamics associated with cultural demography and state policies of accommodation and repression (Nordas 2014: 145–66). These studies differ from the previous studies discussed examining religion in the context of civil war since they do not view religion as a periphery factor that exerts influence on discrete conflict dynamics. Rather Toft, Svensson, and Nordas’s work views religion as being a primary characteristic to the grievances that were driving the violence. In addition, the majority of these works represent a systematic approach to measure incidences of religious violence utilizing civil war and armed conflict data as source material.

This discussion highlights that one rich source of data on the measurement of religious violence is associated with civil war and armed conflict datasets. The majority of studies that examine aspects of religious motivation in the context of intra-state violence focus on whether religion has an impact on issues such has intensity, duration, and termination, but a few studies (Toft 2007 and Svensson 2007, 2013) approach the measurement of religious violence in a more systematic fashion with a focus on capturing religious
incompatibility between different actors being the primary motivator for violence in a conflict. The benefits of utilizing civil war and armed conflict data to measure religious violence resides in their availability, temporal coverage, and the identifiable actors involved in the conflict. However, the main drawback is the inability to capture religiously motivated violence that is not perpetrated by an organized armed actor or is less than lethal in character. In short, the utilization of civil war and armed conflict datasets to create measures of religious violence is biased towards violence committed by organized armed actors, but likely overlooks violence of a communal nature that is not tied to a recognized occurrence of civil conflict.

Given the limitations in utilizing civil war and armed conflict data other scholars have taken a broader approach to the measurement of religious violence, with a particular emphasis on the coding of international religious freedom reports produced by the U.S. State Department. Grim and Finke examine U.S. State Department International Religious Freedom reports generated in 2003 for 143 countries. They provide a particular focus on testing explanations for religious violence and persecution dealing with explanations pointing to a religious marketplace/economies and clash of civilizations perspective (Grim and Finke 2007: 633–58, 2010). Vullers et al. (2015) utilize a similar approach by coding International Religious Freedom reports from the U.S. State Department. In particular, they expand the temporal scope of the analysis to include reports spanning from 1990–2010 while focusing on 130 countries in the developing world with an emphasis on empirically testing the dynamics associated with inter-religious networks (Vullers et al. 2015). Others have utilized both coded U.S. State Department Religious Freedom reports and attitudinal data to more holistically capture and generate broad measures of religiously motivated violence and discrimination. For example, Grim et al. (2013) examines 176 countries for the year 2009 with a particular focus on examining how demographic transitions and population growth impact the propensity for a country to experience religious conflict (Grim et al. 2013: 1–19). In addition, the Pew Research Center provides yearly updates on incidents of religious violence that can be attributable to the following: crimes or malicious acts motivated by religious hatred or bias, public religious tensions that lead to violence, and/or religion-related terrorism and war (Pew Research Center 2017). Data from the Pew Research Center cover 198 countries with 2015 as the most recently available year.

The main benefit of utilizing different source material for the measurement of religious violence is two-fold. Specifically, the U.S. State Department International Religious Freedom reports allows for the capture of violent events that are more communal in nature that do not involve armed actors that are party to civil war or armed conflict. In addition, using U.S. State Department reports allows for the universe of cases to expand beyond states that are experiencing civil war or armed conflict. However, there are also drawbacks. One major trade-off is that the level of specificity in the reports does not allow for precise measurements regarding the intensity of religious violence, nor do they typically provide identifiable information of who is involved from a victim or perpetrator perspective.
Examples of Religious Violence Data

Given the different sources of information used to construct measures of religious violence, I now turn to providing some specific data examples along with some discussion of potential benefits and drawbacks of these various measures. Table 3.2 below provides information on four datasets that attempt to measure religious violence in a cross-sectional systematic fashion.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th># of countries/cases</th>
<th># of year</th>
<th>Data source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toft (2007)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>60 (1940–2000)</td>
<td>Correlates of War</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The studies presented here offer the most complete coverage when it comes to measurements of religious violence. However, there are unique benefits and drawbacks associated with each of these data sources. The Grim and Finke (2007), Grim et al. (2013), and Pew Research Center (2017) data are excellent examples of a cross-sectional measure of religious violence given the number of countries included. However, they have a limited time frame of coverage making it more limited in its application. Toft’s data provides wider temporal coverage but is limited by only looking at indicators associated with religious violence in the context of civil war. In particular, violence of a more communal nature is not captured by Toft due to the source material being reliant on existing data on civil wars. Svensson’s data utilizes a different source of civil war data and adds a dyadic unit of analysis and also includes armed conflicts that fall short of the casualty threshold typically associated with civil war. However, this data’s focus on intra-state conflict also comes with the trade-off of not being able to capture religious violence of a communal nature. The most comprehensive data associated with religious violence of the examples listed is associated with Vullers et al. since it covers a large number of countries (130) and years (21). However, it only covers developing countries and is limited to a dichotomous
conceptualization of religious violence (occurred or not, killing or not). This discussion illustrates that while there are various sources of data that measure religious violence their utilization does not come with trade-offs.

Conclusion

This research note has provided an overview of the literature on the measurement of religious violence. In particular, it highlights conceptual issues associated with identification that operationalizes religious violence from the perspective of reported incompatibility between victim and perpetrator. This study has also advocated more attention to conceptual issues associated with intensity that pertain to how religious violence is observed and what types of violent actions are included for measurement. In addition, a brief overview of the literature associated with measuring religious violence illustrated different measurement approaches and how data measuring religious violence is generated from two key sources of data; civil war/armed conflict data and US State Department International Religious Freedom reports. Finally, different examples of religious violence data were discussed with reference to potential benefits and trade-offs with their utilization. However, this leads to the question of how future research associated with measuring religious violence can address some of the issues of concern highlighted in this study.

An important implication of this study is further attention being devoted to the conceptualization and measurement of religious violence. Future research associated with these issues should concentrate on viewing religious violence as a continuous variable that may have distinct dimensions that exhibit various outcomes as well as determine if concerns regarding measurement validity are relevant with the labeling of specific bouts of political violence as religious in nature (Hurd 2015, 115–26). In addition, there is a need to expand the data sources used to generate observations of religious violence as well as our methodological approaches to this concept’s measurement. Current research underway by the author and other collaborators associated with the Global Religion Research Initiative is focused on examining media reports and utilizing machine learning techniques like natural language processing to construct comprehensive cross-sectional measurements of religious violence to address some of the limitations identified with previous sources of religious violence data (Salehyan 2014: 105–09, Brathwaite and Park 2018 forthcoming).

This study has highlighted the need for further refinement of our understanding and measurement of factors associated with religious violence. One only needs to look at places such as Syria, Iraq, Myanmar, India, Indonesia, and a host of other countries that experience high levels of religious persecution or sectarian conflict to realize that the investigation of this topic is not only timely, but needed given some of the contemporary challenges in the international system. The sooner we understand the dynamics driving religious violence the closer we are to a solution to avoid its most negative effects.
References


