Conflict and Religion

Hypothesis:

1. States with different predominant religions are more likely to engage in militarized interstate violence.

Theoretical Background:

I began this research assignment by looking at, and trying to understand, the relationship between war and religion. Historically speaking, culture and religion were excluded from international relations research because social scientists tend to look for “objective” factors (e.g., political, economic, military factors) in explaining a state's behavior. Influential social scientists, such as Max Weber and Karl Marx, also downplayed religion’s importance in interstate affairs once they concluded that theological systems would be toppled and replaced by modern, secular systems (“Religion and International Relations”). Even recent research has proven that people are becoming less religious than they have been in the past, and religiously influenced social and political institutions are in decline (“The World’s Newest Major Religion”). However, if we consider India and Pakistan for example, territorial disputes over the Kashmir region sparked two of the three major Indo-Pakistani wars. Resolution efforts have been unsuccessful over the past several decades and have led many to question if there is an underlying cause for such conflict. After all India is predominantly Hindu, while Pakistan is predominantly Muslim. The first major thesis about religion’s role in conflict was that of Samuel Huntington. In his essay, he lays out why religious differences are becoming particularly threatening to the existing world order. Psychological phenomenons, like social identity theory, have also been identified to explain why
members of different groups have a tendency to exaggerate their differences, creating conflict between themselves. Together, these two ideas have led me to hypothesize that strong religious differences between states increase the likelihood that these states will use war as an avenue for resolving conflict.

Samuel Huntington might as well have set the world ablaze when he published his 1993 essay, “The Clash of Civilizations?” His thoughts in this article have been widely criticized and rejected by political scientists, but regardless his theory is still widely referenced today. The reason for this is because Huntington’s work came after a significant change to the international system: the Soviet Union had just collapsed and the Cold War was finally over. However, Huntington did not predict that in the absence of ideological struggle, there would be a world of peace and harmony. Instead, he suggests, that the world is headed into a time of multipolar conflict in which culture is the dominant factor in international relations. He begins his thesis by simplifying the world into seven or eight major civilizations. Each civilization, whether it be Sinic, Islamic, or Western, are fundamentally different from each other “by history, language, culture, tradition, and most important, religion” (Huntington 10). This in itself is not very groundbreaking, as we know that different corners of the world have their own cultures and customs that are entirely different from our own. The problem presents itself when international phenomenons, like globalization, cause civilizations to interact with one another like never before. These civilizations can choose to either embrace each other's cultures for what they are, or they can choose to reject them. Hunting asserts that any rejection of one civilization will eventually involve the entire interstate system, as states in the same civilization will come to defend one another. Lastly, Huntington believes that Islamic civilizations will be more
conflict-prone than any other civilization. One reason he assumes this is because the Islamic religion purposefully divides the world into those who follow Islam and those who do not, perpetuating hatred and cultural misunderstanding for another. While Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” may not be the most accepted, his ideas are useful in that they force us to consider culture as a predominant feature in conflict.

Henri Tajfel’s “social identity theory” gives further insight, not only on how individuals feel toward their own group, but how they feel towards those outside their group. Tajfel proposes that the groups to which we belong are an important source of self. Therefore, we typically do whatever we can to defend the group and its values as a way of protecting ourselves. Unfortunately, this often takes the form of discrimination, and state leaders may have an interest in perpetuating this kind of behavior (“Social Identity Theory”). Take religion, for example. Religion serves as its own separate ideology in that it instructs us how we ought to conduct ourselves, especially in relation to others. It also helps to distinguish civilizations from one another, as many countries favor specific religions. Therefore, if a leader needs his constituents' support, he is likely to appeal to the state’s predominant religion. According to Donald Horowitz, nonmaterial incentives (such as religion) for war may produce more support from the population than one fought over territory or resources (Horowitz 22). Thus, wars fought over religion are more likely to gain popular support than wars fought over other matters. Even Huntington hinted at this idea, claiming, “[states] will increasingly attempt to mobilize support by appealing to common religion and civilization identity” (Huntington 19). Social identity theory would also support this, for not only does in-group bias help to demonize the out-group, but it brings about cohesion in the in-group. Leaders look for unity in their constituents before engaging in interstate
conflict, so they demonize the enemy and capitalize on the public’s existing ties (i.e., their religious identity). Ultimately, what they are creating is a united front that is rallied behind what seems like a religious endeavour. A leader’s underlying agenda is not stated, nor does it matter, when the public feels they are protecting both their civilization and religion.

In conclusion, the work provided by Samuel Huntington and Henri Tajfel help support my argument and lay the foundation for why states with different predominant religions have an increased likelihood for militarized conflict. Huntington places less emphasis on states as a source of war in the future, and more emphasis on civilizations that have major cultural cleavages. The reason for this is because the world is becoming a smaller place; interactions between people of different civilizations are happening everyday and they intensify our consciousness and awareness of one another. This awareness and feelings toward people that are outside of the in-group are what Henri Tajfel describes as particularly dangerous. Constituents have an inherent feeling to defend their state, and particularly their religion, when they feel it is being threatened. Meanwhile, leaders may appeal to religion in order to divide the civilizations even further and create cohesion within their own state. Their ulterior motives may be unheard of or insignificant when religion is being used to motivate people.

Research Design
In order to test my hypothesis, I must consider additional variables that have been proven to increase the likelihood of war. If I can control these variables, I can determine if militarized conflict between two states is associated with their religious differences.

I would begin by controlling territorial issues because researchers like John Vasquez have found that territorial disputes generally increase the probability of war and have a higher probability of going to war than other kinds of disputes (e.g. Regime type or policy). To identify a dyadic territorial dispute, I will use the data collected by the Correlates of War project on MIDs.

Secondly, I would consider controlling the state's geographic proximity because empirical tests have already revealed that contiguous dyads have higher likelihoods of conflict (Goertz & Diehl, 1992, Gochman, 1991). I would operationalize geographic proximity again using the Correlates of War Project’s datasets on direct contiguity. Here contiguity is defined as having land borders and borders over various distances across water.

Controlling for major power dyads is another important aspect according to William B. Moul’s “Great Power Capability Ratio”. The evidence in this study reveals that states that are of equal capabilities and are considered major powers are much more likely to go to war with one another. The Correlates of War Project already operationalizes major powers for us, categorizing them as states possessing both political status and overall observable capabilities (i.e., military and economic). Therefore, for this experiment I would consider controlling these dyads using the existing datasets.

I would also consider controlling certain regime types, for we know from the Democratic Peace Theory that democratic states are far less likely to go to war than states that have opposing
regime types. The Polity IV Project already takes care of indicating which states are democratic by giving each states its own score. Therefore, I would control dyads where both states have a score a 6 or higher because we can already assume they would be less likely to go to war with another.

In order to test for other cultural indicators on the likelihood of war, I would also consider controlling ethnic differences between states. We can assume that states that have a significant amount of ethnic fractionalization are less likely to have a predominant religion. States that do not have a strong, predominant religion I hypothesize are less likely to go to war. Therefore, I would use James Fearon’s index of ethnic fractionalization within a state to indicate and control dyads that have a high amount of fractionalization.

For this experiment, I would classify interstate war as “any type of sustained combat, including organized forces, resulting in a minimum of 1,000 battle-related combatant fatalities within a twelve month period”. This definition of war is consistent with the Correlates of War’s definition. Moreover, a state’s predominant religion would be determined by the plurality of the population that adheres to a specific religion during a given war. This measurement may not be very valid in states that have a variety of religions present, or have different branches. Christianity, for example, has a number of different denominations (e.g. Protestant, Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, etc.) that one would not typically group together. But for the purposes of this assignment, sectors of a religion would have to be grouped together. An interstate war would therefore be coded as religious if it occurred between two groups which belong to different predominant religions.
When considering the temporal domain for this experiment, I think it is important to use a time period that would encompass the pre and post-Cold War era (i.e., anytime before 1947 and after 1991). The post-Cold War Era is when Samuel Huntington predicted there would be a noticeable change in the interstate system; wars would no longer be fought between democratic and communist states, but rather they would be between states that have significant cultural differences. Therefore, to see this difference I would use the Correlates of War’s dataset on religion adherence worldwide. The World Religion Project provides detailed information and data about the number of adherents by religion in each of the states in the international system from 1945-2010. I think this dataset is also fitting given that it examines each state in the international system. Otherwise, my experiment would be somewhat incomplete if I were not to examine and explore relationships worldwide.

This research aims to understand a link between religion and conflict. More specifically, I am looking at religious differences between states in a dyad and the likelihood they engage in warfare. I use social identity theory to explain the connection between states with different religions and their natural tendency to oppose one another. With the additional factors being controlled, I hope to exclude spurious factors that are known for influencing the likelihood of warfare. Therefore, I think that if we were to examine religious differences between dyads, we would see empirically that these dyads are related to the onset of war. More specifically, I think we would see a strong positive association between these variables: the stronger the difference in religion, the more likely they engage in warfare. However, even strong associations do not establish causality because we must also consider unseen factors. As mentioned earlier, state leaders may have an interest in using religion as a way of mobilizing their constituents. Religion
is special because for some people, it is a part of their identity. Therefore, some people, especially in states that cherish their religious identity, are more likely to go to war if it means defending this religion. Leaders that understand religion’s significance in the lives of their constituents may feel inclined to make any conflict with other states seem like it is religiously motivated. For example, if we look at Northern Ireland, Protestants fought Catholics. Their cause of conflict, however, was not their religious belief system, but rather Catholics felt like they did not have the same opportunities as Protestants when it came to obtaining decent jobs and living in decent conditions. Similarly, the conflicts seen in the Middle East today are not so much religious wars, but rather conflict over resources. However, since we cannot measure a leader’s ulterior motives or control for it, we cannot say that strong religious differences cause more interstate war. Instead, we would have to define the relationship as spurious.

Another significant take away I want to emphasize is that while I think that we may see an association between these two variables when all other variables are controlled, I do not think this relationship will be telling of which religions are more conflict-prone. The reason for this is because there is still a lot of uncertainty if religion is making peace or making war. Religious differences instigate a great deal of political conflict and violence. Yet, the predominant religions today all claim to be religions of peace. Therefore, how are we to know what to believe? If we look at the Bible, for example, we can recall the story of David and Goliath. Here, David killed his opponent and was applauded for such acts, even though killing is widely condemned. This contradiction is supported by social identity theory, as we assume that members of in-group are treated much differently than those of an out-group. These distinctions are understandable, but extremely problematic at the same time. Those who are perpetuating violence in the name of
religion feel that their acts are justified. Therefore, if we all think like this, why should one civilization should be considered more violent, or prone to conflict, than another? In conclusion, instead of linking a specific religion to extreme conflict, we ought to look at leaders who use religion to advance their hidden politics. This does not mean, however, that religion should be omitted from further research because religion acts as a continuation of politics in other means.

Citations


