'Ours is the Way of God': Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict*

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According to social identity theory, identity competition plays a central role in the inception and escalation of intergroup conflict, even when economic and political factors also are at play. Individual and group identity competition is considered a byproduct of individuals' efforts to satisfy basic human needs, including various psychological needs. Religions often serve these psychological needs more comprehensively and potently than other repositories of cultural meaning that contribute to the construction and maintenance of individual and group identities. Religions frequently supply cosmologies, moral frameworks, institutions, rituals, traditions, and other identity-supporting content that answers to individuals' needs for psychological stability in the form of a predictable world, a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and even self-actualization. The peculiar ability of religion to serve the human identity impulse thus may partially explain why intergroup conflict so frequently occurs along religious fault lines.

Introduction

Examples of violent conflict between religious groups – the Balkans, Sudan, East Timor, and Sri Lanka, to name but a few – spring readily to mind. This article offers a partial explanation of the frequent appearance of religion as the primary cultural marker distinguishing groups in conflict. The approach is interdisciplinary. In the first major section, I provide a general explanation of individual and group identity dynamics, and their role in intergroup conflict, from the perspectives of social psychology and psychologically-informed international relations theory. Subsequent sections draw from the disciplines of religious studies and the sociology of religion to demonstrate the ways in which religion powerfully serves individual and group identity needs and to explain how this fact may account for the frequent entanglement of religion with intergroup conflict.

A Social–Psychological Perspective on Identity and Identity Conflict

Psychologists and other social scientists of diverse orientations have developed a variety of theories regarding the development and functions of individual and group

identity – that is, the more or less 'enduring aspects' of a person's or group's self-definition (Kelman, 1998: 3). In particular, much social psychological research sheds light on the ways in which individuals' efforts to establish and maintain secure identities can produce conflict between groups.

A Framework for Understanding Identity: Why, What, and How

Within social psychology, it is common to distinguish between individual and group identity. The two levels of analysis are integrally and reciprocally related, with the purposes and processes of individual identity formation influencing and informing those of group identity formation, and vice versa. I make use of this distinction for analytical purposes, briefly exploring individual and group identity by subjecting each to the three simple interrogatives *why, what,* and *how*. With respect to individual identity, I ask:

- *Why* do so many individuals strive to develop and maintain a secure sense of self?
- *What* is the content of an individual's identity?
- *How* is individual identity constructed and maintained?

Similarly, with respect to group identity, I ask:

- *Why* do so many groups strive to positively distinguish themselves from other groups?
- *What* is the content of a group's identity?
- *How* is a group's identity constructed, maintained, and transmitted among its members?

This *why, what,* and *how* framework serves as an organizing principle throughout my discussion of individual and group identity, on the one hand, and the relationship between religion, identity, and conflict, on the other.

Individual Identity

'Individual identity', as I use it here, refers to the relatively stable elements of an individual's sense of self.

- *Why* do so many individuals strive to develop and maintain a secure sense of self?

Many theorists link the initial impulse to construct a secure sense of self to the survival instinct of the infant, as did Freud and Mead (Bloom, 1990; Breakwell, 1986). As one develops, and assuming one gains in confidence that physical needs will be met, increasing energy is devoted to the satisfaction of the higher-order needs first systematically identified and discussed by Abraham Maslow (1954/1970). These needs include the need for psychological security in the form of a predictable world, and the need for love (or belonging), self-esteem, and self-actualization. Needs theory has become a cornerstone of much theoretical and applied work in the field of conflict resolution (see Mitchell, 1990).

Individuals seek 'continuity across time and situation' (Breakwell, 1986: 24) to reduce uncertainty in social affairs (Stein, 1996), which contributes to psychological stability. People generally wish to regard themselves favorably (Eiser & Smith, 1972; Goffman, 1963). Efforts to achieve a sense of connection or belonging, self-esteem and even self-actualization help people establish and maintain positive, secure identities (Bloom, 1990; Breakwell, 1986; Stein, 1996). Failure to establish or maintain a relatively secure identity produces severe psychological discomfort, or even a total personality breakdown, which may be experienced by the individual as a threat to survival (Bloom, 1990).

- *What* is the content of an individual's identity?

Each of us carries the psychological equiv-

alent of an identity card. The contents of these 'identity cards' define one's identity at a given point in time. The contents consist of one's values, motives, emotions, feelings, attitudes, thoughts, goals, aspirations, and the like, on the one hand, and one's group memberships, social influence, social interaction patterns, and roles, on the other (Breakwell, 1986: 16).

Some of the contents of one's identity typically change over time as a result of developmental dynamics and social influences. New experiences often challenge us to reassess the relative valuations of the entries on our identity cards and, indeed, to assess whether particular content should be retained at all. Individuals typically assign positive or negative value to the elements of their identities, and these valuations are subject to revision (Breakwell, 1986). Individual identity is 'fluid, dynamic, and responsive to its social context' (Breakwell, 1986: 19).

While it may be true that 'no component [of individual identity] has a constant value' (Breakwell, 1986: 19), it also is true that individual identity typically is characterized by a relatively high degree of temporal and situational stability. Key elements of one's identity are likely to be retained over long periods of time, and the relative values of these particular elements often remain reasonably stable even as new elements are added and existing ones are abandoned or devalued (Kelman, 1998). Naturally, some of the content of one's identity will be much more highly valued than other content – it will be nearer the individual's core, to what one considers oneself essentially to *be*. It therefore will be much harder to dispose of or subordinate to other elements in the course of the ongoing evolution of one's identity.

- *How* is individual identity constructed and maintained?

Individuals seek to achieve and maintain positive social identities through various types of social interaction. Kelman (1998) conceives of the patterns of social interaction through which identities are constructed in terms of three different processes of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalization. *Compliance* occurs when an individual conforms to another's expectations or demands in order to secure favorable regard or treatment, as when a child obeys a parent, or an adult prisoner her captors, to avoid punishment. Compliance behavior contributes to identity formation to the extent that one progressively incorporates aspects of one's compliance-induced self-presentation into one's self-concept. *Identification* involves adoption of the behavior of another person or a group because association with that person or group helps to satisfy the individual's need to establish a positive self-concept. Through identification, individuals vicariously participate in others' pre-established identities, often 'gain[ing] a sense of power and status that, as individuals, they lack' (Kelman, 1998: 13). The teenager who joins a gang is one example of this behavior. Finally, *internalization* occurs when one aligns oneself with others and adopts aspects of their behavior because it is consistent with one's own values; for example, when an adult abandons his parents' political party affiliation for a new affiliation that is more consistent with his current opinions and commitments. Each of these processes implies a more meaningful degree of agency than its predecessor. Where internalization occurs, one does not align one's own identity with that of another person or group primarily because doing so has instrumental value (as is the case with both compliance and identification), but because it flows naturally from one's own value orientation.

Group Identity

According to social identity theory, our interpersonal relationships, particularly in the context of the groups in which we participate, are central to the project of achieving a secure and positively-valued sense of self. Individuals seek a secure sense of self by 'striv[ing] to achieve or to maintain positive *social* identity' (Tajfel & Turner, 1986: 16).

A group is a self-defining collection of individuals. Like an individual, a group can be said to have an identity of its own. That identity is borne and communicated by the group's members, but it cannot be thought of as a composite of the members' respective individual identities, any more than an individual's identity can be conceived of merely as a composite of the identities of the various groups to which one belongs.

- *Why* do so many groups strive to positively distinguish themselves from other groups?

Group identity is, in essence, a manifestation of the individual identity impulse. As noted, individuals seek to satisfy their desire for positive evaluation, in part, through their participation in groups. In the process, groups generate collective purposes and goals, the achievement of which is important to the maintenance of group identity and to the group's survival. In this limited sense we could say that there also is a group-level identity impulse – a collective motivation to serve the purposes and goals on which the members' individual identities, and the survival of the group, depend.

- *What* is the content of a group's identity?

The group's identity consists of the members' shared 'conception of its enduring characteristics and basic values, its strengths and weaknesses, its hopes and fears, its reputation and conditions of existence, its institutions and traditions, its past history, current purposes, and future prospects' (Kelman, 1998: 16). The group's institutions, traditions, and history often find embodiment in writing or other material forms which communicate and preserve the group's identity independently of the individuals that presently comprise the group. As will be explained subsequently, this is powerfully true with respect to most religious groups.

- *How* is a group's identity constructed, maintained, and transmitted among its members?

Various socialization and mobilization processes are the means by which this content is transmitted to and internalized by group members. These include group-specific variations of Kelman's three processes of social influence. Like individual identity, group identity is fluid and dynamic. It 'typically represents a combination of historical realities and deliberate mobilization' in response to a current event or circumstance (Kelman, 1998: 17). Levels of involvement and emotional commitment may differ widely among the group's members.

Identity and Intergroup Conflict

Each group with which a given individual is or is not associated is positively or negatively[1] evaluated both by that individual and by other individuals and groups. Whether one regards one's social identity positively

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[1] Much of the social identity theory literature suggests that negative evaluation of others is inevitable if one is to succeed in constructing and maintaining a positive identity. Although negative evaluation of others is pervasive, I have difficulty accepting that it is inevitable, particularly with respect to the maintenance of a secure identity among mature adults, and particularly if 'negative' connotes prejudice or condemnation, as opposed to mere preference, the absence of a sense of affinity, or forms of disapproval that respect the essential humanity of the individual or group which is evaluated negatively. Achieving a sense of genuine distinctiveness is critical to the construction and maintenance of positive identity, but 'distinctive' need not be heavily value laden – at least not in the extreme sense of good versus evil.

depends, to a significant extent, upon how favorably the group(s) with which one identifies compare to other groups. The process of intergroup comparison produces a competitive dynamic in which groups attempt to enhance their identities relative to other groups. 'The attempt to achieve a comparatively superior position for the in-group, on the basis of valued dimensions, is the key factor leading to discriminatory intergroup behavior' (Tajfel & Turner, 1986: 83).

When individuals do not regard their social identity positively, they respond to the resulting psychological discomfort with one or more individual- or group-level strategies to establish positive identity, depending upon whether group members perceive alternatives to the existing intergroup situation. Group members typically must believe that their situation vis-a-vis another group can be improved, or there will be no group-level response to the situation (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994). Where alternatives to the present situation are perceived by a group's members, a group-level response is likely.[2]

The group will respond to its current, inadequate social identity in one of several ways, ranging from efforts to assimilate itself into the relevant out-group, at one extreme, to a direct challenge to the out-group, at the other. The former strategy amounts to a conscious relinquishment or, at a minimum, dilution of group identity. However, each of the other possible responses involves an effort to enhance and strengthen group identity.[3] Attempts to enhance group status

are likely when exit from a group is very difficult or impossible, as is the case when social identity is based to any significant extent upon persistent social constructions (e.g. surrounding the color of one's skin) or, for many, when it involves religious convictions and affiliations.

While relative deprivation is undoubtedly a key factor in much intergroup conflict (Stein, 1996), it appears that incompatible interests in the form of an uneven distribution of material or social resources may lead to intergroup conflict only where the subordinate group views the dominant group as relevant for purposes of social comparison and begins to develop a positive identity in relation to it (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Incompatible interests may be the apparent cause of conflict in many cases, but conflict arguably will not occur in the absence of intergroup identity competition. While there is no reason to believe that intergroup differentiation inevitably leads to conflict, Tajfel & Turner (1986: 23) consider it 'plausible to hypothesize that, when a group's action for positive distinctiveness is frustrated, impeded, or in any way actively prevented by an out-group, this will promote overt conflict and hostility between the groups', and that this may be so even in the absence of incompatible group interests.

When intergroup comparison does produce overt conflict, an escalatory dynamic often is evident. Because individual identity is partially dependent upon the integrity of the in-group's identity, threats to the in-group are experienced as threats to individual identity (Bloom, 1990). Conversely, threats to the identity of individual group members often will be perceived as threats to the group as a whole. Hence, group identity tends to intensify

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[2] Where cognitive alternatives to the current intergroup situation are not perceived, individual-level responses to the psychological discomfort associated with negatively evaluated social identity will follow. Where possible, individuals may leave the group. Otherwise, *intra*group comparison will intensify (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994).

[3] These responses include (a) threats or direct challenges to the out-group or its members; (b) recasting the in-group's negatively evaluated characteristic in a positive light (e.g. 'Black is beautiful'); and (c) 'creation and adoption of new dimensions for intergroup comparison', such

as when 'the "native peoples" of Canada … refer to their ancient traditions and cultures, in comparison with which the history of the "new Canada" might seem unimpressive' (Taylor & Moghaddam, 1994: 84).

during periods of crisis (Stein, 1996). The conflict escalates as each new threat intensifies and agitates the identities of the target group and its members, widening the gulf between the groups (Worchel et al., 1993). This escalatory dynamic, and the continually increasing consolidation and intensification of individual and group identities that it produces, may partially explain the high degree of intractability that seems to characterize so many conflicts.

Religion and Identity

Having examined the purposes that individual and group identity serve, their content, and the processes by which they are constructed and maintained, I now turn to the relationship between religion and identity. In all their multifarious expressions and dimensions, the world's religions answer the individual's need for a sense of locatedness – socially, sometimes geographically, cosmologically, temporally, and metaphysically. Religious meaning systems define the contours of the broadest possible range of relationships – to self; to others near and distant, friendly and unfriendly; to the non-human world; to the universe; and to God, or that which one considers ultimately real or true. No other repositories of cultural meaning have historically offered so much in response to the human need to develop a secure identity. Consequently, religion often is at the core of individual and group identity.

- *Why* does the identity impulse find support in religion?

Hans Mol (1976) described the chief function of religion as the stabilization of individual and group identity. According to Mol, religious traditions and institutions resist constant change in the negotiation of social meaning, thus affording individuals and groups more secure anchors for self-reference. Underlying and supporting Mol's theory of religion is his belief that a 'differentiation/integration' dynamic pervades human interaction (Mol, 1976: 3).[4] Mol places religion squarely on the integration side of this dialectic.[5] This is not to say that religion always operates to impede change within groups. There is, of course, an inherent tension in the dialectic, and the fact that identities partially founded on religion are also fluid and dynamic is one product of this tension.

While all religions contain resources designed to facilitate the assimilation of new identity content, or even to constitute substantially new identities (e.g. rites of passage and conversion), religion in general tends to promote the stabilization of individual and group identity by favoring the preservation of old content (in the form of doctrine, ritual, moral frameworks, role expectations, symbols, and the like), offering individuals a basis for reconstructing their identities within a stable or very slowly changing universe of shared meaning. New content typically is assimilated, and old content significantly revised or reinterpreted, only after cautious censorship. Even where religion is placed in the service of a program designed to disrupt established identities – for example, Jesus's radical program of Jewish reform and renewal – this typically occurs within the boundaries of an established discourse. His program no doubt was appealing and accessible to many who followed him in large part because they understood it as the fulfillment of something that was long familiar to them.

Religions help provide the predictability and continuity that the individual needs to maintain a sense of psychological stability.

[4] Others writing on the role of religion in intergroup conflict also have discussed this dialectical relationship (see Dunn, 1996).
[5] Mol's focus is *intra*group relations; he does not consider *inter*group relations to any significant extent.

Mol and numerous others have called attention to religion's role in safeguarding order, both social and cosmic (see Berger, 1967; Juergensmeyer, 1993). Among the mechanisms by which religion sacralizes identity is what Mol calls 'objectification', which is 'the tendency to sum up the variegated elements of mundane existence in a transcendental point of reference where they appear more orderly, more consistent, and more timeless' (Mol, 1976: 11). The objectification of religious order enables individuals and groups to cope with change. '[T]emporal dislocations remain manageable' so long as orderliness on a grand scale is assured (Mol, 1978: 180).

Although there is significant diversity among and within religions, most religions provide their adherents with a world-view that assures their place in a meaningful and orderly universe, thereby partially satisfying the individual's need for psychological stability. This assurance often is afforded an ultimacy that, particularly in traditions which emphasize belief and dogma, is self-validating (and perhaps even regarded as unassailable). Religious traditions often provide ready answers when pluralism and other forms of complexity threaten the established order, and thus the identities of individuals and groups (Abdullah, 1978). The frequently non-relativistic nature of these answers may help explain the worldwide resurgence of religion as a rallying point for political mobilization (Shupe, 1990).

Religious communities and meaning systems also frequently are a source of the love (belonging) and affirmation (as a basis for self-esteem) that individuals seek. They also encourage self-actualization, and even self-transcendence. While membership in any group has the potential to support the development of one's 'public self', religious groups often are better equipped to address the identity needs of the 'private self'. This

may be especially true of theistic religions.[6] Theistic traditions provide assurance of the existence of an ultimately dependable other that is capable of affirming one's sense of self when one's fellows do not.

> An Arabic proverb puts it succinctly:
> 'Men forget, God remembers'. What men forget, among other things, is their reciprocal identifications in the game of playing society … If [one] can assume that, at any rate, God remembers, his tenuous self-identifications are given a foundation seemingly secure from the shifting reactions of other men. God then becomes the most reliable and ultimately significant other (Berger, 1967: 37–38).

If one considers oneself to be in 'right relationship' with God, one may feel assured that one is loved, and that one is justified in regarding oneself positively. One may see oneself as being on a path toward self-actualization.

This private aspect of individual identity may partially explain the 'greater degree of loyalty' that religion seems to engender as compared to the 'purely political' forms of what Mark Juergensmeyer refers to as 'ideologies of order' (Juergensmeyer, 1993). God, as the focal point of private commitment, becomes the hub that connects the various spokes (members) of the wheel (group). The commitment of the group's members to one another becomes an expression – and, in times of crisis, perhaps even the litmus test – of their commitment to God. Religious groups often demand a high level of commitment from their members, so that it may be extremely difficult to shed one's religious identity once it is established. This fact may contribute to the prevalence of religious conflict. As indicated above, efforts to

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[6] The role of identity in Buddhism arguably deserves special consideration because of Buddhism's nontheistic orientation and its truly distinctive attitude toward the self. Buddhists' participation in conflict in the contemporary world is mixed, however, as evidenced by the contrasting cases of Tibet and Sri Lanka.

enhance group status are likely when individuals have difficulty escaping the group.

While religion may speak more deeply to the private self than other foci of identity, this does not imply that it regards group identity any less highly. Each of the world's major religious traditions sacralizes group identity to an equal or even greater extent than individual identity. The *ecclesia* or Body of Christ (Christianity), the *ummah* (Islam) and the *sangha* (Buddhism) are notions central to their respective traditions. Whether many or few, liberally or narrowly construed, and strictly or minimally enforced, each tradition has some means by which it determines the boundaries of the group. Doctrines of salvation and chosenness, for example, provide ready in-group/out-group distinctions.

- *What* types of content does religion supply for the construction of identities?

David Little (1995) provides several examples of the types of content that religions often supply for the construction of individual and group identity. Little mentions or alludes to myths of common origin, doctrines of chosenness and holy struggle, claims of primacy with respect to values that arise from a particular tradition's worldview, actors who sanction individual and group behavior with a sacred authority, and memorials and rituals that commemorate the sacrifices of group members.[7] Much additional identity-supporting content can be identified and added to Little's list.

The wide variety of religious doctrines addressing every conceivable aspect of human existence is one important addition. Breakwell (1986) emphasizes the import-

ance of belief systems to the construction and maintenance of identity. Religious doctrines pertaining to the temporal 'location' and continuity of the self and the group provide an interesting example of the role belief systems can play in identity construction and the maintenance of psychological stability. Little (1995) mentions myths of common origin as one example of identity-supporting content that religions frequently supply. These myths – for example, the creation account in Genesis – explain the group's beginnings in cosmological terms, thereby providing the religious practitioner a basis for locating oneself, as successor to the group's original members, in relation to the origin of the universe and the beginning of time. The same cosmologies that explain the origin of the universe frequently explain its present nature and order, thus locating the individual and group in time present. Daily and weekly prayers and rites, and seasonal rituals and feasts, structure time and imbue it with meaning. Finally, many conceptions of salvation in the world's religions project individual and group identity stably and securely into eternity. Where no doctrine of otherworldly salvation exists, martyrdom may provide access to a surrogate for individual salvation (Berger, 1967), anchoring the individual's identity to a group identity that one expects to continue indefinitely.

This temporal dimension of religious doctrine is one example of the often historically superior ability of religion to serve the identity impulse. Myths of common origin, periodic rites and feasts, religious cosmologies, and doctrines of salvation situate the individual in relation to time eternal, from the furthest past to the most distant future, in terms both mundane and transcendent. While other referents that contribute to one's identity (e.g. ancestry) may partially address the human desire for temporal locatedness and continuity (as a contributor to psychological stability), none answer this

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[7] Those features of a religious tradition that provide substance to – or referents for – individual and group identity frequently also are the very processes by which identity is maintained. A ritual such as group prayer, for example, is a form of social interaction and influence that, by virtue of both what is thought and said *and* communal enaction of the ritual itself, is at once medium and message.

desire as completely as many religions do. Members of an ethnic group may share a belief in their common origin, but other features of ethnicity, where they are separable from religion, seldom locate individuals eternally. Religion frequently provides individuals a sense of seamless continuity between past, present, and future.

Religious texts and oral material embody, among other things, myths, lore, songs, and prayers that contribute to identity construction in various ways. They are, in part, repositories of community memory, often providing individuals and groups a cross-generational sense of belonging in time, as well as a sense of belonging with others in distant places. '[M]yth interprets reality', sacralizing identity through 'recurrent narration' (Mol, 1976: 14). Members of a group assimilate the group's narrative, which becomes a feature of their individual identities.

Texts and oral tradition also communicate teachings, beliefs, and norms that have clear socializing effects, promoting order (which serves the need for psychological stability) and enhancing the group's sense of specialness or purpose (which may serve the needs for belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization). Wherever texts and oral tradition are afforded revealed or inspired status, their sacralizing potential is, for many, enhanced. To the extent that interpretation of texts and tradition is discouraged or restricted by virtue of their sacred status and the existence of a religious elite vested with primary or exclusive interpretive authority, they may provide non-relativistic and relatively self-validating and unassailable principles of order around which people construct their identities and groups define their borders.

Perhaps no content is more important than principles of order such as these – the moral and institutional frameworks that establish norms of interaction and assign and regulate roles within the group. In addition to belief systems, which include such ethical frameworks, Breakwell (1986) identifies role prescriptions as another key factor in identity formation and maintenance. Religions readily supply such role prescriptions, ensuring that one's identity in the group is legitimated and affirmed, whether it be celibate monk, mother, rabbi, or child. The Hindu system of *varnashramadharma*, which prescribes one's responsibilities and purposes (according to social status) at a given stage of life, is perhaps the most powerful example of a religious framework of coordinated role orientations. Such frameworks establish norms and expectations for behavior between and among members of the group, often affording one's identity within the group a 'quality of suprapersonality' by virtue of religious legitimations that conceive of the temporal order in relation to the cosmic (Berger, 1967: 39). Religions also provide moral and spiritual exemplars in the form of saints and holy people that embody the religion's norms and highest aspirations.

Specifically, *religious* norms arguably lay greater claim upon individuals than norms emanating from other sources. Durkheim recognized the potential force of both types of norms, but believed that fidelity to religious norms produces a person who is '*stronger* … It is as though he were raised above the miseries of the world, because he is raised above his condition as a mere man; he believes that he is saved from evil, under whatever form he may conceive this evil' (Durkheim, 1912/1947: 416). This strength increases group cohesion (Berger, 1973). The special power of religious norms is thus a further example of the frequent ability of religion to respond to the identity impulse more forcefully than many other repositories of cultural meaning historically have responded.

The relationship between the temporal

order as socially constructed and the cosmic order as understood by a particular tradition or sect may have a significant bearing on conflict between religious groups. 'When the socially defined reality has come to be identified with the ultimate reality of the universe, then its denial takes on the quality of evil as well as madness' (Berger, 1967: 39). As is evident in such places as the Sudan and Afghanistan, religious groups sometimes seek to establish a social order that comports with their religious world-view. When religious world-views collide, so do groups' competing social expectations. Secular political institutions that seek to mediate among competing groups often are most vehemently opposed by religious actors and institutions. In times of social crisis, when identities are most vulnerable, religious norms and institutions may provide ready, alternative frameworks for governance, or, perhaps more commonly, support and justification for the non-clerical leaders and institutions which emerge to establish regimes in the service of a religious group's nationalistic aspirations. The role of religious actors and institutions in the onset and escalation of the conflict in former Yugoslavia, for example, is widely recognized (see Dunn 1996; Mojzes 1995).

These are but a few examples of the types of content that religions contribute to the construction of individual and group identity. Religion often lies nearer to the core of one's identity, in part, because the other elements of one's identity typically do not address the full range of human needs, fears, and concerns as comprehensively or powerfully as religion does.[8]

•   *How* is religious content transmitted

[8] This seems particularly true for moderns living in modern cultures. In tribal cultures, religion may be so closely aligned with other features of one's identity (e.g. ancestry or clan membership) that it becomes difficult to conceive of religion as somehow in competition with other features of one's identity.

among a group's members and assimilated into their identities?

Kelman's three processes of social influence – compliance, identification, and internalization – can be seen at work in the various rites, rituals, prayers and other forms of interaction that provide individuals access to religious content for the construction and maintenance of their identities. Religious education often is a vehicle or context for compliance- and identification-related identity formation. In some Quebec classrooms, for example, French Canadian children assimilate Roman Catholic identity through a combination of rewards, punishment, and manipulation of the social bonds between students and their teachers and priests (Zylberberg & Shiose, 1991). Certain rituals also arguably seek to shape identities through bids for compliance and/or identification. The following is a description of a ritual performed in an African Christian church in Amsterdam:

> When the prayers are concluded, that is when Satan is believed to have been effectively removed from this area, the pastor addresses himself to the congregation. He will assure them that the Lord has purified them and warns the congregation against going into any 'dark places', where Satan is believed to be active and where one can easily come under the influence of satanic powers … [After various prayers,] the congregation will submit itself to God by stating that 'I belong to you', and ask for his protection … Often the session is ended with the Lord's prayer and what is called the 'song of togetherness', Psalm 133, which is in praise of brotherly love (Haar, 1995: 127).

Through this ritual, these churchgoers reaffirm their Christian identity, and their belongingness to God and one another, in hope that they and their loved ones will be protected against satanic powers. They also reinforce their identification with one another through communal vocalization of a 'song of togetherness'.

Rites of passage are important examples of religious socialization mechanisms that contribute to individual identity construction and maintenance, ushering individuals through transitions in status or role (Davies 1994; van Gennep, 1975). Many religions have established rites of passage for every major age and role transition throughout the life-span, from birth (or sometimes before) to death (and sometimes beyond). Birth and naming rituals – baptism in Christianity, for example, or the recitation of the *shahādah* in a Muslim baby's ears – begin to confer upon a child a religious identity that will affect its developing self-consciousness and its future interactions with others. Coming of age rituals, such as Judaism's *bar* and *bat mitzvah* and Sikhism's *pagri bannān* (turban tying ceremony), invite youth to begin conceiving of themselves as adults. Marriage and ordination ceremonies help people make the transition to new role orientations. Together with adult rites of confirmation or conversion – the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, for example, or the typically arduous rite of conversion to orthodox Judaism – marriage and ordination may be the best examples of rites of passage that invite internalization of a new or reconstituted identity. Finally, the great variety of rituals surrounding death, while obviously intended to effect the deceased person's transition away from earthly life, inform the identities of *those who survive* by reaffirming life's meaning and their tradition's views regarding the ultimate nature and destiny of the self (Holm & Bowker, 1994).

Religion and Intergroup Conflict

Not all expressions of religious identity inevitably lead to religious conflict. Within many religious traditions there are trajectories that encourage adherents to resist violent forms of conflict. The pacifism of the historic peace churches (Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren) is well known, and Buddhism and Hinduism each contain teachings about nonviolence. There is much religious content that can support the development of individual and group identities around principles of nonviolence (see Little, 1996; Smith-Christopher, 1998).

And yet, these traditions of nonviolence, which tend to promote tolerance of other religious perspectives, often exist against the backdrop of social and material realities that reinforce the need for group cohesion. Despite laboratory evidence that identity dynamics alone are capable of generating intergroup conflict, group needs for material and social resources typically also play a role. Thus, a religious group facing difficult social or material realities is likely to emphasize those elements within its tradition which group members perceive to be most capable of promoting group cohesion and of mobilizing group members toward the improvement of the group's condition. Not surprisingly, the elements of a tradition that are emphasized by a struggling group often provide implicit justification for the use of violent force.

Whether or not identity dynamics are capable of producing intergroup conflict apart from incompatible group interests, much social-psychological research strongly suggests that resource scarcity alone is insufficient to ignite such conflict. Identity competition very likely is a necessary condition to the eruption of intergroup conflict. The powerful ability of religion to serve the identity-related needs of individuals and groups and the special role identity dynamics play in the production and escalation of intergroup conflict together may help explain why so many conflicts occur along religious fault lines.

Two Counter-Arguments Anticipated: Ethnicity and Secularism

Before concluding, I wish to anticipate and briefly respond to two potential counter-arguments to my thesis. The first concerns the relationship between ethnicity, religion, and nationalism, and the second addresses the problem of secularism.

Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism

The issue that must be addressed with respect to ethnicity is whether it, rather than religion, is the principal identification fueling intergroup identity conflict which has a visible religious component. This is the position taken, for example, by Gurr (1993: 317), who finds religion to be 'at best a contributing factor in communal conflict and seldom the root cause'. Citing as examples militant Shi'i Muslims in Iraq and Lebanon, he notes that their political goals include 'rights and recognition, and not propagation of their faith' (Gurr, 1993: 317).

I believe Gurr has made a mistake that is common among those who comment on the relationship between religion and conflict. Most observers seem to assume that, in order to be properly characterized as 'religious', the combatants' motives must be religious conversion or a desire to establish the superiority of one's own tradition over that of others. While the right to self-governance *on terms consistent with* one's religious convictions often is a central objective of groups in such conflicts, I do not believe most combatants intend to produce massive conversions or establish the metaphysical superiority of one religion over another. The superiority of their tradition already is *assumed* by the combatants and, for most, the persistence of that belief will not depend upon the outcome of the conflict.

If this is the case, then use of the term 'religious conflict' is misleading to the extent it implies that religion somehow is the *cause*

of a conflict. Conflicts between religious groups typically are caused by the same material factors and social dynamics that incite and fuel conflict between ethnic, racial, and other identity groups. The presence or absence of effective political structures and capable, conciliatory leaders; relative resource distribution; the degree of international attention and involvement; and many other political and economic factors typically have a significant bearing on the emergence (or non-emergence) and course of identity conflicts. Religion is not the cause of 'religious conflict'; rather, for many, it still provides the most secure basis for maintenance of a positively regarded social identity, and it frequently supplies the fault line along which intergroup identity and resource competition occurs. Nonetheless, when conflict involving one or more religious groups does occur, the combatants may be emboldened by a sense of religiously defined identity and purpose, and their traditions may provide a fund of symbolic, moral, institutional, and other resources that can be used to mobilize the group and legitimate its cause.

I find myself in essential agreement with Walker Connor's views on the relationship between national sentiment and religion as they pertain to intergroup conflict, despite his assertion that 'the well-springs of national identity are more profound than are those associated with religion …' (Connor, 1994: 107). But, for Connor, the nation is simply 'a self-differentiating ethnic group' (Connor, 1994: 42). Nationhood requires 'a popularly held awareness of belief that one's own group is unique in a most vital sense. In the absence of such a popularly held conviction, there is only an ethnic group' (Connor, 1994: 42). An ethnic group, then, is a group that shares some common trait that is visible to others, but not made a focal point for social organization by those who possess it. A nation is self-conscious and self-defining

in a way that an ethnic group is not (Connor, 1994: 103). Connor sees ancestry as the most common and powerful trait unifying national groups.[9]

Connor attributes nationalism to the identity impulse described above, which he refers to as 'the "us–them" syndrome' (Connor, 1994: 46). And while he rightly eschews facile efforts to attribute group conflict to religious or other cultural differences, rather than attributing it directly to the 'us–them' dynamic which is its psychological cause, in doing so he provides support for an important element of the argument I have advanced. According to Connor, belief in the kinship and uniqueness of one's group is the essence of the 'nation, and tangible characteristics such as religion and language are significant to the nation only to the degree to which they contribute to this notion or sense of the group's self-identity and uniqueness' (Connor, 1994: 104). Connor's argument suggests that any single cultural marker, including religion, may serve as the referent for construction of national identity. While he certainly recognizes the complexity of national groups and the possibility of multiple identifications and markers, he also demonstrates that the 'psychological essence' of intergroup differentiation – the 'us–them' dynamic – often expresses itself through conflict along a single cultural fault line. I believe that religion supplies that fault line so frequently because vast numbers of people experience it as speaking more deeply to the identity impulse which underlies Connor's 'us–them syndrome' than do other potential focal points for group identity, including ancestry.

If, as Anderson (1991) suggests, the nationalist phenomenon is attributable in part to the loss of meaning many experienced as imperialism and religion began to

lose their hegemonic force, then we might expect nationalist movements informed and buttressed by religion to be especially effective antidotes to that loss. While religion is no longer a hegemonic force in many cultures and regions, it nonetheless remains a potent force, as I hope the preceding discussion has demonstrated. If nationalist movements provide meaning and a context for identity development generally, a nationalist movement linked to religion may, for many, offer greater meaning and a richer context for identity development.

With careful study, it should be possible to identify the types of cases in which the primary fault line between groups in conflict is likely to be religious (as opposed to ancestral, linguistic, etc.). One probable case is where distinctions *between* competing groups based on ancestry and other markers are very difficult to identify, as in former Yugoslavia. There, religion is the only cultural marker that reliably distinguishes Bosnian Muslims from their Serb and Croat counterparts. Another case may be the apparent opposite, involving the accommodation of such differences *within* competing groups. Religion sometimes is able to unite peoples of diverse tribal and linguistic origin, as do Islam and Hinduism in India, for example. In both cases, religion serves a similar function, sometimes providing a basis for self-identification and group differentiation that transcends other markers.

Religion has a protean quality: it can divide groups that otherwise are culturally similar, as in the case of former Yugoslavia; it can align fairly neatly with ancestral and linguistic markers, as it does, for example, in Northern Ireland; or it can serve as the basis for differentiation among groups that are similarly diverse, as it does in the case of Indian Hindus and Muslims. When considered in light of other factors – for example, the depth of commitment that religion often inspires and its capacity to

[9] Keller (1991) discusses the saliency of factors other than ancestral ties in the construction of group identity.

speak to the individual's deepest existential concerns in a way that other repositories of cultural meaning typically cannot – this protean quality may help explain the frequent appearance of religion as the primary identity marker distinguishing groups in conflict. Whereas other common features of ethnicity (language, ancestry, social constructions surrounding skin color, etc.) frequently fail to provide clear bases for the establishment of group boundaries, religious self-identification as a basis for delineation of group boundaries can be comparatively straightforward.

I am not suggesting, however, that religion always will prove to be the most salient and powerful force in intergroup identity competition among individuals whose identities are influenced by religion. That proposition would be contrary to much observable fact. Ethnic differences sometimes overcome a common religious loyalty – as they have among Hutus and Tutsis, for example, or Basques and Castilians. And, as already noted, national groups sometimes form in spite of religious differences. Nonetheless, the frequent entanglement of religion with conflict suggests both that religion remains a powerful source of individual and group identity and that, at least among those engaged in conflict between religious groups, religious justifications supporting violence have tended to hold greater sway than norms which oppose it.

Secularism

A second potential argument in opposition to my own involves the issue of secularism. Does group differentiation along religious lines require a high degree of commitment to the tenets of the religion with which one is identified? Can conflict occur along religious lines where members of religious groups have become well-accustomed to life in multinational (including multireligious)

states governed by secular institutions? The questions are closely related, but they highlight different features of the problem that contemporary secularism presents: the issue of relative psychological commitment to the religion with which one is identified, on the one hand, and the relationship between religion and modernity, on the other. My answers to these questions suggest that religion can serve as the primary marker dividing groups in conflict whether the groups' religious identities are lightly or firmly held.

In response to the first question, it can perhaps be said with some confidence that strong commitment 'delineates identity more clearly' (Mol, 1976: 219). Mobilization of religious groups for political action may be easier when commitment runs deep (Swidler & Mojzes, 1990). Nonetheless, it is not difficult to find examples of highly secularized religious groups engaged in conflict, many members of which adhere loosely – or not at all – to the tenets of the religions with which they are identified. Bosnian Muslims, for example, are perhaps the most highly secularized Muslims in the world.

Even lightly held affiliations may be sufficient for competitive, intergroup differentiation (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). And, as Connor explains, a group's sense of 'us' in relation to 'them' is more important than the particular cultural marker that distinguishes the groups. Particularly when members of the relevant out-group(s) have a strong commitment to their own tradition, competitive pressure may cause the in-group to cohere more tightly around its own religiously-defined identity (if not the religion's belief system). This arguably occurred within the Bosnian Muslim community as the conflict in former Yugoslavia intensified. Although Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegović apparently did less to foment militant religious sentiment

among his community than his Serb and Croat counterparts, he nonetheless was successful in 'champion[ing] the homogenization of a Muslim ethnoreligious identity' (Mojzes, 1995: 142). His Party for Democratic Action was clearly identified with Islam. While processes of secularization tend to result in the development of multiple identity affiliations among a society's members, there is no guarantee that latent religious affiliations and sentiments will not arise as the focal point of group cohesion within secularized societies in times of social stress.

As for the second question – that is, whether conflict can occur along religious lines where members of religious groups have become well-accustomed to life in multinational states governed by secular institutions – a quick survey of current conflicts would provide numerous examples of religious violence within the borders of modern states. How is it that militant bids for dominance by religious groups persist in the face of modern political, military, and economic institutions designed to mediate among competing groups? Many have observed that increasing modernization often leads to a widespread sense of social anomie that results from diluted or stripped identities (see Berger, 1967; Mol, 1976). Bruce Lawrence (1995) attributes the worldwide resurgence of religious fundamentalism to reactions against modernism, with its emphasis on social and technological progress; empiricism and science; pluralistic, secular state structures; and capitalism. While some expressions of fundamentalism embrace aspects of the modernist program – as Lawrence points out, fundamentalists the world over 'talk by telephone, drive cars, and fly in airplanes' (Lawrence, 1995: xiv) – each finds other aspects to protest about. While Lawrence sees fundamentalists as ultimately losing out to the forces of modernism, the fact that many

regions of the world have only recently begun in earnest the transition from premodern to modern states of existence, suggests that the fundamentalist phenomenon about which he writes may persist for some time to come.

Conclusion

Religion frequently serves the identity impulse more powerfully and comprehensively than other repositories of cultural meaning can or do. Because religion provides such powerful support to individuals and groups as they endeavor to establish and maintain secure identities, it is not surprising that much intergroup identity competition occurs between *religious* groups. The peculiar ability of religion to support the development of individual and group identity is the hidden logic of the link between religion and intergroup conflict.

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