Religion and Violence in Societies: Do Individuals Use Religion as a Tool to Perpetrate Violence?

Margaret Lohrer, Professor Timothy Longman, Department of Political Science, Boston University

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Introduction and Background

There are many factors that lead to violence and crime in society. Religion is one of these factors. I have extensively researched the connections between religion and violence committed in the name of religion in three societies. The two incidences of religious violence in the US differ greatly, certainly, for instance in their duration: the extremist Christian Right anti-abortion movement has been a part of American life for decades, while the September 11th attacks on New York and Washington were sudden, and occurred in a horrific few hours. Yet the impacts of these events reverberate in the American consciousness, both with lasting impact on our society and our people. Both are examples of the use of religion to incite violence. Ultimately, my conclusions will rely on key aspects of these two examples of religious violence, including the extent to which they are domestic or international events; whether they are ongoing or with some termination point; and whether they are part of a continuing war or better understood as one-time incidents. Without doubt, the best answer to this final question is that they are a hybrid: in neither case are these best understood as isolated violent episodes. In both cases they are part of some sort of longer campaign. I am less interested in the length of these violent campaigns than the perspective of those perpetrating the acts. I want to consider how long and how committed those defending these acts must "stay in the fight." Also, when violent acts are committed internationally by foreign actors, one possible response is war between nations. To the extent the violence is domestic, between US citizens, as with the extremist anti-abortion movement, federal and local law enforcement are called upon to respond. The length of the response and the identity of those responding has ended up being a key part of my research. I consider religious violence in three very different countries: the US, Israel, and South Africa. These countries have distinct founding principles that help determine the role of religion in their society at the outset, and through the present. These are all themes I consider herein: international or domestic, part of a "war" or part of something else, and what to do with those who are responding to these acts.

Hypothesis

Individuals use religion as a tool to perpetrate violence in societies.

Methodology

Case studies on the US, Israel, and South Africa
- US: Army of God and Al-Qaeda
- Israel: Interview
- South Africa: Experience and literature surrounding the most recent conflict of apartheid

Findings

1) US → Actors found to use their religion and justify their violence from scripture
   - Anti-abortion movement
     - Domestic
     - Ongoing
     - Continuing war
     - Violence justified by the Bible
   - September 11th attacks
     - Domestic
     - Termination point
     - One-time incident, while categorized as being part of Al-Qaeda's longer campaign
     - Violence justified by the Quran
2) Israel → Actors founded a secular nation to avoid religious violence and crime committed and justified in the name of religion
3) South Africa → Actors of churches break away from churches supporting the state in order to help end the conflict of apartheid
   - Domestic
   - Termination point
   - As opposed to religious actors in the US, religious actors in South Africa did not use their religion as a tool to perpetrate violence

Conclusions

Individuals do use their religion as a tool to perpetrate violence, but such individuals are classified as extremists and terrorists and only make up a small percentage of religious actors. There is no correlation between violence committed in the name of religion and the foundation of religious freedom in these three countries: the US, Israel, and South Africa. However, the manner in which government and political leaders have responded to and handled religious violence raises concerns regarding the potential for the rise in religious violence in the future.

Future Research

Whether the increase in religious actors will cause an increase in religious violence still needs to be determined and much more quantitative research should be conducted to in order to test this relationship.

Acknowledgments