Religiosity and reactions to terrorism

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ABSTRACT

Although many of the world's most serious outbreaks of conflict and violence center on religion, social science research has had relatively little to say about religion's unique role in shaping individuals' attitudes about these events. In this paper we investigate whether Americans' religious beliefs play a central role in shaping attitudes toward the continuing threat of terrorism and their willingness to assist officials in countering these perceived threats. Our analysis of an original data collection of almost 1600 Americans shows that more religious respondents are more likely to express concerns about terrorism. However, this relationship is mediated by their level of conservatism. We also find that more religious respondents are more likely to claim that they will assist government officials in countering terrorism. This relationship remained even after accounting for conservatism, and people's general willingness to help police solve crimes like breaking and entering.

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1. Introduction

Grim and Finke (2007:633) argue that although many of the most serious outbreaks of violence and conflict in the world today center on religion, social science research has relatively little to say about religion's unique role in these events. This critique can be softened somewhat in the aftermath of the coordinated attacks of September 11, 2001. Along with other high profile terrorist strikes around the world, these attacks served to focus increased attention on the role of religion as a force that can powerfully shape individuals' attitudes toward political violence (Juergensmeyer, 2003; Bail, 2012; Disha et al., 2011; Welch, 2012). Nevertheless, much of the recent research has focused only on Muslims (McCauley and Scheckter, 2008; Tyler et al., 2010; Sun et al., 2011) while more inclusive research about the connections between religion and violent political conflict remains heavily influenced by a body of leading studies from the 1960s and 1970s. This research concluded that contemporary Americans have largely privatized religion and hence are far less likely today than in the past to use it to legitimate public attitudes or actions (Berger, 1967; Luckmann, 1967; Berger et al., 1973).

Of course, Berger et al. (1999) and others (Casanova, 1994; Simko, 2012) are well aware of the fact that religion has not disappeared from public or private life, but rather that it now competes with a wide range of other institutions that share responsibility in developing convincing explanations for critical life events. Indeed, Putnam (2000) has shown that almost half of association memberships in the United States are directly related to religious congregations and that half of Americans' volunteering takes place in a religious context. Taking a cue from these recent investigations of the continuing importance of religion in framing reactions to major life events, this study focuses on whether Americans' religious beliefs play a central role in shaping attitudes toward the continuing threat of terrorism and responses to it.

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Threats of high profile terrorist attacks increase uncertainty and religiosity has long been recognized as a psychological coping mechanism for responding to such threats (Bonanno and Jost, 2006). The iconic example here is the coordinated attacks of 9/11. Counting the passengers on the planes and the hijackers, the 9/11 attacks claimed nearly 3000 lives—more than the number who perished at Pearl Harbor at the start of the United States entry into World War II. The 9/11 attacks resulted in the greatest loss of life from a coordinated terrorist event in US history (LaFree et al., 2015; Mickolus et al., 2010). We argue that compared to less religious individuals, more religious Americans will be more likely to see terrorism as a potent and enduring threat, and be more willing to help address concerns about terrorism. Our multivariate analysis of nearly 1600 respondents to a national survey offers partial confirmation of these expectations. Religiosity shapes concerns about terrorism through a more conservative orientation. More religious people are more conservative, leading to greater concerns about terrorism. In contrast, religiosity has a unique influence on willingness to help address concerns about terrorism, and the influence remains even after accounting for more religious people's greater willingness to help stop general crime.

2. Religiosity and fear of terrorism

With the concept of "theodicy" Weber (1922, 1946) provides a general explanation for an expected connection between religiosity and concerns about terrorist threats. The term theodicy has a long history, originating in Leibniz's ([1710]1998) contemplation of how the banal reality of everyday human suffering can be reconciled with a belief in a just and benevolent deity. Weber (1946) conceptualizes theodicy as an attempt to reconcile the view of the divine characteristics of omnipotent and all seeing deities with the lived experience of suffering and evil in the world. Weber (1946:125) conceives of religion as a universal feature of culture that evolves out of a need for social order and in his writings on theodicy (Weber, 1922, 1946) he identifies three ideal-typical forms. Drawing heavily on Weber, Berger et al. (1973:185) take a more general view of theodicy, arguing that religion ultimately arises out of a need for social order; an "explanation of human events that bestows meaning upon the experiences of suffering and evil." In this paper we draw on this general view of religion as a construct for explaining the most painful and challenging of human experiences whether caused by natural or human agents.

The role of religion in making sense out of lived experience may be dependent on the scope of suffering experienced. Wilkinson (2005:58) notes that most of the time religious experiences center on routine practices and that the majority of people who follow religious teachings adopt a "pragmatic orientation" towards the business of everyday life. However, on occasion people are thrust into situations involving a much higher magnitude of displacement and death; situations whose irrationality challenges their sense of an ordered reality. In this regard, Grim and Finke (2007:635) offer several examples of horrendous historical events that could trigger this type of fundamental questioning, including the "sectarian massacres endemic in Iraq today, the so-called ethnic cleansing in Bosnia that fell along religious lines, the Holocaust of millions of Jews during World War II, or the forced movement and massacre of hundreds of thousands of Armenians prior to World War I." Bail (2012:857) argues that the four coordinated attacks of 9/11 provide a recent example of a non-routine challenge to the social order where thousands of innocent people were killed without an obvious rational justification. The sheer brutality of terrorist attacks such as 9/11 may leave many feeling that their traditional beliefs are inadequate and encourage them to reach out for extraordinary explanations. In this context, Weber (1946) points out the critical social and psychological functions of religion to provide explanations for existential challenges such as these.

While Weber's (1946) use of theodicy is mostly about accounting for events that have happened in the past, Berger and Luckmann (1966) and others (Scott and Lyman, 1968) point out that indeed such social constructions are used both to create explanations of the past and to build expectations for the future. In this paper we are especially interested in understanding whether religion has a role in constructing expectations about impending terrorist threats and appropriate responses to them.

3. Religiosity and concerns about terrorism

Except for a handful of post-9/11 studies focused mostly on Muslim communities, we identified very little research linking religion to attitudes regarding terrorism. Moreover, almost all of the extant research has been on attitudes toward terrorism among Muslim communities outside the United States (McCauley and Scheckter, 2008; Shapiro and Fair, 2009; LaFree and Morris, 2012). Two exceptions to this general pattern are recent studies by Tyler et al. (2010) and Sun et al. (2011), which center on Muslims in the United States. Based on interviews with 300 Muslim Americans living in New York City, Tyler et al. focused especially on people's reported willingness to cooperate with the police to prevent terrorist attacks. Similarly, Sun et al. (2011) used survey data from 810 Arab Americans in the metropolitan Detroit area to evaluate support for antiterrorism measures, including surveillance, stop and search policies, and detention. The research showed that the majority of Arab Americans indicated weak to modest support for aggressive law enforcement practices, especially those targeting Arab Americans. These studies focused on a very small part of America's ethnic and religious landscape. Additionally, neither of these studies directly tested whether more religious respondents were more likely to express concerns about terrorism and a willingness to work with authorities to prevent it. Although there is disagreement about the extent to which results from more common forms of crime generalize to terrorism-related crime (cf., LaFree and Dugan, 2004; Clarke and Newman, 2006; Bjorgo, 2012), we briefly consider the literature on the relationship between religion and crime for its potential to shed light on the relationship between religious attitudes and terrorism.