

Treat the Stranger as Your Own: Religious Prosociality and Conflict Transformation¹

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Recent social scientific research sheds new light on the relationship among religion, conflict, and cooperation. Religion itself does not cause conflict; rather, religious groups are subject to the same us-them dynamic that can generate conflict between other types of identity groups, including ethnic groups. Religions are particularly adept at promoting cooperation within groups, however, which helps explain the unique capacity they have demonstrated throughout history to support the development of and sustain large groups. Recent research regarding religion's capacity to promote cooperation within groups also is yielding insights into how religion can help promote cooperation between groups—a development that has received scant attention among experts in the emerging field of religious peacebuilding, or within the broader international relations community. This article provides a synthetic, analytical overview of this important line of research and offers examples of its implications for policy making and practice.

Keywords: religion, religious actors, conflict, peacebuilding, religious prosociality

Religion and conflict sometimes mix, but perspectives on their relationship tend to be overly simplified. For some, religion is irrational and in tension with modern, liberal notions of democracy and collective problem solving; it is not merely a factor in some conflicts, it is a cause of conflict, and it offers little or nothing in the way of resources for conflict resolution. For others, religion, properly understood, is a benevolent force that promotes personal and collective peace and wellbeing, and all entanglements of religion and conflict stem from perversions of religion or cynical manipulations of it by unscrupulous leaders who are not genuinely religious, but who understand and exploit religion's capacity to bind and mobilize people. Still others see religion simply as a hopelessly complex, impenetrable mass of traditions, perspectives, and social structures; a feature of history and culture that must be superficially understood and acknowledged, but which must largely be quarantined as parties seek a resolution to their conflict in a political, social, and conceptual space mostly free of its influence.

This article presents a different perspective on the role of religion in both conflict and cooperation, and the potential for transformation of conflicts involving religion. A clearer and more nuanced picture of the ways in which religion and conflict relate, and also how religion promotes cooperation within groups and can contribute to the transformation of conflict between groups, has begun to emerge over the past couple of decades—thanks, in part, to the efforts of a small group of social scientists who have approached these questions with genuine curiosity, largely steering clear of the polemics that too often attend them. The first major section of this article provides an in-depth introduction to this emerging, interdisciplinary field of research. The second major section explores the relationship between religion and conflict through the lens of research

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on religious prosociality. The final major section of this article attempts to draw lessons from this research, and from the fields of religious studies and conflict resolution, that can be employed to avert, moderate, or transform destructive cycles of conflict in which religion is a factor. Violent conflict is the focus of this article, but the perspective on religion it presents, and the lessons drawn, also are applicable to other types of disputes involving religion.

The Prosocial Character of Religion

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century proclamations that religion was dead or dying are now themselves widely considered deceased. Data compiled by the Pew Research Center indicates that humanity now is approximately 31 percent Christian and 23 percent Muslim. The percentage of Christians is projected to be precisely the same in 2050, while the percentage of Muslims is projected to climb to about 30 percent. If current trends hold, by mid-century about 60 percent of the world’s population will consist of roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims, and another 27 percent will identify with other religions. Just 13 percent of the world’s population will be religiously unaffiliated, down from approximately 16 percent today.² Even many of these unaffiliated people say they hold religious beliefs; for example, 68 percent of unaffiliated adults in the U.S. and 30 percent of unaffiliated adults in France report believing in God or a higher power.³ Following decades of official efforts in the Soviet Union to promote atheism, 82 percent of Russians identify with one religion or another.⁴

As political scientists Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart sum up the data, “[t]here is no evidence of a worldwide decline of religiosity, or of the role of religion in politics.”⁵ Those who are confounded by these trends would do well to consider recent, interdisciplinary research on the prosocial dimensions of religion. Although some view religion principally as a divisive, and even malevolent, force, it seems few other features of human culture historically have been as effective at promoting cooperation among large numbers of people. Indeed, social scientists studying religious prosociality recognize that some secular institutions that promote social trust and cooperation, like the rule of law, can be seen as outgrowths of precursor religious institutions, serving many similar functions.⁶

When most religious and nonreligious people think about religions today, they likely think of belief systems with associated practices, narratives, texts, norms, roles, and institutions. What impulses contributed to the development of these sources, beliefs, practices, and other features of religion, and how do they serve individuals and groups today? Many people see their religious sources, beliefs, practices, and institutions as transcendently revealed or inspired, of course. And

² Pew Research Center, *The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050*, April 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

³ Pew Research Center, *The Global Religious Landscape*, December 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-unaffiliated/>.

⁴ Pew Research Center, *Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church*, February 2014, <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/02/10/russians-return-to-religion-but-not-to-church/>.

⁵ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 212.

⁶ Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Jonathan Fox, *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State: A Time Series Analysis of Worldwide Data* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

many religious adherents who link tradition with the transcendent also generally acknowledge that there are many aspects of religion, as it becomes expressed in social life across time and place, that are products of human influence. Indeed, some religious people would say this human agency and its accumulated consequences over time are a dimension of divine agency.⁷

A growing body of empirical research confirms that, however else a religion is understood by and serves its adherents, it helps them get along, promoting mutually beneficial trust and cooperation. According to currently prevailing evolutionary theory, as biological kinship becomes more remote, it becomes too attenuated to ensure cooperation.⁸ Religion helps engender a sense of social kinship even among people who are not closely related biologically.⁹

We operate in groups, in part, because group membership confers benefits isolated individuals cannot obtain, or cannot obtain in equal measure, including increased protection from many types of harm (e.g., animal and human predators) and greater productive capacity. Much research—from biological, anthropological, and historical work to game theoretical computer simulations—suggests that blood ties alone may not promote cooperation at a scale sufficient to develop many forms of coordinated human effort we now take for granted, like large-scale

⁷ It should be noted up front that much of the research discussed in this article was conducted by social scientists who are atheists, but who nonetheless are respectful of religion. Needless to say, the veracity of religious metaphysical claims is beyond the scope of this article. Most of these researchers argue that belief in supernatural agents is a byproduct of specific features of human cognition, such as theory of mind, and some argue that the seeming improbability of a religion's metaphysical claims is a factor that increases trust among co-religionists (Scott Atran, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Norenzayan, *Big Gods*). One need not be an atheist, of course, to appreciate and contribute to the emerging science regarding the psychology of religious commitment, as the work of Christian experimental psychologist Justin Barrett demonstrates (Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004). Theologian Sarah Coakley and biologist and mathematician Martin Nowak, both Christians, nonetheless observe in their introduction to *Evolution, Games, and God: The Principle of Cooperation* (which is the culmination of a long collaboration among a group of theologians, philosophers, and religious and nonreligious natural and social scientists) that “if it is simply assumed that ‘religion’ may be explained away in terms of something else, all attempts to clarify its workings will inevitably fall prey to the same reductive principles,” a concern that has led them and collaborators to develop research protocols that “test genuinely *theological* motivations for ‘altruistic’ human behavior” (Martin A. Nowak and Sarah Coakley, eds., *Evolution, Games, and God: The Principle of Cooperation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 26. Nowak, Coakley and their collaborators have developed and begun to use such protocols (David G. Rand et al., “Religious Motivations for Cooperation: An Experimental Investigation Using Explicit Primes,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 4, no. 1 (2014): 31–48). This research by scholars who do not share the atheistic orientation of others studying religious prosociality is significant, and perhaps it eventually will produce robust empirical support countering the strains of others’ research that Coakley and Nowak consider reductionist. If so, it seems unlikely to me (nor do I think they would expect) that their new line of research would completely negate all findings of others’ research, nor the utility of all of those findings (alongside their own) for conflict resolution practice, which is the focus of this article.

⁸ W. D. Hamilton, “The Genetical Evolution of Social Behavior, Parts I and II,” *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (2014): 1–52; Robert L. Trivers, “The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism,” *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 46, no. 1 (1971): 35–57.

⁹ Randolph M. Nesse, “The Evolution of Commitment and the Origins of Religion,” *Science and Spirit* 10, no. 2 (1999): 32–33, 46. Biologists Martin Nowak, Corina Tarnita, and Edward Wilson (Martin A. Nowak, Corina E. Tarnita, and Edward O. Wilson, “The Evolution of Eusociality,” *Nature* 466 (2010): 1057–1062) maintain that the biological basis for the evolution of cooperation extends beyond the limits predicted by the theory of kin selection. We might surmise that, in human populations, their theory suggests religion does not function to extend cooperation beyond kin, but rather that it is consistent with a broader, God-given tendency to cooperate, and perhaps has “goaded [groups] to further altruistic efforts” (Rand, et al., “Religious Motivations”). The Nowak, Tarnita and Wilson challenge to the theory of kin selection does not, however, appear to be holding up well to critique by other scientists (Xiaoyun Liao, Stephen Rong, and David C. Queller, “Relatedness, Conflict, and the Evolution of Eusociality,” *PLOS Biology* (2015), DOI: 10.1371/journal.pbio.1002098.

agriculture, life in cities, and maintenance of reliable trade networks spanning and joining continents.¹⁰

Life in groups of any size presents us more frequently and pressingly with a question with which even wanderers and hermits must struggle on occasion: Whom can I trust? Satisfaction of many individual needs and desires requires cooperation, but people sometimes exploit others. We all try to guard ourselves against exploitation, but it is not so easy to identify would-be exploiters. Researchers approaching these questions from an evolutionary perspective have developed evidence that family members generally are more reliable, and that closer family members tend to be most reliable, but what about the person at the opposite edge of the village, the stranger passing through, those in the next village, or potential trading partners half a continent away or across the ocean? How do we develop and maintain sufficient trust in others to confront and overcome collective action problems, so as to realize benefits wanderers and hermits largely choose to forego?

Recent social scientific work suggests that the widely shared complexes of beliefs, practices, narratives, texts, norms, roles, and institutions that we recognize today as the world’s major religious traditions help solve this dilemma, facilitating social life at large scale.¹¹ People (religious or not) generally seem to be more trustworthy when they believe they are being watched,¹² and so it arguably follows that felt awareness of a god that one believes is concerned with human moral conduct encourages compliance with social norms and lessens the monitoring burden borne by members of one’s group.¹³ Ara Norenzayan and others argue that “Big Gods”—morally concerned

¹⁰ Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2006).

¹¹ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*. Primatologist and biological anthropologist Agustin Fuentes argues that development of our capacity for large scale cooperation precedes the development of religion (Agustin Fuentes, “Hyper-cooperation is Deep in Our Evolutionary History and Individual Perception of Belief Matters,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 5, no. 4 (2014): 284–290, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2014.928350). There also is some counter-evidence suggesting that prosocial forms of religion are most prevalent in mid-sized populations (Christian Brown and E. Anthon Eff, “The State and the Supernatural: Support for Prosocial Behavior,” *Structure and Dynamics* 4, no. 1 (2010): 1–21). Norenzayan himself suggests there may come a point in the largest societies when material goods and secular institutions are secure enough that religion is “no longer need[ed] . . . to sustain large scale cooperation. In short: secular societies climbed the ladder of religion, and then kicked it away” (Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 172).

¹² Azim F. Shariff and Ara Norenzayan, “God is Watching You: Supernatural Agent Concepts Increase Prosocial Behavior in an Anonymous Economic Game,” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 9 (2007): 803–809. “A mountain of evidence in psychology and economics reveals how powerful social monitoring incentives are. . . . Experiments in social psychology have also shown that any cue that increases the feeling of being watched . . . increases prosocial tendencies, and those that encourage feelings of being hidden from view . . . license more selfishness and cheating” (Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 20). This is equally true whether or not the monitor one perceives is associated with religion (Melissa Bateson, Daniel Nettle, and Gilbert Roberts, “Cues of Being Watched Enhance Cooperation in a Real-World Setting,” *Biology Letters* 2, no. 3 (2006): 412–414; Azim F. Shariff and Ara Norenzayan, “God is Watching You: Supernatural Agent Concepts Increase Prosocial Behavior in an Anonymous Economic Game,” *Psychological Science* 18, no. 9 (2007): 803–809). Economist Thomas Schelling, a pioneer of game theoretic approaches to conflict analysis, foreshadowed the findings regarding supernatural monitoring: “In a society that believes absolutely in a superior power that will punish falsehood when asked to do so and that everybody knows everybody else believes in, ‘cross my heart and hope to die’ is a sufficient formula for conveying truth voluntarily” (Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 116).

¹³ Kristin Laurin, et al., “Outsourcing Punishment to God: Beliefs in Divine Control Reduce Earthly Punishment,” in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B* (2012), DOI: 10.1098/rspb.2012.0615; Norenzayan, *Big Gods*. In a meta-analysis of 93 studies on the effects of religious priming for prosocial behavior (i.e., reminding research subjects of God or religion before presenting an opportunity for prosocial behavior), Azim Shariff and colleagues found that “[c]ontrary to previous speculation, . . . religious priming produced no consistent effect on the non-religious,” leading them to speculate that “responsiveness to religious cues depends to a significant extent on culturally transmitted beliefs”

gods that inspire exclusive commitment—are capable of engendering trust among large numbers of people, thus helping groups grow.¹⁴ Religious practices (e.g., regular attendance at services and regular and/or extended periods of time devoted to prayer or meditation) and sacrifices (e.g., fasting, renouncing certain pleasures, and giving material support to the community) signal sincere commitment, thereby demonstrating one’s trustworthiness.¹⁵ In addition, I would add, they genuinely deepen one’s commitment to a way of life and to others who embrace it, thus helping one become the sort of person whom one means to be. This includes not only cultivation of the virtue of trustworthiness, but also cultivation of other, complementary virtues.

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have shown that religious participation and commitment are greatest “in societies in which survival is uncertain” because of poverty, weak or corrupt state institutions, unreliable food or water supplies, disease, harsh environmental conditions, or any of a host of other factors that are less prevalent in industrial and post-industrial societies.¹⁶ As Norenzayan explains:

(Azim F. Shariff, et al., “Religious Priming: A Meta-Analysis with a Focus on Prosociality,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* (2015), 15, DOI: 10.1177/1088868314568811). Many religious people no doubt would take umbrage with the suggestion that their prosocial conduct is primarily attributable to a sense of being watched by a divine agent whose vengeance they fear, and would instead attribute this conduct to elements within their religions that encourage amity, compassion, charity, forgiveness, generosity, and other prosocial values. One might fairly question whether prosocial conduct premised upon a sense of being watched (not to mention fear of punishment) can properly be understood as being associated with trust, as opposed to mere compliance behavior. Social psychologist Mariska Kappmeier has developed a more nuanced, multivariate theory that conceives of trust in terms of the presence or absence of indicia of seven super-ordinate personal and relational qualities (competence, integrity, predictability, compassion, compatibility, collaboration, and security), rather than something dependent upon a sense that one is being monitored (Mariska Kappmeier, “Trusting the Enemy: Towards a Comprehensive Understanding of Trust in Intergroup Conflict,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 22, no. 2 (2016): 134–144. Kappmeier’s approach can be used to identify and study other features of religion that promote prosocial conduct, and to do so in a way that is more broadly consistent with the self-understandings of religious people.

¹⁴ Data from numerous cross-cultural laboratory and field experiments support the notion that individual prosocial behavior is causally associated with religion (Dimitris Xygalatas, “Effects of Religious Setting on Cooperative Behavior: A Case Study from Mauritius,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 3, no. 2 (2013): 91–102; Shariff et al., “Religious Priming.” The theory that mass commitment to Big Gods explains the transition from small-scale group life to the large-scale group life we see in most places around the world today, however, relies heavily upon various studies conducted over the past 50 years that attempt to determine the correlation between group size and belief in a Big God (aka a “moralizing High God”), while controlling for other variables, like relative resource scarcity. The findings from these correlational analyses generally are consistent with the “Big Gods, big groups” theory, but there remain open questions, particularly with respect to groups outside the Abrahamic religions, about which more, and currently more compelling, data exist (Quentin D. Atkinson, Andrew J. Latham, and Joseph Watts, “Are Big Gods a Big Deal in the Emergence of Big Groups?,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* (2014): 1–9, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2014.928359). Among the major religions, Buddhism seems least consistent with the Big Gods theory, though “counter-intuitive agents” exist within many strains of Buddhism (Ilkka Pyysiäinen, “Buddhism, Religion, and the Concept of ‘God,’” *Numen* 50, no. 2 (2003): 147–171). Norenzayan nonetheless sees “karmic eschatologies,” such as those in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, in which “[r]ebirth links up with the idea of ethical causation across lifetimes,” as another mechanism promoting prosocial behavior that plays “a central role in the cooperative sphere” (Ara Norenzayan, “Big Questions About Big Gods: Response and Discussion,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 5, no. 4 (2015): 70, DOI: 10.1080/2153599X.2014.928359). It is important to note that Norenzayan and his collaborators do not claim that Big Gods are the only prosocial feature of religion, nor, of course, that religion is the only prosocial feature of human culture (ibid).

¹⁵ Joseph Henrich, “The Evolution of Costly Displays, Cooperation and Religion: Credibility Enhancing Displays and Their Implications for Cultural Evolution,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 30, no. 4 (2009): 244–260.

¹⁶ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 219.

In a society in which the rule of law is weak, and overall levels of trust and cooperation among strangers are quite low (that’s indeed most people for most of history), credible signals of fearing a god are, and have been, the only game in town, and in those societies, it would be reasonable to rely on such religious badges as a trust cue.¹⁷

Some Iraqis and Syrians in territory controlled by ISIS,¹⁸ though they never were fond of the group or its methods, initially appreciated the jobs, infrastructure improvements, and relative (even if minimal) sense of order it seemed to be providing in a region devastated by conflict that already had made life impossibly bleak¹⁹ —conflict which is, in large part, a response to corrupt regimes (and their foreign patrons).²⁰ This is how some non-Taliban people in Afghanistan regard the Taliban.²¹ The fact that many people remain religious in traditional and untraditional ways in the United States, Russia, and other societies where survival is comparatively certain is evidence that religious perspectives, practices, and affiliations still have salience for many people in those societies. The reasons for this no doubt include, yet extend well beyond, the social ordering functions religion can play.

Scholars debate whether the heightened trust, cooperation, and generosity that characterize religious prosociality are persistent personality characteristics or preferences of religious people²² or whether they arise only in situations in which a person is reminded of God or religion.²³ Scholars on both sides of this debate cite experimental evidence in support of their respective positions. They also debate whether religious prosociality is parochial (i.e., favors members of one’s own group)²⁴ or readily extends to members of other groups,²⁵ though it seems clear that situations can be shaped to increase the odds that prosocial conduct will extend to

¹⁷ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 74.

¹⁸ I use this acronym, rather than the phrase signified by its first two letters, because that phrase constitutes a claim by the group that is deeply problematic and offensive to many Muslims.

¹⁹ Ben Hubbard, “Offering Services, ISIS Ensnarces Itself in Seized Territories,” *New York Times*, June 17, 2015, A1.

²⁰ Whatever modest sense of appreciation some inhabitants of territory controlled by ISIS initially felt has since been exhausted by ISIS’s inability to continue to provide jobs and services, not to mention its onerous taxation and incredible brutality (Ben Hubbard, “Statehood Project is Troubled, Those Who Escaped ISIS Say,” *New York Times*, December 2, 2015, A1.

²¹ Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Violent Extremism, Sacred Values, and What It Means to be Human* (London: Penguin Books, 2010); Azam Ahmed, “Taliban Justice Gains Favor as Official Afghan Courts Fail,” *New York Times*, February 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/01/world/asia/taliban-justice-gains-favor-as-official-afghan-courts-fail.html>.

²² Jim A. C. Everett, Omar Sultan Haque, and David G. Rand, “How Good is the Samaritan, and Why? An Experimental Investigation of the Extent and Nature of Religious Prosociality Using Economic Games,” last revised January 21, 2016, <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2484659>.

²³ Deepak Malhotra, “(When) Are Religious People Nicer? Religious Salience and the “Sunday Effect” on Pro-social Behavior,” *Judgment and Decision Making* 5, no. 2 (2010): 138–143; Xygalatas, “Effects of Religious Setting on Cooperative Behavior”; Shariff, et al., “Religious Priming.”

²⁴ Azim F. Shariff, “Does Religion Increase Moral Behavior?,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 6 (2015): 108–113.

²⁵ Michael R. Welch, et al., “Trust in God and Trust in Man: The Ambivalent Role of Religion in Shaping Dimensions of Social Trust,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43, no. 3 (2004): 317–343; Everett, Haque and Rand, “How Good is the Samaritan.”

members of other groups.²⁶ Finally, scholars debate whether religious prosociality is dependent upon an expectation of reciprocal benefit²⁷ or not.²⁸

Whatever one might conclude in these debates, increased prosociality (including restraint when issuing punishments) is associated more with belief in a punishing God than with belief in a forgiving God.²⁹ “[R]eligions obey a well-known principle in human psychology (that the stick is often stronger than the carrot).”³⁰ Norenzayan speculates, however, that religious “sticks” may be relatively more useful (in terms of promoting adherence to group norms) in societies with weak secular institutions, because religion generally is more responsible for producing prosocial behavior in those societies.³¹ Anthropologist Hillary Lenfesty and biologist Jeffrey Schloss accept this principle “[g]iven the overwhelming abundance of supporting empirical data,” but they also place considerable stock in the ability of positive inducements associated with religion to elicit prosocial behavior. They point, for example, to the experience of connectedness it engenders and “the ability of some religious . . . cues to provoke empathy.”³²

In sum, religion is adept at promoting trust and cooperation among members of a group. No other feature of culture seems to offer so many resources for establishing and maintaining positive, secure group (and individual) identity.³³ Indeed, the notion that there are separate religious and secular cultural spheres in some societies is a modern one, and the existence, nature, and extent of these spheres remain contested.³⁴

Religion and Conflict

Religious prosociality arguably is most evident from the in-group dynamics it generates.³⁵ The flipside of this phenomenon, of course, is competition with out-groups, and “[h]umans often use religion to cooperate to compete.”³⁶ Individuals form and cooperate within groups (including religious groups), in part, to gain advantages over and protect themselves against people outside

²⁶ David Clingingsmith, Asim Ijaz Khwaja, and Michael Kremer, “Estimating the Impact of the Hajj: Religion and Tolerance in Islam’s Global Gathering,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 124, no. 3 (2009): 1133–1170; Zachary K. Rothschild, Abdolhossein Abdollahi, and Tom Pyszczynski, “Does Peace Have a Prayer? The Effect of Morality Salience, Compassionate Values, and Religious Fundamentalism on Hostility Toward Out-groups,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 45, no. 4 (2009): 816–827.

²⁷ Shariff, “Does Religion Increase Moral Behavior?”

²⁸ Xygalatas “Effects of Religious Setting on Cooperative Behavior”; Everett, Haque, and Rand, “How Good is the Samaritan.”

²⁹ Laurin et al., “Outsourcing Punishment to God.”

³⁰ Norenzayan, “Big Questions,” 73.

³¹ Norenzayan “Big Questions.”

³² Hillary L. Lenfesty and Jeffrey P. Schloss, “Big Gods and the Greater Good,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 5, no. 4 (2015): 305–313, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2153599X.2014.928357>. Nowak and colleagues maintain that the role of punishment in the evolution of cooperation has been inflated (Anna Dreber et al., “Winners Don’t Punish,” *Nature* 452 (2008): 348–351).

³³ Jeffrey R. Seal, “‘Ours is the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (1999): 553–569.

³⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (eds.), *Rethinking Secularism* (New York: Oxford University Press., 2011); Tala Asad, et al., *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

³⁵ Ara Norenzayan et al., “The Cultural Evolution of Prosocial Religions,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 39 (2016): 1–19.

³⁶ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 456.

the group. Even groups arbitrarily assembled and labeled in temporary experimental settings bond and compete.³⁷ Scholars debate the extent to which groups fight for material gains³⁸ or to address identity-based grievances,³⁹ but most acknowledge that both these and other motivations typically are at play in civil wars and other violent conflicts.⁴⁰

Attitudes toward religion in the West can be so hostile that the average person might be forgiven for considering it a factor in most violent past and present conflicts.⁴¹ As best we can tell, however, this simply is not true. The few rigorous analyses available suggest that religion has been a factor in no more than 40 percent,⁴² and perhaps even significantly less than 10 percent,⁴³ of violent conflicts from antiquity to the present day. Rarely is religion the primary factor. One recent study found that religion was a primary factor in just 14 percent of conflicts, but that it was not the lone primary factor in any of these.⁴⁴

We nonetheless must ask why religion is associated with conflict at all. One reason that some conflicts involve one or more religious groups is that identity dynamics play a significant role

³⁷ Henri Tajfel, “Experiments in Intergroup Discrimination,” *Scientific American* 223 (1970): 96–102; Marilyn B. Brewer, “In-group Bias in the Minimal Intergroup Situation: A Cognitive-Motivational Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (1979): 307–324.

³⁸ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56 (2004): 563–595.

³⁹ David Keen, *Complex Emergencies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ Anthony Vinci, “Greed-Grievance Reconsidered: The Role of Power and Survival in the Motivation of Armed Groups,” *Civil Wars* 8, no. 1 (2006): 25–45.

⁴¹ Neuroscientist Sam Harris, one of the “New Atheists,” calls religion “the most potent source of human conflict, past and present” (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 35). An empiricist, Harris cautions that “an insufficient taste for evidence regularly brings out the worst in us” (*ibid.*, 26). Like biologist and fellow New Atheist Richard Dawkins (Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), however, Harris nonetheless shows little interest in studying religion with the rigorous empirical orientation and methods he deploys in his work as a scientist. Writing about the causes of violence involving religious people, Dawkins says “[t]he very word ‘religions’ is bowdlerized to ‘communities’, as in ‘intercommunal warfare’” (Dawkins, 21). Like Harris, Dawkins thus advances the notion that religion is the cause of conflict involving religious people, which is a view that has been discredited by scientists studying conflict involving religion. Psychologist and prominent atheist Steven Pinker is no friend of religion, but does not go quite as far as Harris. In his 802-page, data-driven explanation of the historical decline in all types of violence, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011), Pinker acknowledges that “particular religious movements at particular times in history have worked against violence” (*ibid.*, 677) and maintains that “[r]eligion plays no single role in the history of violence because religion has not been a single force in the history of anything” (*ibid.*, 678). He nonetheless opens his book with a (textually accurate) litany of heinous acts reported or sanctioned in the Bible, then returns frequently to the theme of religious support for violence, cruelty, and intolerance throughout his book. Pinker maintains that “[t]he theory that religion is a force for peace, often heard among the religious right and its allies today, does not fit the facts of history” (*ibid.*, 677), but this position is not reached using the unbiased empirical orientation and quantitative methods with which he studies the history of violence more generally, nor the other subjects to which he has turned his attention, like human cognition. It is unsurprising that some of the (mostly atheist) social scientists studying religion in a comparatively unbiased manner distance themselves from these critics of religion. For example, as atheist experimental anthropologist Scott Atran muses about the flimsy empirical basis underlying the New Atheists’ crusade against religion, “Well, damn the facts; world salvation is on the march here” (Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 417).

⁴² Greg Austin, Todd Kranock, and Thom Oommen, compilers, “God and War: An Audit and An Exploration,” 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/world/04/war_audit_pdf/pdf/war_audit.pdf.

⁴³ Austin, Kranock, and Oommen, “God and War”; Charles Phillips and Alan Axelrod, eds., *Encyclopedia of Wars* (New York: Facts on File, 2004).

⁴⁴ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Five Key Questions Answered on the Link Between Peace & Religion: A Global Statistical Analysis on the Empirical Link between Peace and Religion*, October 2014, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Peace-and-Religion-Report.pdf>.

in intergroup conflict and religion serves the identity-related needs of individuals and groups.⁴⁵ Religion supports a strong sense of *us*, generating a strong sense of *them*, and we know this us-them dynamic can turn violent when one group feels threatened by another.

The us-them dynamic, it must be noted, also is at play in conflict in which religion is not a significant factor, like conflict between ethnic identity groups, so this answer does not tell us whether religion contributes uniquely to conflict dynamics. Through cross-cultural lab experiments and field research, social scientists from varied disciplines are attempting to determine whether there is something peculiar about religion that makes religious groups more prone to conflict, makes conflict involving religion more intense, or both. Norenzayan reminds us that “[e]xclusivity, dogmatism, and fundamentalism are not the same thing as religion,” even though “they are often seen as interchangeable with religion by its critics.”⁴⁶

Based upon his own and others’ research, Norenzayan tentatively believes there are at least three ways religion contributes to conflict. First, Norenzayan sees the phenomenon he and other researchers refer to as “supernatural monitoring” as a unique factor that can contribute to religious intolerance and conflict.⁴⁷ This is the felt sense that a person is watched by God, and that God is concerned with human morality. For example, Norenzayan and fellow social psychologist Azim Shariff found in one study that their North American Christian research subjects, when prompted to think of God, were more generous toward other Christians when dividing a sum of money, less generous to those whose religious affiliation was unknown to them, and least generous to Muslims.⁴⁸ Norenzayan points out, however, that findings like this are merely evidence that “making supernatural monitoring salient” leads religious people to be less generous toward members of another religion, which is not necessarily “an indication of intense hostility toward religious outgroups.”⁴⁹

Second, Norenzayan points to “the social bonding power of religious participation and ritual that could exacerbate conflict between groups.”⁵⁰ Norenzayan and fellow social psychologists Ian Hansen and Jeremy Ginges conducted a series of experiments involving Palestinians and Israelis to determine whether practices that build strong ties within a religious community also widen the gulf between that group and other groups, making it more prone to intolerance and more likely to support violence. Because many types of identity groups not premised upon religion also build and strengthen bonds through gatherings, rituals, and other practices, these researchers sought to determine whether religious belief itself causes conflict, as many critics of religion claim.

Their studies assessed support for suicide bombings and other extreme forms of parochial altruism among Palestinians and Israelis⁵¹ and how support correlated to the frequency with which

⁴⁵ Seul, “Ours is the Way of God.”

⁴⁶ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 158.

⁴⁷ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*.

⁴⁸ Azim F. Shariff and Ara Norenzayan, “Religious Priming Effects Are Sensitive to Religious Group Boundaries,” unpublished data, University of Oregon, 2012 (referenced in Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 161).

⁴⁹ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 161.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 160; Seul, “Ours is the Way of God.”

⁵¹ Suicide attacks by Israeli Jews are not common, so the researchers assessed attitudes among Israelis toward Israeli settler Baruch Goldstein’s February 25, 1994 attack at a West Bank Muslim holy site, during which he killed 29 Muslims and died himself.

respondents attended religious services (as a proxy for strong commitment to the religious group) and prayed (which the researchers found to be a reliable indicator of strong commitment to religious beliefs). These two variables (attendance at services and prayer) are themselves weakly correlated (i.e., some people attend services frequently and pray frequently; others attend services frequently, but do not pray; and so on). The researchers found a strong correlation between support for violence and frequent attendance at services and no correlation among support for violence and prayer frequency (i.e., strong religious beliefs).⁵² These results, which were replicated through surveys of respondents representing six different religions (Anglican, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism) in six different countries (Great Britain, India, Indonesia, Israel, Mexico, and Russia), discredit the religious belief hypothesis regarding the link between religion and conflict and suggest that “religious violence” is more attributable to the general human phenomenon of solidarity within a group that competes with other groups (as many other types of groups do) than to religious belief itself.

Finally, Norenzayan observes that values embraced by religious groups often are regarded as sacred—that is, they are “immune to trade-offs and seem insensitive to outcome.”⁵³ When values are regarded as sacred, trades involving them are considered taboo.⁵⁴ Indeed, even suggesting trades of material goods for things to which sacred value is ascribed (e.g., land regarded as holy) increases opposition to compromise.⁵⁵

This and other recent research regarding the relationship between religion and conflict seems to establish that religion is not the cause of conflict with a religious dimension.⁵⁶ Religion may well contribute to conflict in each of the three ways Norenzayan suggests, yet we see similar dynamics at play even where religion is not involved:

⁵² Jeremy Ginges, Ian Hansen, and Ara Norenzayan, “Religion and Support for Suicide Attacks,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 2 (2009): 224–230.

⁵³ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 167.

⁵⁴ P.E. Tetlock, R. S. Peterson, and J. S. Lerner, “Revising the Value Pluralism Model: Incorporating Social Content and Context Postulates.” In *The Psychology of Values: The Ontario Symposium, Volume 8*, edited by C. Seligman, J. Olson, and M. Zanna (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996).

⁵⁵ Jeremy Ginges et al., “Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution of Violent Political Conflict,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 104, no. 18: 7357–7360 (2007).

⁵⁶ Seul concluded previously that so-called “religious conflict” is “caused by the same material factors and social dynamics that incite and fuel conflict between ethnic, racial, and other identity groups. . . . 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” (Seul, “Ours is the Way of God,” 564). Atran, likewise, sees “no evidence that with religion banished, science will reduce violence. . . . Religions throughout history have tended to lessen social distance within a group as they have increased distance and occasions for misunderstanding and conflict with other groups. But so do other determinants of cultural identity, such as language, ethnicity and nationalism” (Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 414). Social Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who also studies religious prosociality, says, “[r]eligion is . . . often an *accessory* to atrocity, rather than the driving force of the atrocity” (Jonathan Haidt *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 268.) Norenzayan concludes that “[r]eligion is an important player, but rarely the primary cause of wars and violent conflicts” (Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 157). These views comport with Norris and Inglehart’s belief that “[t]he expanding gap between the sacred and the secular societies around the globe will have important consequences for world politics, making the role of religion increasingly salient on the global agenda. It is by no means inevitable that the religious gap will lead to greater ethno-religious conflict and violence” (Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular*, 241).

- What Norenzayan and other researchers call “supernatural monitoring” is unique to religion almost by definition, but a sense of being monitored promotes prosocial behavior even when the monitor is not believed to be transcendent⁵⁷ and even if it is associated with secular, rather than religious, institutions.⁵⁸ Nationalists submit to, bond around, and die for abstract, romanticized, superordinate (if not supernatural) concepts of the nation.⁵⁹
- While some studies indicate that co-religionists are more generous to one another than they are to outsiders, this same tendency has been observed in experiments among members of other types of groups, including members of the same ethnic group.⁶⁰ There also is evidence that religious prosociality is generalized and not parochial. In one study, for example, Christians were more generous both to other Christians and to atheists in a set of economic games, and more devout Christians were most generous, while atheists gave more only to other atheists.⁶¹ Religious groups generate strong bonds and can generate strong oppositional identities, but other types of groups also do so, including people with differing political perspectives.⁶² Although theists whose perspective is exclusivist (i.e., believing one’s religion is the only true religion) generally are less tolerant of others, theism can also be non-exclusivist. Non-exclusivist theism is no more associated with intolerance than is atheism; in fact, non-exclusivist religious belief and devotion generally have been shown to reduce intolerance.⁶³
- Religion is effective at promoting sacred values, yet secular cultural influences also can sacralize values.⁶⁴ For example, some adversaries in environmental disputes regard their values as sacred.⁶⁵ Religious rituals can sacralize a group’s values, but so can secular rituals.⁶⁶ There is evidence that some religious people, more than nonreligious people, are more likely to think about ethics in rule-bound ways not easily amenable to compromise solutions,⁶⁷ and this is a factor that might tend to

⁵⁷ Bateson, Nettle, and Roberts, “Cues of Being Watched.”

⁵⁸ Shariff and Norenzayan, “God is Watching You.” Citizens of the officially atheist former Soviet Union felt monitored to a degree that might approach the “supernatural,” as perhaps do some people in the United States in the age of digital surveillance by the NSA.

⁵⁹ Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁶⁰ James Habyarimana et al., “Why Does Ethnic Diversity Undermine Public Goods Provision?,” *American Political Science Review* 101, no. 4 (2007): 709–725.

⁶¹ Everett, Haque, and Rand, “How Good is the Samaritan”; see also Welch et al., “Trust in God.”

⁶² Adam Waytz, Liane L. Young, and Jeremy Ginges, “Motive Attribution Asymmetry for Love vs. Hate Drives Intractable Conflict,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 44 (2014): 15687–15692.

⁶³ Ian G. Hansen and Ara Norenzayan, “Between Yang and Yin and Heaven and Hell: Untangling the Complex Relationship between Religion and Intolerance,” in *Where God and Science Meet: How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion* (vol. 3), edited by Patrick McNamara (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press—Praeger Publishers, 2006).

⁶⁴ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*.

⁶⁵ Andrew J. Hoffman et al., “A Mixed-Motive Perspective on the Economics Versus Environment Debate,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, no. 8 (1999): 1254–1276.

⁶⁶ Hammad Sheikh et al., “Religion, Group Threat and Sacred Values,” *Judgment and Decision Making* 7, no. 2 (2012): 110–118.

⁶⁷ Jared Piazza and Justin F. Landy, “‘Lean Not on Your Own Understanding’: Belief that Morality is Founded on Divine Authority and Non-Utilitarian Moral Judgments,” *Judgment and Decision Making* 8, no. 6 (2013): 639–661; Jared

intensify some conflicts involving religion. However, the same is true of political conservatives.⁶⁸

As noted above, what religion does clearly provide is abundant support for the development and stability of group identity, and competition between identity groups of various kinds sometimes turns violent.⁶⁹ Religion certainly offers some distinctive resources for group development and cohesion. However, while it is a common perception that these resources or other features of religion make religious groups more prone to conflict, or to more intense conflict, than other types of identity groups, the existing evidence does not support such claims.⁷⁰

Religion’s distinctive features may well have helped religious groups grow larger and endure longer than other groups, with their expansion inevitably bringing them into conflict with new potential adversaries.⁷¹ The more we understand about the ways religion is associated with conflict—and especially about unique ways in which it is associated with conflict—the better able we will be to devise approaches for trying to avert or transform violent and otherwise destructive conflict in which religion is a factor. Where religion is a significant factor in a conflict, however, other factors almost certainly will be at play. Effective conflict resolution strategies must attend to all dimensions and drivers of a conflict.

In addition to providing insight into how religion is and is not entangled in conflict, research on religious prosociality has begun to provide useful insights about the ways in which religion can contribute to the promotion of tolerance and conflict resolution. Unlike many other cultural markers and worldviews that have contributed to conflict, religions also have resources that tend to promote tolerance and peacemaking.⁷² As Norenzayan says, if religion is a maker of conflict,

Piazza and Paulo Sousa, “Religiosity, Political Orientation, and Consequentialist Moral Thinking,” *Social Psychological & Personality Science* 5, no. 3 (2014): 334–342.

⁶⁸ Piazza and Sousa, “Religiosity, Political Orientation, and Consequentialist Moral Thinking.”

⁶⁹ Seul, “Ours is the Way of God.”

⁷⁰ One recent quantitative analysis of armed conflicts in developing countries over a 20-year period (1990–2010) may begin to shed some light on the question of when religious identities or other religious factors do and do not play a role in the onset of armed conflict (Matthias Basedau, Birte Pfeiffer, and Johannes Vüllers, “Bad Religion? Religion, Collective Action, and the Onset of Armed Conflict in Developing Countries,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 2 (2016): 226–255. The study found that armed conflict between two groups is more likely when both their ethnicities and their religions differ (what the study calls “interreligious conflict”). It also found that, when a religious group has ideological differences with the state (what the study calls “theological conflict”), such as when the group wants to replace secular law with religious law, calls to violence by religious leaders have some predictive effect regarding the onset of armed conflict. When one religion is dominant (i.e., at least 60 percent of a country’s citizens adhere to the same religion), the study found that this can contribute to the onset of types of armed conflict other than “interreligious conflict” and “theological conflict” (e.g., conflict between two religious groups with mixed ethnic identity or conflict between a religious group and an ethnic group). The study found, however, that both religious fractionalization (i.e., high religious diversity) and religious polarization within a society (i.e., the existence of religious groups that are roughly equal in size) reduce the likelihood of armed conflict.

⁷¹ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*; Norenzayan, *Big Gods*.

⁷² Political scientist Matthew Walton and conflict resolution practitioner Susan Hayward provide an excellent example of recent scholarship identifying tolerance promoting religious resources within a specific tradition (Theravada Buddhism) and conflict context (Myanmar’s long-running civil war) and offering suggestions about how to employ those resources to help transform tensions among some Buddhists and Muslims. Matthew J. Walton and Susan Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives: Democratization, Nationalism, and Communal Violence in Myanmar* (East-West Center Policy Study Series 71) (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2014), <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/ps071.pdf>.

then it also is an unmaker of conflict.⁷³ Religion's potential to help resolve conflict and promote peace is the subject of the third and final major section of this article. Before turning to that topic, however, I wish briefly to address the issue of extreme militancy in the name of religion.

Extreme Religious Militancy

What are we to make of contemporary groups that sponsor suicide attacks and other acts of extreme violence in the name of religion, as opposed (or in addition) to engaging in conventional forms of armed conflict, like Al Qaeda and ISIS?

Like all paramilitary groups, they are comprised mostly of young men—and, increasingly, but still minimally, young women⁷⁴—who use violent tactics that are shocking, and which are meant to shock.⁷⁵ Anthropologist Scott Atran, who has studied and interviewed suicide bombers and other violent extremists around the world, concludes from his extensive research (involving many interdisciplinary collaborations) that religiously affiliated militants, including jihadists, generally are, or emerge from, “cliques of youthful friends . . . on a moral mission.”⁷⁶ Research conducted by political scientist Marc Sageman supports this view.⁷⁷ His “data shows that they are generally idealistic young people seeking dreams of glory fighting for justice and fairness.”⁷⁸ Political scientist Robert Pape and economist James Feldman distinguish between transnational suicide attackers, who act in defense of distant communities to which they are loyal, and national actors defending their own communities. Though their analysis suggests that transnational attackers work in tightknit groups and national actors more often are independent volunteers,⁷⁹ the latter often may be influenced by and seek the esteem of likeminded peers.⁸⁰

⁷³ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 160. This point also has been emphasized by José Casanova (*Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)); Jeffrey R. Seul (“‘Ours is the Way of God’: Religion, Identity, and Intergroup Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 36, no. 5 (1999) and “Religion and Conflict,” in *The Negotiator's Fieldbook*, edited by A. K. Schneider and C. Honeyman (Washington, DC: American Bar Association, 2006)), R. Scott Appleby (*The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000)); Marc Gopin (*Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and “Religion as Destroyer and Creator of Peace: A Postmortem on Failed Peace Processes,” in *Religion and Foreign Affairs: Essential Readings*, edited by D. R. Hoover and D. M. Johnston (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 271–279); and others.

⁷⁴ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*; Josh Halliday, “London Schoolgirls among 60 Female Britons Thought to Have Joined ISIS,” *The Guardian*, March 1, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/01/london-schoolgirls-60-female-britons-joined-isis>.

⁷⁵ Suicide bombings and beheadings may be meant to shock, but Stephen Walt (Stephen M. Walt, “What Should We Do if the Islamic State Wins?: Live With It,” *Foreign Policy*, June 10, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/10/what-should-we-do-if-isis-islamic-state-wins-containment/>) rightly encourages us not to “pretend that today’s ‘advanced’ societies are uniformly genteel or moral either. An innocent blown up by an ill-aimed drone strike is just as much a victim as someone brutally beheaded by the Islamic State.”

⁷⁶ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 312.

⁷⁷ Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terror Networks* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

⁷⁸ Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, 35.

⁷⁹ Robert A. Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York: Random House, 2005); Robert A. Pape and James K. Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse: The Explosion of Global Suicide Terrorism and How to Stop It* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

⁸⁰ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*.

All of these scholars find that violent extremists’ moral mission is not principally propelled by religion. Pape and Feldman, who analyzed a comprehensive dataset containing details about all suicide attacks occurring since 1980, including the timing of attacks in relation to the inception of associated foreign military occupations, conclude that, “[s]imply put, [resistance to foreign] military occupation accounts for nearly all suicide terrorism around the world since 1980.”⁸¹ ISIS’s bombing of a Russian commercial airliner in Egypt on October 31, 2015 and its attacks in Paris on November 13, 2015 seem consistent with this perspective; in September 2015, both countries began striking ISIS militants in portions of Syria controlled (albeit in contravention of international law) by ISIS. Even scholars like Sageman,⁸² who place more emphasis on processes of religious radicalization, including belief in a global war against Islam, see specific grievances—such as objection to foreign military occupation—as a necessary precondition to terrorist acts.

Most suicide attacks occur when the foreign military presence is from a country with a different predominant religion than the predominant religion of those in the place where the foreigners are present,⁸³ but this likely describes the vast majority of contemporary foreign military occupations. Religion is among the features of culture these actors wish to defend; it is one of the sources of shared meaning that binds them together; and they ground their actions, in part, in religious doctrines and passages from texts that justified violent defense of the group centuries or millennia ago. Resistance to foreign occupation nonetheless holds greater explanatory power for suicide attacks, rather than religion as such.⁸⁴ Members of some militant groups, like Hamas’s founder and leader, Khaled Meshaal, sometimes explicitly frame the group’s violent tactics in these terms: “We are a resistance movement against an occupation. . . . We have never sought to kill a Jew because he was a Jew.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Pape and Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse*, 10.

⁸² Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.

⁸³ Pape and Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse*.

⁸⁴ Speaking about the assumptions he held as he began his research on suicide terrorism, Robert Pape says, “I thought I was going to figure out when an Islamic fundamentalist goes from being a devout, observant Muslim to somebody who then is suicidally violent. But there was no data available, so I put together this complete database of suicide attacks around the world . . . I was really struck that half the suicide attacks were secular. I began to look at the patterns and I noticed that they were tightly clustered, both in where they occurred and the timing, and that 95 percent of the suicide attacks were in response to a military occupation” (Elliott Balch, “Myth Busting: Robert Pape on Suicide Terrorism, ISIS, and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Chicago Policy Review*, May 5, 2015, <http://chicagopolicyreview.org/2015/05/05/myth-busting-robert-pape-on-isis-suicide-terrorism-and-u-s-foreign-policy/>). Commenting on journalist Graeme Wood’s March 2015 article about ISIS in *The Atlantic*, in which Wood argues that ISIS’s chief objective is to “[return all of] civilization to a seventh-century [religious] legal environment, and ultimately to [bring] about the apocalypse” (Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>), Pape maintains that Wood is “just wrong. . . . Wood is painting a picture of ISIS as all religious, all the time. Interestingly . . . he is talking about how the main difference with Osama bin Laden’s Al Qaeda is that ISIS really wants territory. Wanting territory means there’s a community that wants a state. ISIS, and most suicide groups, are driven by an ideal of nationalism; they want to control their destiny with a state. ISIS is composed of a leadership of about 25 people, which is one-third very heavily religious, for sure; one-third former Saddam [Hussein] military officers who are Baathists, who are secular; and one-third who are Sunni militia, Sunni tribal leaders. That just conveniently is lost in the Wood piece. It’s definitely the case that ISIS wants to kill people who are not part of its community. But this is normal in nationalist groups” (Balch, “Myth Busting”).

⁸⁵ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 399. There are obvious differences between an organization with transnational ambitions, like ISIS, for example, and Hamas. ISIS seeks to build a theocratic state and to dominate the surrounding region from it, displacing a perceived hegemon to which it attributes many problems near its base and around the world (Cole Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State* (The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the

Many of those recruited to Islamic militant organizations are recent converts, or come from moderate or largely secularized Muslim families.⁸⁶ “[W]hat inspires the most lethal terrorists in the world today,” Atran maintains, “is not so much the Koran or religious teachings as a thrilling cause and call to action that promises glory and esteem in the eyes of friends, and through friends, eternal respect and remembrance in the wider world that they will never live to enjoy.”⁸⁷ Reflecting on the presumption that Islamic fundamentalist religion “independent of American and Western foreign policy” is the cause of suicide attacks, thus justifying military intervention to democratize Muslim countries, Pape and Feldman conclude that “the facts have not fit our presumptions.”⁸⁸

While religion may not be the driving motivation of these militants, it would be a mistake to view religion only as cynically manipulated for instrumental purposes in these movements and to view their religious character as irrelevant to most recruits. For some—and perhaps for many recent converts, in particular—religion may be considered an antidote to the unmoored, debased existence the forces of secularization and globalization seem to promote.⁸⁹ It was right for Muslim leaders to denounce both ISIS’s militant and exclusivist form of Islam and the violence ISIS has done in its name,⁹⁰ and Western leaders’ insistence that such extreme militancy has nothing to do with religion is to be applauded as a moral stand against such violence and in defense of the

Islamic World, Analysis Paper No. 19, March 2015), <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>). Although Hamas once campaigned for imposing uniform religious standards, like requiring women to wear the hijab, on all Palestinians, and there have been some sporadic, though less ambitious, efforts to do so since, it never has officially declared imposition of a specific interpretation of Islamic law on all Palestinians to be among its policy objectives, nor does it advocate global jihad.

⁸⁶ Sageman *Understanding Terror Networks*; Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*; Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*.

⁸⁷ Scott Atran, “Pathways To and From Violent Extremism: The Case for Science-based Field Research.” Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Emerging Threats & Capabilities, March 10, 2010, http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/atran10/atran10_index.html.

⁸⁸ Pape and Feldman, *Cutting the Fuse*, 2–3.

⁸⁹ Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*.

⁹⁰ Michael Kaplan, “ISIS Ramadan War: Muslim Leaders Condemn Islamic State Attacks, Call Holy Month Time for Peace,” *International Business Times*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-ramadan-war-muslim-leaders-condemn-islamic-state-attacks-call-holy-month-time-1990904>. Among many in the West and some smaller regions around the world, Muslims presently are viewed as more prone to violence than other groups, but data compiled and analyzed by political scientist Steven Fish dispel this invidious stereotype, clearly demonstrating that Muslims generally are not violent people. Non-Muslim countries average 7.5 murders per 100,000 citizens per year, for example, while the murder rate in Muslim countries is less than a third of that number, whether or not those Muslim countries have authoritarian regimes. Nor is large-scale political violence more prevalent in predominantly Muslim countries (M. Steven Fish, *Are Muslims Distinctive? A Look at the Evidence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)). Muslims were, however, responsible for about 60 percent of the approximately 200 terrorist bombings that occurred between 1994 and 2008 (ibid.). Fish sees this statistic as a response by a small number of extremists to the fact that “in the contemporary world, Christians won big.” As Fish explains, “Christians drew the boundaries of the states in which most Muslims live. . . . Currently, people in Christian countries make up one-third of the world’s population, while holding two-thirds of its wealth and nine-tenths of its military might” (M. Steven Fish, “Why is Terror Islamist?,” *The Washington Post*, January 27, 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/27/why-is-terror-islamist/>). Many Muslims feel frustrated and humiliated by this history and its legacy, Fish maintains, but only a small number of people express those feelings violently, as (according to Fish) we could expect to happen if the tables were turned (ibid.). Of course, Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere generally have a negative view of groups that sponsor terrorism and their violent tactics (Pew Research Center, *Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Middle East: Negative Opinions of al Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah Widespread*, July 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/01/concerns-about-islamic-extremism-on-the-rise-in-middle-east/>).

spiritually and ethically grounded forms of Islam practiced by the vast majority of Muslims around the world. Discrediting violence in the name of religion and validating and amplifying religious perspectives that encourage tolerance and moderation is imperative.

Nonetheless, we should acknowledge that religion is at least superficially entangled even with the most extreme forms of violence with which it plainly seems to be associated, and we should encourage more research about extreme militancy in the name of religion, as well as methods for addressing it. The strategies and methods useful for addressing this problem may be more about altering Western foreign and military policy, avoiding and reversing radicalization of youth, and other types of policies and programs that are largely beyond the primary focus of this article, but understanding the ways in which religion is associated with extreme militancy (ranging from cynical and disingenuous manipulation of religion to sincere belief) and supporting efforts by mainstream religious actors to counter them no doubt can contribute meaningfully to solutions.⁹¹

Religious Prosociality and Conflict Transformation

As we saw in the previous sections of this article, religious beliefs and practices help bind people together in groups, and groups sometimes compete. Yet the prosocial features of our religions that help groups form and develop strong internal bonds also can and do help build bridges between people from different groups. Most contemporary conflict resolution theory and practice focused on conflicts that involve religion, particularly the work of religious peacebuilding scholars and practitioners, has given little or no attention to social scientific research on religious prosociality and what it tells us about the ways in which religion is and is not entangled with conflict and how it can and does contribute to conflict transformation.

The contemporary (and still largely Western) academic field of religious peacebuilding, one key strain of which is about religious actors working to prevent or end violent conflicts, has grown rapidly over the past two decades, both in terms of theory development and in terms of number and scope of applied activities. This growth was sparked, in part, by the publication in 1994 of *Religion, The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*,⁹² the first in-depth study in the modern West of religion’s potential to contribute positively to official and unofficial diplomacy in the context of contemporary international relations. This was the year after Samuel Huntington’s article “The Clash of Civilizations?” appeared in *Foreign Affairs*.⁹³ That article and the book⁹⁴ that followed it tend to characterize religion as essentialist, reified, and conflict generating. The field’s growth began to accelerate in 2000, with the publication of Scott Appleby’s *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* and Marc Gopin’s *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*.

While violence in the name of God grabs headlines, many religious actors are working quietly to avert or end conflict, whether or not it involves religion, and to promote peace in other

⁹¹ For example, Scott Atran (*Talking to the Enemy*, 415) observes that “Islam also stops violence. The only organizations I’ve found that have actually enticed significant numbers of voluntary defections from the ranks of would-be martyrs and jihadis—in Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, and elsewhere—are Muslim religious organizations.”

⁹² Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁹³ Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49.

⁹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

ways⁹⁵—as, indeed, they have been doing for millennia. According to one study published in 2011, religious actors have played a mediating role in the vast majority of post-Cold War peace processes designed to end civil wars (21 of 25), playing a very direct and decisive mediating role in over half of these cases (11). Well-known examples include the successful mediation efforts by the Roman Catholic Community of Sant’Edigio and the work of Muslims and Christians through the Interfaith Mediation Center to reduce conflict in Nigeria. Religious actors also played significant roles in many of the reconciliation and transitional justice cases examined.⁹⁶ There is resurgent interest among researchers and policymakers in religion as a positive force in international affairs, including interest in “very non-political notions such as reconciliation, forgiveness, healing of relations, and apology . . . connected with religious world views” that are increasingly “included in contemporary discourse on [international relations].”⁹⁷ Former United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright asserts that religious organizations “have more resources, more skilled personnel, a longer attention span, more experience, more dedication and more success in fostering reconciliation than any government.”⁹⁸

Religions obviously have resources (texts, norms, rituals, etc.) that can be used to justify and promote cooperation or conflict.⁹⁹ While resources that more readily can be used to promote cooperation often are deployed to expand and strengthen bonds within religious groups, and resources that more readily can be used to justify conflict sometimes are deployed to maintain and defend the boundaries of religious groups, examples of religion supporting tolerance and cooperation between and among groups are abundant.¹⁰⁰ One contemporary opportunity and challenge for those who wish to help prevent or transform conflict involving religion is to tap into religion’s prosocial impulses more systematically in efforts to improve intergroup relations.¹⁰¹

Effective conflict transformation efforts can, and often must, be incredibly varied, encompassing different modes of advocacy, third-party and internal mediation, interaction within and between groups, and social action.¹⁰² While the (mediated or unmediated) negotiation of a

⁹⁵ David R. Smock, “FBOs and International Peacebuilding,” United States Institute of Peace Special Report 76, October 2001; Susan Hayward, “Religion and Peace Building: Reflections on Current Challenges and Future Prospects,” United States Institute of Peace Special Report 313, August 2012, <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR313.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011).

⁹⁷ Joanna Kulka, “A Balanced Perception of Religion in International Relations,” E-International Relations, July 9, 2015, <http://www.e-ir.info/2015/07/09/a-balanced-perception-of-religion-in-international-relations/>.

⁹⁸ Madeleine Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God and World Affairs* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 77.

⁹⁹ Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*; Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*; Seoul, “Religion and Conflict,” 323–334.

¹⁰⁰ One will find numerous examples among the essays collected in the new *Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, edited by A. Omer, R. S. Appleby, and D. Little (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹⁰¹ This project is not about excavating what supposedly is authentic and good in religion, sifting out what supposedly is inauthentic and bad, and essentializing these “good” elements apart from their historical, social, and political contexts—a strategy justifiably criticized by religion, conflict, and peace studies scholar Atalia Omer (“Religious Peacebuilding: The Exotic, the Good, and the Theatrical,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, 3–32). Rather, it is about recognizing that the impulses and perspectives that often cause people to favor their own group—a tendency that cannot simplistically be characterized as good or bad, either for one’s own group or for other groups—sometimes also can be tapped to help extend prosocial conduct beyond the boundaries of one’s own group, possibly reducing intolerance and violence.

¹⁰² Robert Ricigliano, *Making Peace Last: A Toolbox for Sustainable Peacebuilding* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2012).

ceasefire agreement, peace accord, or new constitution is a focal point activity in efforts to transform most violent conflicts, a document like this typically is just a milestone, however important it may be, in an ongoing process of building more functional structures and relationships within a society. Most peace processes that lead to long-term social and political stability are akin to social movements that involve diverse actors and diverse forms of action.¹⁰³ Key actors involved in any peace process must find direct and indirect ways to engage many more people in the process, not only through dialogue, but also through modes of communication and experiences that help to overcome differences, serve basic human needs, and unite and reconcile people who have been in conflict. Religious actors can engage in peace practice not only by participating in negotiations and political dialogue, but also through other forms of speech (e.g., preaching) and action (e.g., group ritual or provision of social services), however loosely or tightly connected to official negotiations and dialogues these activities may be.

The “Big Gods, big groups” hypothesis introduced above and contending theories will continue to be debated, but the potential value to the field of conflict resolution of this new strain of social scientific research regarding religious prosociality already is becoming apparent, whether or not a consensus regarding grand theories ultimately emerges. To date, most theory and practice directed at conflicts that involve religion, including work done by religious peacebuilders, has not systematically accounted for insights derived from the empirical research methods used by social scientists, nor has it routinely been evaluated by them.¹⁰⁴ Scholars and practitioners have advanced what would seem to be many valuable approaches to employing religious resources to promote peace, such as using practices of forgiveness and reconciliation in conflict resolution efforts¹⁰⁵ and amplifying pro-peace doctrinal strains within a tradition,¹⁰⁶ but they have lacked rigorous ways to determine which approaches are most effective, to fine-tune approaches, and to develop new approaches. The new social science regarding the relationship among religion, conflict, and conflict resolution already is beginning to produce insights that can increase the effectiveness of efforts to resolve conflicts in which religion is a factor.

The remainder of this section provides an overview of some early insights from the new social science on religious prosociality that should prove useful to conflict resolution practitioners

¹⁰³ John Paul Lederach, *The Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2003); Mikael Weissmann, “The Missing Link: Bridging Between Social Movement Theory and Conflict Resolution,” GARNET Working Paper No. 60/08, October 2008, <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A780143&dsid=-966>; Ricigliano, *Making Peace Last*.

¹⁰⁴ Save one passing reference to one source in one author’s contribution to the project, the *Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, an otherwise excellent and wide ranging 700-plus page survey of the field written by leading religious peacebuilding scholars, does not discuss, or even reference, any of the new social science on religious prosociality and its implications for conflict resolution practice, including evaluation of programs. The GHR Foundation has made a large grant to the Alliance for Peacebuilding to enable it to systematically assess and improve the effectiveness of religious peacebuilding efforts using evidence-based methods. Paul M. J. Suchecki, “How Useful Is Religion in Defusing Conflicts? A Funder Gives Big to Find Out,” *Inside Philanthropy*, February 27, 2015, <http://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2015/2/27/how-useful-is-religion-in-defusing-conflicts-a-funder-gives.html>.

¹⁰⁵ Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and Hendrik M. Vroom, eds., *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation: Multifaith Ideals and Realities* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002); Raymond G. Helmick and Rodney L. Petersen, eds., *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Religion, Public Policy, and Conflict Transformation* (Radnor, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001).

¹⁰⁶ Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003); Walton and Hayward, *Contesting Buddhist Narratives*.

and other peacemakers working to help prevent or transform a conflict involving religious actors. These examples mainly pertain to what Rob Ricigliano¹⁰⁷ calls attitudinal (i.e., group perspective change) and transactional (i.e., negotiation interaction) contributions to peacebuilding, but research on religious prosociality also can make structural contributions to peacebuilding (for example, by influencing law and policy on such matters as free exercise of religion and religious militancy).¹⁰⁸ Some of this research affirms current practices; some suggests refinements or new modes of practice. I see this research and the insights it offers as a complement to other perspectives and approaches within and beyond the social sciences, including more qualitative perspectives and approaches.¹⁰⁹ Practitioners have much to gain from this new line of scholarship, but effective practice must be multidisciplinary, including careful attention to the history of a conflict.¹¹⁰

Devoted Actors Defending Sacred Values

Much conflict resolution theory is premised upon the hypothetical “rational actor” model that dominates modern economic theory. This model has been tempered by findings from psychology about actual human perception and cognition, but this tempered view of rationality still assumes that individuals always seek to achieve outcomes that maximize net personal, worldly gains; sometimes, according to this perspective, we simply are prone to errors in perception and judgment that prevent us from optimally serving our self-interest.¹¹¹

Some conduct, from suicide attacks to forgone opportunities to resolve a conflict on terms widely judged by others to be beneficial, seems so to defy self-interest, however, that it strains the rational actor model to the breaking point. This sort of conduct makes more sense when viewed from the perspective of a *devoted actor* model, in which one is willing to defend what is at stake in the conflict at great, and even ultimate, this-worldly personal cost.¹¹² Devoted actors do not seek outcomes that maximize self-interest in mundane or material terms; they act to preserve and

¹⁰⁷ Robert Ricigliano, *Making Peace Last*.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰⁹ Political scientist Ron Hassner’s study of conflict over sacred sites is an excellent example of interdisciplinary work on the relationship among religion, conflict, and conflict resolution efforts that endeavors to be both “deep” and “broad.” Deep approaches to studying this relationship, such as those utilized by many scholars in disciplines such as religious studies, theology, and history, often rely upon detailed case studies to gain in-depth insight into very local perspectives and practices within a particular religious group or national or subnational geographic area. Broad approaches to studying this relationship typically utilize quantitative and qualitative social scientific research methodologies in search of insights that apply, and which may be capable of guiding policy and practice, not only within, but also across, local contexts. Each of these orientations has advantages and disadvantages. This article focuses mostly upon contributions made by broad approaches, because they are largely neglected in the literature on religious peacebuilding, but joining these orientations arguably is the most productive way to generate actionable insights regarding the relationship among religion, conflict, and conflict resolution (Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 174).

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth F. Thompson, “Justice Interrupted: Historical Perspectives on Promoting Democracy in the Middle East,” United States Institute of Peace Special Report 225, June 2009, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/101370/sr225.pdf>.

¹¹¹ M. Bazerman and Katie Shonk, “The Decision Perspective to Negotiation.” In *The Handbook of Dispute Resolution*, edited by M. Moffitt and R. Bordone (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

¹¹² Scott Atran, “Genesis of Suicide Terrorism,” *Science* 299 (2003):1534–1539.

defend a moral order with which they and their compatriots identify completely.¹¹³ Many religious people undoubtedly conceive of themselves and behave as devoted actors in many situations.

The devoted actor can, of course, be seen as an absolutely resolute rational actor; as a person who values one thing (like resistance to foreign occupation) much more than other things (like the prospect of continued this-worldly existence with family and friends) that most of us give comparable weight when making decisions (and which other theists believe God wills for them as much or more). In this sense, the devoted actor who resorts to violence is acting to maximize personal gain. He simply ascribes much higher value to outcomes that others either consider immoral or as entailing unacceptable costs.

This point highlights a major difference between a typical secular materialist worldview and a typical theistic religious worldview. Many religious people believe that acting in accordance with God’s will, following ethical principles, and struggling for moral causes lead to nearness to God, salvation, and eternal well-being, all of which are, in a sense, considered personal gains consistent with one’s worldview. A person with such a religious worldview may well consider the espoused religious justification for a suicide attacker’s conduct to be theologically unsound (not a true expression of God’s will) or disingenuous (not truly motivated by religion), yet she herself does try to discern and act in keeping with God’s will in her own life, and she accepts and appreciates that other religious people also try to do so. To the extent she makes what she herself or others consider to be sacrifices along the way, these sacrifices are rational when considered from inside her worldview. The secular materialist, by contrast, regards the suicide attacker’s conduct as irrational, not only because it fails to account for costs she believes the attacker should wish to avoid (like loss of one’s own life and the likelihood of retaliation against members of one’s family and community), but also because she considers the attacker’s religious worldview to be false.

Some suggest that (religious or secular) sacred values may not really be incommensurable (non-tradable) with more mundane (religious or secular) interests. Some values that are deeply held by some people may well be more subject to compromise when one’s alternatives to negotiation are unattractive.¹¹⁴ There is evidence, for example, that environmentalists are more open to compromise when they perceive significant litigation risk.¹¹⁵ Studies by experimental anthropologist Scott Atran, political scientist Robert Axelrod, and their colleagues (and the daily news streams from the fronts of civil wars and culture wars) indicate, however, that many conflicts with devoted actors involved in armed conflict and extremely polarized political disputes are likely to remain immune to negotiation so long as efforts to resolve them solely employ methods that treat sacred values as if they were readily tradable. From a practical perspective, we would be wise to assume in these situations that concessions involving sacred values cannot be bought with concessions on more mundane matters, even though, with careful attention to process, including

¹¹³ Scott Atran, Robert Axelrod, and Richard Davis, “Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution,” *Science* 317 (2007): 1039–1040; Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran, “What Motivates Participation in Violent Political Action: Selective Incentives or Parochial Altruism?,” *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1167 (2009): 115–123; Alan Fiske and Taze Shakti Rai, *Virtuous Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹¹⁴ Ann E. Tenbrunsel et al., “The Reality and Myth of Sacred Issues in Negotiations,” *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research* 2, no. 3 (2009): 263–284.

¹¹⁵ Andrew J. Hoffman et al., “A Mixed-Motive Perspective”; P. E. Tetlock, “Thinking the Unthinkable: Sacred Values and Taboo Cognitions,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 7, no. 7 (2003): 320–324.

the sequencing of moves, a package deal in which all parties to a conflict realize gains and losses on both sacred and mundane matters ultimately may be possible “within an overarching moral frame of social duties and (material) attempts to balance duties,” rather than through trades that ask devoted actors to disregard felt duties imposed by sacred values.¹¹⁶

In one study, social psychologist Jeremy Ginges, Atran, and other researchers assessed Israelis’ and Palestinians’ and other combatants’ willingness to end their conflicts through material concessions and compromises on issues to which one or both of the communities in conflict attached sacred values (e.g., territory, the right of return, and the status of Jerusalem). They found that proposed trades in which one side would concede something to which it attached sacred value in exchange for material benefits (e.g., money) generated a “backfire effect,” increasing resistance to resolution of the conflict. However, even the most hawkish members of each community were open to proposals in which each side made concessions involving sacred values.¹¹⁷ The conventional thinking among conflict resolution theorists and practitioners is that incremental progress on resolution of more mundane issues eventually can lead to willingness to compromise on major issues of symbolic importance, but this research suggests instead that symbolic gestures (like demonstrations of recognition and respect or an apology) may pave the way for negotiation of more mundane issues.¹¹⁸ The implication, of course, is that peacemakers should invest at least as much energy in efforts to achieve early symbolic concessions as they invest in efforts to achieve material concessions.

Atran and Axelrod suggest numerous strategies for reframing sacred values to make trades involving them more tenable.¹¹⁹ These reframing strategies include the following (which I illustrate with examples):

- *Updating how sacred values are expressed to signal retreat from or revision of claims one knows are inaccurate or out-of-step with current realities.* For example, before the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) revised its policy on inclusion of homosexual youth and leaders, it progressively relaxed prior claims about the morality of homosexuality.
- *Expressing or operationalizing sacred values in ways that are creatively ambiguous.* The BSA’s new membership standard says a person cannot be excluded from the organization based solely upon “sexual orientation or preference,” thus allowing those involved to “agree to disagree” on the nature of homosexuality, while paving the way for inclusion of

¹¹⁶ Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, “Reframing Sacred Values,” *Negotiation Journal* 24, no. 3 (2008): 229. Deeply held values implicated in disputes that are brought to court in a well-functioning domestic legal system are effectively rendered commensurable, because both parties implicitly accept that the outcome of litigation may be a ruling that wholly or partially disregards one’s values. A judicial system before which parties can bring a dispute involving sacred values simultaneously allows their values to be negotiated (by the judges who will debate and rule on the merits of the case) and ensures their values and the group’s identity are (seemingly) defended without compromise (Jeffrey R. Seul, “Settling Significant Cases,” *Washington Law Review* 79, no. 3 (2004): 881–968. In the context of many international armed conflicts and civil wars, as well as some domestic conflicts involving sacred values (e.g., free speech rights versus images of the Prophet in Denmark or France), however, there is no third-party arbiter that all parties consider legitimate or sufficiently authoritative. The conflict must be resolved through negotiation by the conflict parties themselves, if it is to be resolved peacefully.

¹¹⁷ Ginges et al., “Sacred Bounds on Rational Resolution”; Atran, Axelrod, and Davis, “Sacred Barriers to Conflict Resolution.”

¹¹⁸ Atran and Axelrod, “Reframing Sacred Values.”

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*; Atran, *Talking to the Enemy*, 382–389.

homosexuals. Years before the 2000 Camp David Summit, Israeli legal scholar Ruth Lapidoth proposed that Jerusalem’s Holy Esplanade (the Temple Mount to Jews, and Al Aqsa Mosque to Muslims) be regarded as subject to Divine Sovereignty,¹²⁰ and Jordan’s King Hussein later suggested many times that *all* holy sites in Jerusalem be regarded as subject to Divine Sovereignty, rather than the sovereignty of one party or divided into sovereign parts. This notion was seriously explored at the summit, but was rejected because religious leaders were not sufficiently involved in the process and the suggestion raises many complications regarding religious understandings of holy sites in general, and the Holy Esplanade in particular.¹²¹ Nonetheless, Professor Lapidoth and King Hussein were suggesting a creatively ambiguous solution to the symbolic dimension of the disputes over Jerusalem’s holy sites that was intended to open the way for compromise on more mundane matters.

- *Change the context or time horizon, so the stakes are lowered here and now.* The recent multilateral agreement regarding Iran’s nuclear capacity is intended to delay (for 15 years), but not entirely eliminate, Iran’s ability to develop a nuclear arsenal eventually. Assuming the agreement is respected by all parties, sanctions against Iran will be lifted, but Iran’s leaders can credibly claim they still stand by Iran’s “sovereign right” to develop a nuclear bomb.
- *Prioritize among sacred values without abandoning any of them.* Many environmentalists and other supporters of renewable energy and many supporters of fossil fuels likely agree that job creation is desirable (and, for some, even a sacred value), even if they do not agree on the scientific case for climate change. Policies that phase in renewable energy production and phase out reliance on coal in the nearer term and natural gas in the longer term, and which focus on creating jobs in the transitional fossil fuel and renewable energy sectors now and later seek a (shifting) balance among prioritized values, thus might be negotiable among these staunchly opposed players. Laws creating buffer zones around abortion clinics and waiting periods and/or optional counseling prior to abortions balance pro-life and pro-choice perspectives on abortion and the principle of free speech, which both sides value.
- *Seize low-cost opportunities to demonstrate respect for others’ sacred values.* During Nelson Mandela’s first secret meeting with South African President F.W. de Klerk, Mr. Mandela opened with a respectful, in-depth summary of Afrikaner history, experience, and perspectives, as he understood them. Mr. de Klerk later reported feeling utterly disarmed by this opening gesture and completely disposed to listen to and work with Mr. Mandela. Mr. Mandela’s gesture cost him nothing, but helped achieve much for all South Africans.

Other reframing strategies include appeals to shared values that will be served through an agreement in which each side compromises on some sacred value that is not shared and breaking a sacred value down into smaller elements or steps. The abortion waiting period law discussed above is an example of the latter strategy. It may result in fewer abortions, even if does not eliminate

¹²⁰ Ruth Lapidoth, “Sovereignty in Transition,” *Journal of International Affairs* 45, no. 2 (1992): 325–346.

¹²¹ Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*, 86.

all abortions (a goal that pro-life advocates would continue to pursue). All of these reframing strategies have a common logic and objective: They enable a party to enter, and negotiate within, the other's frame of reference without leaving one's own frame of reference, and they permit parties to retain (sometimes in a refigured way) all, or nearly all, of the *symbolic value* associated with what they hold sacred while enabling them to divide the *mundane or material value* connected to what they hold sacred.

Tolerance-Promoting Texts and Doctrine

Religious peacebuilding experts often encourage religious leaders and others to amplify texts and doctrine that encourage tolerance,¹²² but does spotlighting of pro-peace textual material and ideas help? If so, in which circumstances? Social scientists may help provide some answers to these questions.

For example, through decades of collaborative research, including studies of Israelis and Palestinians and U.S. citizens reminded of the 9/11 attacks, social psychologists Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski consistently have found that “[d]eath fears inflame violence toward others with different beliefs, especially those whom we designate as evil.”¹²³ A fascinating and encouraging study by Pyszczynski and other colleagues, however, found that Iranian conservative Muslim and U.S. fundamentalist Christian subjects were more likely to support violent action against the other group when reminded of their mortality, but that support for violence decreased to the same levels expressed by moderate citizens of each country when they also were reminded of their religion's compassionate values (for Muslims, the saying “Do goodness to others because Allah loves those who do good”; for Christians, the saying “Love thy neighbor as thyself”).¹²⁴ These priming studies are not conducted in the ordinary course of subjects' lives, but it seems reasonable to assume that reminding people frequently (in religious services, in daily life, and during conflict resolution activities) both of the transience of this earthly life (through, for instance, the Christian ethic and practice of *momento mori* or Buddhism's Five Remembrances) and of their tradition's compassionate values may promote a similar shift in perspective.

A recent set of studies by social psychologists Adam Waytz, Liane Young, and Jeremy Ginges involving Democrats and Republicans in the United States (in one study) and Israelis and Palestinians (in a separate study) revealed that parties to intense political and ethnoreligious conflicts unconsciously attribute their own group's aggression more to love of their group and the other group's aggression more to hatred of the out-group, a bias they call “motive attribution asymmetry.”¹²⁵ Interestingly, a material reward (in this case, money) offered to some study participants for accuracy in assessing the other side's true motivations “reduce[d] egocentrism through increasing effortful perspective-taking.”¹²⁶ This suggests that structures and incentives designed to help a group see and experience the real, in-group focused motivations of the other group might help dampen this bias (and other biases). Interreligious dialogue that is structured and

¹²² Harold Coward and Gordon S. Smith, eds., *Religion and Peacebuilding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

¹²³ Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski, *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life* (New York: Random House, 2015), 144.

¹²⁴ Rothschild, Abdollahi, and Pyszczynski, “Does Peace Have a Prayer?”

¹²⁵ Waytz, Young, and Ginges, “Motive Attribution Asymmetry for Love vs. Hate.”

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15690.

guided in keeping with findings from research on attitude change and the sort of perspective taking exercises that are standard fare in conflict resolution trainings are examples of these types of structures, and perhaps “effortful perspective taking” would be increased if small, appropriate incentives were deftly incorporated into the experience (e.g., facilitators might offer to pick up the tab for the group’s dinner if participants effectively assess others’ motivations).

Devotional Practices

An interesting study in the United States (where existential security generally is high) found that conservative Pentecostal Christians who attend church most regularly and report greater influence of religion in their daily lives are more trusting of people inside *and outside* their group than less committed co-religionists and atheists, other Christians, and Jews.¹²⁷ As noted above, a series of studies (conducted in environments with comparatively low existential security) found strong support for suicide attacks among those Israelis and Palestinians who attend religious services frequently, but do not pray frequently. However, these same studies found that “[r]eminders of prayer, if anything, decreased” support for attacks.¹²⁸ These latter studies suggest that devotional practices such as prayer may dampen out-group hostility, even where groups are under stress. There are many types of prayer in theistic traditions in which one could reflect upon peace-oriented textual material or values. Certain types of Buddhist meditation practice have been shown to increase empathy and compassion, as well as prosocial conduct in games that offer the opportunity to cooperate or compete.¹²⁹ This research would seem to validate the efforts of some conflict resolution experts to incorporate mindfulness practices into their work.¹³⁰ Religious peacemakers should consider encouraging these types of devotional practices.

Group Ritual

The religious peacebuilding literature encourages the creative use of ritual in conflict resolution practice.¹³¹ Recent social scientific research on religious prosociality validates this idea, while also offering insights about types and features of rituals that may particularly help promote tolerance and conflict transformation. For example, several studies indicate that *synchronized movement* is one key to creating feelings of affinity.¹³²

¹²⁷ Welch et al., “Trust in God and Trust in Man.”

¹²⁸ Norenzayan, *Big Gods*, 164.

¹²⁹ O. M. Klimecki et al., “Differential Pattern of Functional Brain Plasticity After Compassion and Empathy Training,” *Social Cognitive Affective Neuroscience* 9, no. 6 (2014): 873–879.

¹³⁰ Leonard L. Riskin and Rachel Wohl, “Mindfulness in the Heat of Conflict: Taking STOCK,” *Harvard Negotiation Law Review* 20 (2015): 121–155.

¹³¹ Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon*; Lisa Schirch, “Ritual, Religion, and Peacebuilding,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, 516–540.

¹³² Michael J. Hove and Jane L. Risen, “It’s All in the Timing: Interpersonal Synchrony Increases Affiliation,” *Social Cognition* 27, no. 6 (2009): 949–961; S. S. Wiltermuth and C. Heath, “Synchrony and Cooperation,” *Psychological Science* 20, no. 1 (2009): 1–5. Other examples include uniform, repeated rituals (which also may involve movement and song) performed regularly and less regular, high-arousal rituals performed under the supervision of religious authorities (Quentin D. Atkinson and Harvey Whitehouse, “The Cultural Morphospace of Ritual Form: Examining Modes of Religiosity Cross-culturally,” *Evolution & Human Behavior* 32, no. 1 (2011): 50–62; Ivana Konvalinka et al., “Synchronized Arousal Between Performers and Related Spectators in a Fire-walking Ritual,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 108, no. 20 (2011): 8514–8519; Xygalatas et al., “Extreme Rituals Promote Prosociality,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 8 (2013): 1602–1605. Group ritual evokes the sentiment Emile Durkheim famously described as “collective effervescence” (Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by K. E. Fields (New York:

Most studies of ritual have focused on in-group solidarity, but there is evidence that group rituals can help promote solidarity with and tolerance toward members of other groups. Economists David Clingingsmith, Asim Khwaja, and Michael Kremer studied effects on social attitudes of Pakistanis who either won or lost (through a lottery system) a spot to participate in the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj). The Hajj draws more than two million Muslim men and women of all sects, races, ethnicities, classes, ages, regions, and cultures from around the world for a five-day pilgrimage that includes performance of a diverse set of rituals at a number of different locations. A one-time requirement (for those with financial and physical capability) symbolizing each individual's ultimate self-presentation before and return to God, the Hajj is an event of culminating spiritual significance and intimacy for the individual, and is intended to highlight the shared nature and equality of human beings' existential situation before God. Intentions and prayers, ranging from verbally recited prayers and prayers involving synchronous movements to individual, personal spontaneous supplications, are integral to the rituals. Many of the rituals, such as encircling the Ka'ba and running back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa, are understood to recapitulate prayers, activities, and events in the lives of beloved religious figures and spiritual-ethical exemplars. The Hajj is very strenuous physically, with much of the travel between locations taking place on foot, often in high temperatures. The pilgrims together undergo considerable hardships and physical risks, provide mutual assistance, engage in spiritual conversation, share meals and supplies, and stand side by side for prolonged periods while praying with many people different in physical appearance, languages, customs, and even styles of ritual practice.

The Hajj thus brings diverse people together for extended interaction and ritual activity. The researchers found that Hajj participation decreased observance of more parochial religious practices and increased observance of more global religious practices; increased attitudes of equality, peace, and harmony toward other Muslims (including people from different Islamic sects and ethnic groups) and toward adherents of other religions; increased belief in the ability of people from different religious traditions to live in peace; and produced more favorable attitudes toward women.¹³³ Cambodian Buddhist leader Maha Ghosananda's Dhammayietra (also known as the Walk for Peace and Reconciliation)¹³⁴ and the Abraham Path initiative in the Middle East¹³⁵ are other examples of the simple power of group ritual for peacebuilding.

Shaping Situations to Promote Religious Prosociality

Religious prosociality is persistently "in the situation" (i.e., religious people tend to behave in prosocial ways when their present context encourages prosocial behavior), regardless of the conflicting evidence about whether it is persistently "in the person." This suggests that it may be possible to shape negotiation contexts and other situations in ways that encourage prosocial behavior. For example, if key members of negotiation delegations are religious, moderate religious

Simon & Schuster, 1995), vii. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt provides a more comprehensive list of activities that can evoke this sentiment (Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 221–245).

¹³³ Clingingsmith, Khwaja, and Kremer, "Estimating the Impact of the Hajj."

¹³⁴ Monique Skidmore, "In the Shade of the Bodhi Tree: Dhammayietra and the Re-awakening of Community in Cambodia," *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1996): 1–32.

¹³⁵ Abraham Path Initiative, accessed June 13, 2016, <http://abrahampath.org>.

leaders could be invited to offer words of encouragement (perhaps drawing upon scripture) before important meetings or negotiation sessions, reminding people of the loss of life the conflict has caused and will continue to cause if it is not resolved, and of values within their respective traditions that call for tolerance, compassion, and reconciliation. Meeting spaces could contain or be situated around positive reminders of religion. For example, the offices of the Common Space Initiative in Beirut, where many key meetings that are part of Lebanon’s national dialogue process have occurred, is surrounded by dozens of churches and mosques that broadcast their presence throughout the day with bells and calls to prayer.¹³⁶

One recent experiment involving Muslim youth in Gaza and the West Bank powerfully demonstrates the potential value of interventions that shape negotiation situations to promote prosociality across group lines.¹³⁷ Study participants were asked how they would resolve a moral dilemma in which they had the choice to act to sacrifice the life of one Palestinian man to save the lives of several children who otherwise would be killed accidentally (a variant of the famous trolley dilemma). All respondents considered two versions of this dilemma: in one, the children they had the opportunity to save were Palestinian; in the other, they were Jewish Israelis. Even the baseline responses of these Palestinian youth were not what many would expect: many of the respondents had serious reservations about allowing Jewish children to die to save a Palestinian. When the researchers subsequently asked them to think about this choice *from God’s perspective*, however, they were almost 30 percent more likely to sacrifice the life of a Palestinian to save the Jewish children—a hugely statistically significant shift. Those who facilitate discussions or negotiations among parties in conflict who are religious will recognize immediately how practically useful an insight like this can be in their work. Asking theistic negotiators to consider issues and options from God’s perspective may well help spark creativity and break impasses.

Conclusion

This article highlights the role of religion in promoting cooperation within groups and the ways in which it is—and is not—implicated in conflict between groups. Religion promotes trust and cooperation among members of a group. No other feature of culture seems to offer so many resources for establishing and maintaining positive, secure group (and individual) identity and, hence, group solidarity. Religion supports a strong sense of *us*, generating a strong sense of *them*, and we know this *us-them* dynamic sometimes can turn violent. Yet, the prosocial features of religion that help a religious group grow and thrive also can contribute to tolerance and the resolution of conflicts between groups. Recent social scientific research regarding the prosocial nature of religion is producing a clearer and more nuanced picture of the ways in which religion and conflict relate, and also of how religion can contribute to the transformation of intergroup conflict with a religious dimension. This work is beginning to yield insights that can increase the effectiveness of conflict resolution practice, both by affirming or prompting modifications to existing approaches to practice and by inspiring new approaches. This new line of scientific inquiry into the social dynamics surrounding religion deserves the sustained attention of scholars and practitioners interested in conflict with a religious dimension.

¹³⁶ Common Space Initiative, accessed June 13, 2016, commonspaceinitiative.org.

¹³⁷ Jeremy Ginges, et alia, “Thinking from God’s Perspective Decreases Biased Valuation of the Life of a Nonbeliever,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 113, no. 2 (2016): 316–319.

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