

Review of Jonathan Fox's *Religion, Civilization, and Civil War*

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In the past ten years there has been increasing interest in rigorous, quantitative analysis of the determinants of civil war, ethnic violence, and other forms of domestic conflict. Scholars have analyzed the impact of ethno-linguistic fractionalization, terrain, economic growth, natural resources, and a variety of other factors. Little attention, however, has been paid to quantitatively estimating the role of religion as a cause of violence despite our intuition that religion is one of the central sources of political division in the modern world. It is this lacuna in the empirical literature to which Jonathan Fox addresses himself in *Religion, Civilization, and Civil War*.

Fox's book is, to my knowledge, the most comprehensive quantitative treatment of the relationship between religion and civil violence available and, as such, it merits the attention of scholars of the correlates of violence. Fox's project is to use two existing data sets (Minorities at Risk and State Failures), supplemented by his own data on various religious variables, to explore religion's impact on several forms of domestic level political violence. In so doing, Fox also provides an important comparison of the relative explanatory power of religion and Huntington's concept of a civilization.

Fox's study makes a variety of contributions to the political violence literature. First, he reminds us of the important role that religion plays in explanations of civil conflict. Second, his data collection provides a valuable supplement to existing data sets that will facilitate future research on the religious determinants of violence. In particular, Fox has collected

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new data on religious identity, religious discrimination, religious rights, religious institutions, and the religious content in conflicts. Finally, Fox's analysis yields novel empirical results.

The most consistent, interesting, and challenging finding in *Religion, Civilization, and Civil War* is the subtle, and relatively weak role religion plays in explaining civil conflict. Fox finds that both religious identity and religious grievance, on their own, are not major determinants of political violence. Indeed, the effects of religious variables are consistently smaller than the impact of separatism, contagion, repression, and regime type. It is when religion is interacted with other variables that its importance emerges. Religion, it seems, exacerbates separatist conflicts. That is, ethnic separatists who wish to break way from a group associated with a different religion are significantly more likely to resort to violence than are ethnic separatists attempting to break away from co-religionists. Moreover, the opposite is true if one focuses on protest rather than violence: ethnic separatists attempting to break away from co-religionists are less likely just to engage in non-violent protests than are ethnic separatists attempting to break away from those of a different religious group.

Such findings are both non-intuitive and theoretically suggestive. Fox argues that a possible explanation is the high emotional salience of religion; if one is prepared to take action over religious divisions, that action is likely to be violent because religious conflicts are fundamental. While certainly a plausible theory, other possibilities also exist. Recent work in the economics of religion suggests that the organizational structure and incentives associated with religious groups may be different in important ways from those associated with non-religious groups. Thus, another plausible explanation might focus on how religious organizations intentionally or unintentionally structure incentives in a way that heightens the risk of violence.

This theoretical uncertainty is a virtue of this book. The analysis raises as many questions as it answers. As such, the empirical findings highlight a variety of new puzzles waiting to be answered by future theoretical and empirical scholarship.

While *Religion, Civilization, and Civil War* is praiseworthy in many ways, some aspects of the analysis are, of course, subject to criticism. To be fair, many of these criticisms could

be leveled at almost all of the extant empirical work on political violence. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing them out.

My main concern has to do with the extent to which the author wants to make causal claims based on his findings. It is my view that the main contribution of this book is to provide a broad description of an empirical landscape that had previously only been examined in bits and pieces. To reach strong causal inferences from such an enterprise, however, is a bit risky. Allow me to point out just two issues in the quantitative analysis.

The first problem is endogeneity. The author runs a variety of regression analyses with different measures of civil conflict as dependent variables. The independent variables typically include measures not only of the religious determinants of violence but also of economic grievance, political grievance, and state repression. One of the identifying assumptions of the regressions is that these right-hand side variables are not correlated with the error term, which, among other things, implies that the presence of civil conflict does not exert a causal influence on these variables. However, for each independent variable mentioned above a plausible theoretical story could be told whereby civil conflict does exert a causal influence. For instance, state repression measures the use of state violence to repress ethnic minorities. It seems likely that governments facing civil insurgencies are more likely to adopt such repressive policies than are governments governing in relative peace. Moreover, if repressive policies exert negative economic externalities on the minority in question, then if repression is endogenous, economic grievance will be as well. A similar argument follows for political grievance. The magnitude of these endogeneity problems is difficult for a reader to assess. However, if they do exist, then they can create serious problems of bias and inconsistency that make strong causal inference impossible.

A second, though related, issue involves omitted variable bias. Fox does not control for several variables that other scholars have identified as important empirical determinants of political violence, including rough terrain, natural resources, oil, and state capacity. Some of these factors may be correlated with independent variables that are included in Fox's regressions. A few examples include, oil and Islam, rough terrain and separatism, and

natural resources (and oil) and international support. While data constraints make avoiding such problems difficult, they nonetheless limit the strength of the causal claims that can be made based on the evidence in *Religion, Civilization, and Civil War*.

Despite these issues, Fox's book makes an important contribution to the study of the determinants of political violence. The book introduces new data, raises important questions, and offers the most comprehensive analysis to date of religion's relationship to the occurrence of civil conflict.