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Divine disputes?

Exploring the religious dimensions of armed conflicts

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DIVINE DISPUTES?

EXPLORING THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSIONS OF ARMED CONFLICTS

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Abstract

A growing literature has started to explore the relationship between religious dimensions and the escalation, duration and termination of armed conflicts. This study examines the conditions for negotiated settlements. The author argues that if the demands of the belligerents are explicitly anchored in a religious tradition, they will come to perceive the conflicting issues as indivisible, and the conflict will be less likely to be settled through negotiations. Utilising unique data on the religious demands and identities of the primary parties, all intrastate conflict-dyads in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 1989-2003, are examined. The study finds that if governments or rebel groups have made explicit religious claims, these conflict-dyads are significantly less likely than others to be terminated through negotiated settlement. By contrast, whether the primary parties come from different religious traditions does not affect the chances for negotiated settlement.

Keywords: religion, civil wars, peace agreement, indivisibility, negotiated settlement, internal armed conflicts

About the author

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Introduction

The issue of religious violence has become increasingly topical in recent years. In political discussions as well as in academic discourses, the phenomenon of the religious dimensions of armed conflicts has taken a central place. The events of September 11, 2001, and the following global war on terror, have made religious violence the focal point of the contemporary peace and security debate. Hence, it is pivotal to understand more about the religious dimensions of armed conflicts.

The debate can be characterised as two basic polarised positions that commonly exist in debates on the religious dimensions of armed conflicts. Although most scholars would situate themselves somewhere between these two positions, the contradictory perspectives nevertheless permeate the whole debate.

The position at one end of the spectrum can be classified as *reductionistic*. According to this view, religious dimensions can always be reduced to real social tensions, rooted in divergent economic interests or social power structures. The reductionistic perspective questions the validity of the religious dimensions of armed conflicts, aspiring to shift the analysis to the underlying non-religious issues that, according to this perspective, are hidden behind the rhetoric of religious language, symbols and structures. From the reductionistic perspective, a proper analysis would reveal the real economic and social issues that lie underneath religious issues. Scholars holding this position will pay little attention to the religious dynamics of armed conflicts, proposing that a focus on these kinds of questions diverts our attention away from the root causes of conflicts.

Another perspective at the other end of the spectrum of the debate could be classified as the *essentialistic* position. In contrast to the reductionistic perspective, this position suggests that religion in different forms is an essential and real part of the dynamics of armed conflicts. The essentialistic position would see the religious sentiments, identities and cleavages beneath economic and political tensions. Religious identities are, according to this perspective, fixed, and represent an important unit of analysis. Analysis of conflicts should therefore focus on the religious aspects. The well-known American political scientist Samuel Huntington could be seen as a representative of this perspective, with his famous thesis that the world is heading for a 'Clash of Civilisations' (1996).

Between these two positions at the endpoints of the debate on the religious dimensions of armed conflicts there is a third possible perspective, which is the basis for this study. This position could be framed as the *con-*

ditionalistic position, which argues that religious issues can play a role in the dynamics of armed conflicts *under specific conditions*. It does not assume that religious aspects are either irrelevant or the core explanatory factors behind the dynamics of armed conflict. Thus, it does not neglect, nor does it overemphasise, religious dynamics when analysing armed conflicts. On the contrary, it suggests that religious dynamics may play a role in armed conflicts, but only under certain circumstances. The conditionalistic position suggests that it is pivotal for research to identify these conditions in order to understand when and where religious aspects affect the onset, development and termination of armed conflicts. This study represents an effort to start to outline these conditions, although it is merely a starting point in this important research process.

A significant distinction that the study suggests in this regard is the difference between religions as part of conflicting identities and religious dimensions as part of the incompatibility. This distinction is one effort to identify conditions under which religion plays a role in the dynamics of armed conflicts. A growing literature on religion and conflict has started to explore the relationship between religious dimensions and the duration and termination of armed conflicts.

This study examines the claims and identities of civil war combatants and examines their effects on negotiated settlements. The study argues that if the demands of the belligerents are explicitly anchored in a religious tradition, they will come to perceive the conflicting issues as indivisible, and it is less likely that the conflict will be settled through negotiations. Utilising unique data on the religious demands and identities of primary parties, the study examines all intrastate conflict-dyads in the Uppsala Conflict Data Project, from 1989 to 2003.

The study finds that if governments or rebel groups have made explicit religious claims, such conflicts are significantly less likely than other conflict dyads to be terminated through negotiated settlement. By contrast, whether the primary parties simply come from different religious traditions does not affect the chances for negotiated settlement. Hence, religion can be negatively related to the chance for settlement, under the condition that religious demands are stated in relation to the central incompatible positions in conflicts. As this study shows, differences in religious identities do not help to explain why some conflicts end peacefully in contrast to others.

For the future, peace and conflict research needs to advance the process of identifying the conditions under which the religious dynamics of armed conflicts influence the onset, the escalation or the de-escalation of armed conflicts, and the chances for negotiation, settlement and durable peace.

Policy-makers and scholars alike must move the debate away from simplistic generalisations, and with improved analytical tools we will be in a better position to understand, and ultimately to prevent, armed conflicts.

Previous research

The relationship between religion and conflict has emerged as an increasingly important field of study over the past decade. A growing literature has discussed how religious factors play out in the outbreak, development and termination of armed conflicts. An important debate has evolved around the question whether we are witnessing a trend towards a “clash of civilisations” (i.e. Gurr, 1994; Ellingsen, 2000; Huntington, 2000; Russett et al., 2000; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Fox, 2004b).

Another part of quantitative research where religious dimensions have been examined is in the research on the conditions for the onset of civil war. Measurements of religious “fractionalisation” (Collier and Hoeffler, 2002; Fearon and Laitin, 2003) or religious “polarisation” (Reynal-Querol 2002) are now commonly included in quantitative research on civil wars.¹ Religious dimensions of *ethnic* conflicts, both nonviolent and armed, have also been under scrutiny (Gurr, 1994; Fox, 2004b).

The bulk of previous studies on religion and civil war termination have examined the identity aspect of religion. Religion is conceptualised as a distinct identity basis, under which groups of individuals can be subsumed, regardless of the depth and intensity of their beliefs. Leng and Regan (2003) suggest that difference in religious identities by the belligerents may distort communication and, therefore, serve as an obstacle for peaceful settlement of conflicts. Studying interstate conflicts, they report that difference in religious identities in conflicts fought between countries significantly decreases the likelihood of settlement. Focusing on civil wars, Walter (1997) finds that whether the identities of parties break down along religious lines affects neither the likelihood of settlement nor the duration of post-settlement peace.

Similarly, Tusicisny (2004) finds that there is no significant relationship between civilisational differences – defined using religion as the primary characteristics of civilisations – and the duration of armed conflicts. Other studies on religious identity have focused on the composition of different groups in a conflictual society. For instance, religious fractionalisation,

¹ ‘Fractionalisation’ is a measurement of the likelihood that the two randomly selected persons will belong to the same religious group.

which has been thought to increase the societal tension and enhance the ability to mobilise after religious lines, has been found to have no significant effect of the duration of conflict (i.e. Collier et al., 2004).

A few important studies have tried to go beyond the mere identity aspect of religion, by including measurements of whether religion played an active role in the conflict dynamics. Most notably, Toft (2007) identifies religious aspects of civil wars and distinguishes whether religion was *peripheral* and/or *central* in the conflicts. Religion was considered central in a civil war if the combatants were “fighting over whether the state or a region of the state would be ruled to a specific religious tradition”, whereas the role of religion was considered to be peripheral when the combatants identified with a specific religious tradition, “but the rule of a specific religious tradition could not be the object of contention” (Toft, 2006b:21).

As another example of an effort to include more than latent dimensions in the measurement of religion, Pearce (2005) examines the relevance of religion amongst the primary parties in conflicts. Fox (2004b) explores how salience of religious issues, religious discrimination and other factors affect the dynamics of ethnic conflicts. Studying *ethnic* civil wars, Bercovitch & DeRouen (2005:108) examine whether ethnic civil wars fought over religion are more opportune for mediation than wars of secession and autonomy.

Why should religious dynamics influence the development and termination of armed conflicts? This study suggests that conflicts with religious dynamics will be more difficult to settle, since they create a perception that the issues at stake cannot be divided. The idea that conflicts characterised by indivisibility – “where the adversaries perceive the disputed resource as a unit they cannot divide between them” (Gilady and Russett, 2002:401) – are difficult to solve peacefully is not new. However, there is little consensus on what types of issues parties in conflict will find it difficult to compromise over. Previous research has conceptualised indivisibility in terms of, for instance, ethnic identity (Kaufmann, 1996), territory (Toft, 2004), legitimisation of bargaining positions (Goddard, 2006), and sacred spaces (Hassner, 2003).²

Hassner (2003), in his analysis of conflicts over sacred spaces, has developed one of the most theoretically elaborated definitions of the concept of indivisibility, which I will use below. However, although Hassner’s definition is theoretically useful, his empirical application of sacred spaces is, I suggest, too narrow. I argue that a larger set of issues is indivisible: whenever the positions of the belligerents in internal conflicts are explicitly anchored in religious aspirations, the belligerents will perceive the contest-

2 On managing indivisibility problem in the case of Jerusalem, see Albin (1991).

ed issue as indivisible. I suggest below that two components of Hassner's threefold definition are particularly applicable to internal armed conflicts with religious dimensions.³ The example of the religious nationalism of the Buddhist movement in Sri Lanka will serve as an illustration of how religious dimensions in incompatibilities create perceptions of indivisibility – in this case of the nation-state – and thereby undermine prospects for peaceful solutions.

The first aspect of Hassner's definition of indivisibility – *integrity* – implies that “the issue cannot be parcelled out or subdivided without significantly diminishing its subjective value” (Hassner, 2003:12). In civil wars, the basic contested issue is the state, that is, the authority of either parts of the territory or the whole country (Wallenstein, 2002). When (at least) one side explicitly anchors its demands in religious convictions and beliefs, the subjective value of the contested territory or control of the government of the state is substantially increased. There is only one constitution in a state, which can either be secular or religious, but not both simultaneously.⁴ Juergensmeyer (1993:39) contends that any compromises between secular and religious nationalism “suggest that spiritual and political matters are separate, which most religious activists see as a capitulation to the secularist point of view”.⁵

Similarly, if the territory is subdivided, it loses much of the subjective value it has gained through religious attachment. In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist nationalists hold the position that the *whole* of Sri Lanka has a divine mission, given by the Buddha himself, to uphold and maintain the pure form of Buddhist teaching and practise (Harris, 2007:152). The incompatibility in the Sri Lankan conflict should be considered religious due to the fact that the government seeks to uphold an unified country in which Buddhism has “the foremost place” (Bartholomeusz, 2002:5; Frydenlund, 2005:9), which the *Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam* vigorously contests.⁶ The Buddhist nationalists are an influential and vocal voice in the Sinhalese political landscape and have fought to protect the unitary status

3 Indivisibility, according to Hassner, is about a social fact. Hence, the question is not whether an issue or good physically can be divided, but rather whether parties *perceive* the contested issue as a good that can be divided (Hassner, 2003:13).

4 Similarly, Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000:119) argue that religious conflicts are difficult to resolve since the parties involved tend to perceive compromises as impossible.

5 Religious nationalism refers to the attempt to “link religion and the nation-state” (Juergensmeyer, 1993:40).

6 It is interesting to note that in their only attempt to spell out a political solution to the conflict, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), in explicit contrast to the present constitution in Sri Lanka, stated that “no religion should be given a foremost place in the North East” (ISGA, LTTE's proposal for an Interim Self-Governing Authority, 2003: paragraph 5).

and political integrity of Sri Lanka and protested against any attempts aiming at increasing autonomy.

Another component of the indivisibility, *nonfungability*, refers to the condition that “the issue cannot be substituted for or exchanged for something of equal value” (Hassner, 2003:13). Once a conflict is framed in religious terms, the political audience cost for concessions is substantially increased, since backing down on religiously based positions would imply a break with commonly long-held beliefs, sentiments and worldviews.⁷ Religious conflicts can be intractable “due to the non-bargainable nature of the motivations behind them” (Fox, 2004a:58). As a result, there is no perceived substitute for the disputed state or the contested territory. In theory, the loss or concessions of one side in relation to one area can be compensated by resources from another area (Rubin et al., 1994).

For instance, downscaling territorial aspirations could be compensated with economic resources. Yet, these types of side-payments are not applicable to conflicts with religious dynamics. In Sri Lanka, the Buddhists nationalists do not agree to compensate concessions regarding the formation of the Sri Lankan state with other gains. For instance, although President Kumaratunga tried to give the Buddhists clergy an influential role in her suggested constitution amendment, they furiously contested it since it involved devolution of governmental powers (Bartholomeusz, 2002:6, 32).⁸

This reasoning leads to the expectation that, in general, internal armed conflicts where parties have explicit religious aspirations should be less likely to be settled through negotiations. Some statistical studies have examined the general applicability of the conjecture that religious factors of conflicts enhance their intractability, examining durability (Tusicsiny, 2004), effect on the civilian population (Toft, 2007), and intensity (Pearce, 2005). Yet, quantitative research has left the *settlement* of conflict issues unexplored. Although the severity of resolving religious issues has been asserted in individual case studies, we need studies on a larger set of cases to know the general patterns beyond the individual cases.

7 This is also illustrated by Lesh’s (1993: 130-131) analysis of the Sudanese civil war, where religious beliefs increased the political costs for making concessions at the negotiation table.

8 It could be argued that the issue at stake can be divided in conflicts with religious incompatibilities since the parties aspire to different things. Yet, religious nationalists take the formation, function and capacity of the nation-state as given, although they contest the ordering ideology underneath (Jurgensmeyer 1993:6). Hence, the third component of Hassner’s definition of indivisibility – that parties demand the same thing – is applicable also to conflicts with religious incompatibilities. For instance, although the rationale for the Buddhist nationalists in Sri Lanka is mythological, the objective is a precise geographical object: the Buddhist nationalists’ aspiration of control over the whole of Sri Lanka as conceptualised by the political geography of the colonial powers, precluding any materialisation of the LTTE’s goal of a *Tamil Eelam*, a Tamil homeland (Little, 1994:30).

Research design

Data

To test whether religious dynamics of armed conflicts make them less prone to settlement, a new data set on all intrastate armed conflicts during 1989 to 2003 has been constructed, using the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) as the point of departure (UCDP, 2007).⁹ An intrastate armed conflict is a conflict between a government and a nongovernmental party, where the use of armed forces between two parties results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. The unit of analysis is conflict-dyad. A dyad is a pair that consists of a government and – for intrastate conflicts – a rebel group. During the time period investigated, there were 217 conflict-dyads in 73 countries.

Previous research on religion and armed conflict has predominately used the country, or the conflict as the unit of analysis.¹⁰ Given that several armed conflicts have more than one rebel group, and that there is a variation within the same country or conflict in regard to whether the issues are framed in religious terms or not, it is more appropriate to use the conflict-dyad as a unit of analysis. A dyad is coded as either terminating in peace settlement, or no settlement (see Table 1). The category of “no settlement” captures conflicts that continue to drag on in the year 2004, that have ended in decisive victory for one of the sides, or that have terminated in other ways.¹¹

Other ways of termination are the creation of an alliance (implying a new dyad), or when one of the sides has been defeated by another party. The incompatibility is measured at the onset of the dyad and is therefore assumed to be constant throughout the conflict-dyad history.

Table 1. Distribution of type of conflict terminations

<i>Settlement</i>	<i>No Settlement</i>			
	Government victory	Rebel victory	Other	Ongoing
56	23	20	22	97

⁹ The conflict data originate from the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme (UCDP), but the religious dimensions are coded as part of this project. The definitions below originate from, or build on, the UCDP database.

¹⁰ One exception is Fox (1997), who uses the ethnic group as the level of analysis.

¹¹ Table 1 shows a distribution of cases over different types of civil war terminations.

Negotiated settlement

For a conflict-dyad to end through a negotiated settlement, three criteria have to be met. A negotiated settlement should (1) address the problem of the incompatibility, by settling all or part of it by regulating the incompatibility; (2) be signed by the parties in a conflict-dyad; or (3) decrease the battle-related deaths to below the threshold of 25 in at least one year. Hence, it is the combination of the regulation of incompatibility and a change in conflict behaviour (end to fighting), which is of interest in this study. Therefore, if there are several peace agreements signed in the conflict-dyad, only the peace agreement that is able to put an end to the fighting for at least a one year period is coded as negotiated settlement.¹²

Religious incompatibility

The study examines the existence of religious components in the incompatibility (*Religious incompatibility*). An “incompatibility” is the conflict issue that the belligerents themselves have expressed, indicating the aspirations and motivation of why they fight. Hence, incompatibilities are grounded in the stated positions of the primary parties.¹³ The study examines whether the belligerents had explicit aspirations to create a state, or a region within the state, governed by religious laws and legislation, or whether one specific religious tradition should be given a special role. For instance, if a rebel group fights for the application of Sharia law within a certain territory, then that incompatibility will be coded as religious.

Moreover, if a rebel group demands secular governance over a territory where the government-side has given a specific religious tradition a role in the government, then this incompatibility is also coded as religious. Hence, if at least one side in the conflict-dyad, the rebel group or the government, has made demands that are explicitly referring to religion, this variable takes a value of one (1), otherwise zero (0).¹⁴

¹² The source is UCDP, as of April 2005. www.pcr.uu.se/database

¹³ It should be underlined that *incompatibility* is not identical to *causes* of conflicts. Even conflicts with a religious dimension in the incompatibility might be caused by, for example, social-economic factors. For instance, Gopin (2000:14) points out that “even if the roots of the conflict are economic disenfranchisement, the revolt against the status quo may in fact express itself in religious terms”.

¹⁴ The data for the coding is from the comments on incompatibility in the UCDP (2007) and are complemented with additional sources on the specific cases. In line with Walter’s (2002) coding of indivisibility (which she codes as territorial claims), the coding of incompatibility is “based on the states aims of the rebels at the beginning of the conflict rather than the stated goals of the government since it is the rebels who almost always initiate a war and are therefore likely to define its parameter” (p. 60).

Religious dissimilarity

The study has coded whether the primary parties belong to different religious traditions, rather than sharing religious tradition (*Religious dissimilarity*). “Belong” implies that it is the religious tradition of the *majority* of the state that determines the identity of the government and the majority of the group that the rebel represents, which is used to determine the religious identity of that side.¹⁵ “Religious tradition” means any of the world religions (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism) or its major subgroups (Sunni or Shia Islam, Protestant, Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christianity).

Note that this variable does not aim to capture the degree of religious commitment. Rather, the variable measures whether the conflicting parties share or have different religious belongings. The concept of tradition is important in this regard, for these constituencies need not be actual believers in the religious traditions to which they belong. For example, being a Protestant in Northern Ireland, or a Serb in Bosnia-Herzegovina, does not necessarily imply religious devotion but may nevertheless serve as a collective “identity marker”.

These religious identities can be politically, but not necessarily religiously, mobilised. This variable records the religious tradition of the contestants in the conflict-dyad, and takes the value of one if the two sides belong to different religious traditions. Data are taken from the CIA *World Factbook*, and complemented with additional sources on the specific cases.

Civil war termination factors

To control for other ways to characterise indivisibility and whether religious conflicts are different from other types of identity-based conflicts, two control variables are included. One measure (*Territory*) takes the value of 1 if the demands of the combatants refer to the formation of the state.¹⁶ Incompatibility concerning territory relates to the status of a specified territory, such as secession or autonomy.¹⁷ A second measurement (*Ethnic*) takes the value of 1 if identities of the parties break down after ethnic lines.¹⁸ This variable

¹⁵ There are two exceptions for using the majority for determining the religious tradition, Iraq and Lebanon, since in these cases, there were religious majorities fighting against a religious minority (Shia versus Sunni Islam and Islam versus Christian). These amendments are motivated since what we try to capture is cases where different religious follow the conflict lines.

¹⁶ The reference category is governmental incompatibilities. Incompatibility concerning government is a conflict where the type of political system, the replacement of the central government or the change of its composition is at stake.

¹⁷ The data are taken from the UDCP as of April 2005. www.pcr.uu.se/database

¹⁸ The data come from a data set by Forsberg (2005), using a definition of ethnic conflicts similar to that of Fearon and Laitin (2003:79). Included in the data are internal armed conflicts listed in UDCP during the 1989 to 2004 time period.

is included in order to control for the possibility that it is the ethnic, rather than the religious, dimension of armed conflicts that impedes negotiated solutions.

Several other explanatory factors for settlement of civil wars other than the type of conflict have been identified in previous quantitative civil war termination literature. The most prominent candidates for explaining the probability that civil war combatants will reach settlement are conflict duration (Mason and Fett, 1996), military intervention on either the rebel or the government side (Regan, 2002), third-party security guarantees (Walter, 2002), mediation (Regan and Aydin, 2006), and the size of the government army (DeRouen and Sobek, 2004). In addition, conflict intensity, income, and democracy are included as control variables.

The study measures the conflict duration in years (*Duration*) from the onset of the conflict until the conflict is coded as either terminated or unresolved at the year of 2004. The start of the dyad is the first year when the conflict behaviour resulted in a minimum 25 battle-related deaths per year. Where data on this date was missing, then the date was coded (1) when the first battle-related deaths in the dyad occurred, (2) from the year of first use of armed force (dyad), or 3) from the year of first stated goal of incompatibility (dyad).

Military intervention is measured by examining whether there have been outside military interventions (that is, whether the internal conflict has been internationalised) on either the government or the rebel side. Data on secondary warring parties from UCDP is used. A country could be a secondary warring party on the government side (*Government-sided intervention*), or a secondary warring party on the rebel side (*Rebel-sided intervention*).¹⁹ Third-party guarantees are coded using data from Cunningham (2005), who has updated and recoded the original coding by Walter (2002) on the dyadic structure.²⁰ Diplomatic intervention is measured by examining whether there has been external diplomatic third-party involvement (*Mediation*) in the conflict-dyad. This data is taken from Svensson (2007), originating from UCDP. The size of government army (*Army*) is also taken from the World Bank and is measured by taking the number of government troops in thousands.

As for the other control variables, intensity of conflict is measured by coding the highest level of intensity in the conflict-dyad. This variable (*War*)

19 Note that this definition is somewhat more narrow than the one employed by Regan (2002). In line with Cunningham (2005), own troops are used as criterion for defining intervention, excluding lower types of intervention such as sending military equipment.

20 Cunningham has generously let me employ his data.

takes a value of 1 if battle-related deaths in the conflict-dyad have surpassed the threshold of one thousand in at least one year. Economic incentives are controlled for by measuring the income level of the conflict country (*Income*) Data on GDP per capita are taken from the World Bank. The degree of democracy (*Democracy*) is measured by taking the combined polity scores from the Polity IV data set (Marshall and Jaggers, 2002).

Findings

I have suggested that religious claims create indivisibility problems and that civil wars where parties have made religious claims will therefore be more difficult to settle through negotiations. In support of this argument, the study finds that conflict-dyads where the rebel group or the government has explicit demands referring to religion are significantly less likely to be ended through negotiated settlements than are conflict-dyads where neither the rebel group nor the government has any religious dimensions in their demands.

Religious dissimilarities, territorial incompatibilities, or ethnic cleavages do not tend to systematically affect the chances for peaceful settlement of civil wars. Utilizing a more fine-grained unit of analysis than in most of previous civil war termination literature, this study also finds that third-party involvement through mediation and guarantees are important explanatory factors for negotiated settlement in internal armed conflicts. I will now elaborate on these findings in greater detail.

Table 2. Religious incompatibilities & religious dissimilarity

<i>Different religious traditions?</i>	<i>Religious dimension in incompatibility?</i>		Total
	0	1	
0	125	24	149
1	43	25	68
Total	168	49	217

In Table 2, the combinations between conflict-dyads with religious components in their incompatibilities and conflict-dyads with primary parties from different religious traditions are shown. The total number of observa-

tions is 217 conflict-dyads. Conflicts with religious incompatibilities are a minority of the total number of conflicts, accounting for only 48 conflict-dyads. Of the 217 conflict-dyads, 169 (78 percent) are between parties that belong to the same religious tradition. Hence, similar to earlier studies on ethnic conflicts (Fox, 2004b:68), this distribution indicates that the majority of conflicts are intra-religious.

Overall, religious identities and religious incompatibilities account for a minority of the armed conflicts in the world.²¹ Conflicts with religious incompatibilities are far less common than conflicts with participants belonging to different religious traditions. Only 48 conflict-dyads, or 22 percent of the total number of armed conflicts, have a religious dimension in their incompatibility.

If the two dimensions of religion – identity and incompatibility – are combined, we get four different kinds of conflicts. First, we have the most common category. These are conflicts – for example, Burundi, Colombia and El Salvador – in which religion played no part in either separating the identities of the belligerents or in the claims of the fighting parties. Parties in these dyads are fighting for governmental control, regime change, autonomy or independence, without resorting to religious claims relating to the issue at stake. They constitute a majority (58 percent) of the armed conflicts that have been active in 1989 to 2003.

Second, there are conflicts in which the parties are separated by a difference in religious identities, but neither the government nor the rebel group has made explicit religious demands regarding the basic contested resource. The conflict in Northern Ireland between the British government and the Irish Republican Army is a well-known example of this type of conflict. Although the fault lines in the conflict are between different religious traditions, it is commonly argued that these types of conflicts should not be classified as religious. They constitute 20 percent of the armed conflicts in the world.

Third, there are armed conflicts between belligerents that belong to the same religious tradition, but in which there are religious dimensions in the incompatibility. Examples of such conflicts are Algeria, Egypt and Indonesia. These conflicts take place between belligerents that belong to the same religious tradition, although they may not necessarily have the same interpretation of the religious tradition. One of the actors, the Algerian government, for example, is explicitly secular, while the rebel

21 Ellingsen (2001) finds that about two-thirds of all internal conflicts in the time period 1946 to 1999 have been cultural conflicts and only one-third have been noncultural. However, that study uses a broader definition of cultural conflict compared to my definition of religious conflicts.

Table 3. Probit estimates on negotiated settlement

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Religious incompatibility	-0.778** (0.219)	0.621* (0.259)	-0.681* (0.302)	-0.820** (0.221)
Religious dissimilarity	0.093 (0.220)	0.131 (0.270)		-0.267 (0.437)
Territory		-0.116 (0.266)	-0.053 (0.231)	-0.378 (0.252)
Ethnic		0.285 (0.305)		
Religious incompatibility x territory			-0.155 (0.471)	
Religious dissimilarity x territory				0.735 (0.524)
Duration		-0.017 (0.012)		
Army		-1.87e-07 (3.79e-07)		
Government-sided intervention		0.192 (0.393)		
Rebel-sided intervention		-0.201 (0.373)		
War		-0.076 (0.289)		
Mediation		1.014** (0.189)		
Income		7.03e-06 (0.0000291)		
Democracy		0.005 (0.022)		
Third-party guarantees		1.122** (0.283)		
Constant	-0.539** (0.148)	-1.337** (0.305)	-0.494** (0.164)	-0.447** (0.161)
Observations	217	209	217	217

Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. Errors are clustered on country-level.

* significant at 5 percent; ** significant at 1 percent

group, Groupe Islamique Armé is an outspoken Islamic group. Examples of dimensions in the incompatibility are demands for a religious state, or religious laws in state, or demands for a secular state (if the state is, or has the ambition to become, religious). 24 conflict-dyads, or 11 percent, fit into this category.

Fourth, there are conflicts where the parties are separated by their religious belongings, and in which there is a religious dimension in the incompatibility. Sri Lanka, Sudan and India's Kashmir are examples of these conflicts. This does not necessarily imply that *both* sides have religious claims. For instance, in Sri Lanka, the rebel group (LTTE) is a nationalistic, and not a religiously motivated, group. It demands a secular state, in opposition to the Sri Lankan constitution, which gives Buddhism a "foremost place" (Little, 1994). This category stands for 11 percent of the armed conflicts.

We now turn to the question of whether religious identities or religious incompatibilities have an effect on the probability that the parties will reach a negotiated settlement of their violent dispute.²² In Table 3, negotiated settlement is the dependent variable. Since dyads within the same country are not necessarily independent of each other, the standard errors are clustered on the country level. As a criterion for statistical significance, a *p*-value of 0.05 is used.

The independent variable *Religious incompatibility* has a negative and significant effect on the likelihood of the parties reaching a peace settlement. The probability of observing a negotiated settlement, holding every other explanatory variable at its mean, if a conflict-dyad has a religious incompatibility was only 10 percent; if there is no religious incompatibility in the dyad, the probability was 25 percent.²³ There is a total of 56 conflict-dyads coded as terminated through a negotiated settlement. Of these, only five were in conflicts with religious incompatibilities.

Hence, if there is a religious component in the incompatibility, the parties are less likely to sign a negotiated settlement of their dispute. That finding should be seen in light of previous research on religion and armed conflict. This is in somewhat contrast to the study by Bercovitch and DeRouen (2005), which found that ethnic conflicts fought over religion are more

22 Whereas the dependent variable is *Negotiated settlement*, there are several possible alternative forms of termination captured in the *No settlement*. In the data, there are 23 cases of victory for the government. Only eight are coded as religious dissimilarity conflicts, and three of them are coded as conflicts with religious incompatibility. There are also 20 conflict-dyads that were terminated in rebel victory. Of these 20 dyads, none is a religious dissimilarity conflict, and only three are coded as conflicts with religious incompatibility.

23 Predicted probabilities are generated using *CLARIFY* (King, Tomz, and Wittenberg, 2000). Results are available from the author upon request.

opportune for mediation compared to wars of secession and autonomy. Their finding may not be generalisable to the wider universe of internal armed conflicts.²⁴

Moreover, the variable *Different Religious Identities* has a positive effect, which is an indication that different religious identities give the parties an *increased* chance of reaching a settlement. The standard error of this coefficient is large, however, so we cannot have reasonable confidence in this estimate. The finding that religious dissimilarity does not decrease the chance for settlement stands in contrast to previous findings regarding international conflicts. Hence, whereas Leng and Regan (2003) find that difference in religious identities significantly decreases the likelihood of settlement, this seems not to be the case for internal conflicts.

It is also interesting to note that neither ethnic cleavages nor nonreligious territorial conflicts are more or less likely to be terminated through negotiated settlement.²⁵ Their effects of these two variables are statistically insignificant. Moreover, third-party involvement is crucial for settlement to be reached. The two control variables that measure third-party involvement, mediation, and third-party security guarantees, are both positive and significant. On the contrary, explanatory factors such as the strength of the government army, the duration and intensity of conflict, and military intervention on either the rebel or the government side failed to have a significant effect, indicating that explanatory factors identified by country-level studies may be less applicable when dyadic data is used.

Still, even if the control variables are included in the empirical analysis, the negative effect of religious incompatibilities is significant. Hence, we can be reasonably certain to conclude that conflicts with religious dimensions are substantially less likely to be terminated through negotiated settlements.²⁶

It could be argued that the effect of religion dissimilarity is contingent

²⁴ Comparing our results, it should also be pointed out that the coding of religious incompatibilities differs between our studies. Bercovitch and DeRouen's (2005) data codes issues as either religious or secession/autonomy. However, there are certainly conflicts (Mindanao in Philippines, for instance) that have both secessionist and religious dimensions in their incompatibility. Their way of coding religious aspects of armed conflicts is therefore unfortunate if we seek an understanding of how religion may impact the probabilities for conflict resolution. In this study, a conflict can be coded as having a religious dimension regardless of whether it is fought over territory.

²⁵ Most conflicts (62 of 67) where the identities of the parties break down after religious lines are also coded as ethnic. Yet, there are more ethnic conflicts (104 of 166) that were ethnic but where parties belong to the same religious tradition.

²⁶ The dependent variable is *Negotiated settlement*, measuring not only that the belligerents have been able to reach an agreement, but also an agreement that has terminated the conflict, in the sense of affecting the conflict behaviour. The empirical pattern reported in the first regression still holds if we only focus on agreement (and not add the termination of armed conflict criteria): religious dissimilarity has a positive, but nonsignificant effect on the likelihood of peace agreements, whereas peace agreements are significantly less likely in conflicts with religious incompatibilities.

on whether the issue at stake is separation. Fox (2004b) finds that once dissimilar religious identities are combined with the conflict issue of separatism, it significantly increases the likelihood of conflict. To control for this possibility, an interaction variable between territorial claims and religious dissimilarity is included in model 4.²⁷ Yet, conflicts where the identities of the parties break down along religious lines and are fought over territory are not less likely to be settled. Hence, although religious-territorial disputes might be particularly inclined to escalate into violence, they are not more difficult to settle.

Discussion

The starting point of this study is the fact that we do not know whether conflicts involving religion are inherently more intractable than other type of conflicts. This study tries to fill this lacuna in our knowledge by examining the relationship between religious dimensions of civil wars and the probability for negotiated settlement. By differentiating between two different dimensions of religion in armed conflict, this study provides potential answers to that question. If we focus on religious dissimilarity – conflicts in which belligerents follow religious lines – we can conclude that religious conflicts are not more intractable than others. Conflicting religious identities, which have preoccupied much of previous research, did not seem to have any effect on the likelihood that the parties will reach a negotiated settlement.

On the other hand, if we examine the incompatibilities of conflicts, we get a quite different answer. Conflict-dyads where at least one side has an explicit religious claim are significantly less likely to end through negotiated settlements, compared to conflicts without such religious dimensions. This empirical pattern holds even after controlling for the mainstream explanatory factors suggested by previous research on civil war termination.

An emerging debate suggests that issue indivisibility is a fruitful explanation for political violence. However, there is little consensus on what types of issues parties in conflict will find it difficult to compromise over. This paper suggests that we need to seek an alternative route to characterise indivisibility problems in armed conflicts. It is, I suggest, the explicit religious demands concerning the state that create problems of indivisibility. When examining internal armed conflicts, three competing ways of conceptualising conflicts with indivisibility problems would be to focus

²⁷ The UCDP does not differentiate between separatism and other forms of territorial demands, such as demands for increased autonomy for a particular region.

on territorial conflicts (Toft, 2004), conflicts fought along ethnic lines (Kaufmann, 1996), or religious dissimilarities (Huntington, 1996).²⁸

Yet this study finds that it is conflicts with religious, rather than territorial, issues where agreements are least likely. Toft (2004) argues that civil wars with territorial dimensions will tend to take an indivisible character, which will make peaceful accommodation less likely, due to the reputation costs for the government and the close connection between identity and territory for the rebels. However, territorial conflicts (as seen in model 3 in Table 3) are not significantly less likely to be settled through negotiations.²⁹

Similarly, the empirical analysis here shows that religious incompatibilities, rather than ethnic differences, seem to be a factor that makes internal armed conflicts more difficult to resolve. Kaufmann (1996) suggests that ethnic conflicts are particularly difficult to settle, since they are rooted in indivisible identities. Since conflicting identities in ethnic wars are both more rigid and transparent than in ideological conflicts, the ability to reach peace agreements and power-sharing arrangements is dim. However, the fact that the identities of the belligerents break down after ethnic lines does not decrease the likelihood of settlement.³⁰

Moreover, I find no support for the claim that conflicts with parties from different religious traditions are more indivisible and thereby less likely to be resolved than other types of conflicts. Huntington (1993:298) predicts that the immutable and exclusive character of civilisational differences will make them less amenable to compromise, and therefore conflicts with participants from different civilisations – “fault-line wars” – would not be settled by “comprehensive peace treaties that resolve central political issues” (Huntington, 1993:291). Yet the data presented here poses a considerable challenge to this proposition. Examining precisely the time period which Huntington made predictions about – the post-cold war period – the study shows that conflicts with participants from different religious traditions (civilisations) are not less likely to be peacefully settled through negotiations.³¹

28 Hassner (2006-2007) develops an argument for the intractability of territorial conflicts, suggesting that the degree of perceived intractability increase over time.

29 This is by no means a comprehensive test of Toft’s (2004) explanatory model, since a test of the implications of the theory for conflict termination would also need to take the settlement patterns into account.

30 This is in line with what previous research has found (e.g. Walter, 2002:78).

31 It is also interesting to note in this context the empirical pattern for victory in religious dissimilarity conflicts. Huntington (1993) predicted that dissimilarity conflicts could basically only end in complete victory for one side. However, only eight out of sixty-eight dissimilarity conflicts ended in government victory. None ended in rebel victory.

There could be alternative explanations to indivisibility for why religious conflicts are more intractable than others. Toft (2006a) suggests that longer time horizons among people of faith make it possible for religious conflicts to absorb more costs and therefore continue without peaceful solutions. If the actors appreciate the value of time differently, and at least one side discounts the present, this can influence the chances for peace. In another article, Toft (2007) develops a model of religious outbidding, explaining why religion becomes central in some conflicts but not in others. Political elites under threat and in need of external support can reframe the issue of contention in religious terms. Once a religion becomes central, nonviolent termination will also be less likely to occur (Toft, 2007).

The empirical analysis here cannot discriminate between the two causal mechanisms or the indivisibility argument developed in this article, since all three lead to the same conclusion: conflicts with religious components are less likely to be settled through rational bargaining. A natural continuation for future research is therefore to clearly develop how indivisibility, asymmetrical time horizons, and religious outbidding relate to each other and try to tease out different observable implications that could be tested to see which one of these explanations that have most explanatory power.

One could argue that groups with religious claims are more likely to become armed in the first place and that the focus of this study on conflicts where violence has erupted therefore is biased in favour of finding a negative relationship between religious incompatibility and negotiated settlement. Addressing this selection effect problem, we would need to broaden the empirical analysis to instances of conflicts where there is no violence. However, data on nonviolent disputes in internal armed conflicts do not presently exist, and to collect original data on these types of conflicts is beyond the scope of this project.

Moreover, the data on ethnic groups, which capture only one part of the types of conflicts included in this study, do not seem to support this contention. For instance, examining the likelihood of ethnic armed conflicts Fox (2004b:93), finds that groups expressing religious demands are not statistically significantly more likely to engage in higher levels of rebellion than groups that do not. Yet future research should still try to find ways to address this issue.³²

32 Another methodological problem that should be explored in greater detail by future research is the problem of endogeneity. It might be the case that rebels or governments use demands strategically, taking into account that the other side might be reluctant to agree to such religious demands.

Conclusions

This study yields four implications, which can also show directions for future research priorities. First, religious aspects of armed conflicts are pivotal if we want to be better able to gauge the conditions for peace. This may provide an impetus for further systematic research using cross-national data for testing conjectures and theoretical arguments about how religion plays out in the dynamics of armed conflicts. However, the different dimensions of religion in armed conflicts should be kept analytically separate.

This study has shown that we cannot correctly understand how religious dimensions affect armed conflicts if we do not theoretically distinguish between religion as part of group identity and religion as part of the incompatibility. The empirical work here illustrates that these two dimensions of religion play out very differently in effecting the propensity of the parties to settle conflict.

A second – possibly controversial – implication of this study is that multi-faith dialogue may not be the most important priority if we want to seek ways to reduce armed conflicts. Much of the policy programmes dealing with religion and conflict have been building on the implicit assumption that religious cleavages enhance intractability of conflicts and that religious dissimilarity therefore constitutes a severe obstacle for peaceful solutions. Yet, this assumption is not empirically supported. Conflicts with parties belonging to different religious traditions are not more difficult to settle than conflicts where parties belong to the same religious tradition. More important, measures to manage conflicts with religious incompatibilities should be developed by the international community.

A third implication of this study is that measures aiming to prevent conflict actors from expanding their demands into the religious realm should be emphasised and developed.³³ Since dyads involving parties that make religious demands are more intractable than others, it is pivotal to prevent such escalation.

The conflict in Israel-Palestine may serve as an illustration of this dynamic. In the beginning of the conflict, the Palestinian insurgency mobilised according to nationalistic and Pan-Arabic identities. After the conflict escalated, new groups mobilizing by religious claims emerged and gained strength. As the “conflict increasingly [is] being seen as an ethno-religious struggle instead of a nationalist conflict”, the intractability of the conflict increased (Telhami, 2005:361).

³³ In this article, escalation is empirically captured when a new dyad is formed within a conflict, for instance, when a new rebel group emerges.

One of the most important priorities should be to find nonmilitary ways to handle religious militancy and extremism. As shown for instance in the cases of Central Asia, reacting to militant Islam through increased militarism and political repression has only served to increase the popularity of these movements (Rashid, 2002).

A fourth and final implication of this study is the need to scrutinise the exceptions to the general trend reported here. Although religious dimensions in the incompatibility have a negative effect on the likelihood of negotiated settlement, exceptions exist. As always in social sciences, we are dealing with probabilities, rather than deterministic social laws. Belligerents in some few cases of conflicts with religious dimension in their incompatibility – for instance, in the Philippines, Sudan and Tajikistan – have been able to settle their violent disputes through a negotiated settlement. Future empirical research should investigate these exceptions in order to explore the mechanisms for regulating religious incompatibilities.

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