

Religion and War in the Past and Future

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MICHAEL HOROWITZ, DEC 22 2008

The recent bombings in Mumbai have focused the attention of the world on the problem of extremism in South Asia. While the picture is far from complete, early information suggest that the bombers came from Muslim religious extremist groups based, at least in part, in Pakistan. Along with other events around the globe, it appears the specter of religiously-motivated violence is not just back on the global agenda, but will be part of international affairs for years to come. Given what appears to be a jump in religiously-motivated violence over the last several years, what can we learn from past instances of religiously-motivated warfare to help us understand the present and future? While they are separated by hundreds of years and belong to very distinct religious traditions, lessons drawn from history, including the Catholic Crusading movement, the English Puritans, and other groups, reveal some potentially very interesting ideas for scholars interested in how religious beliefs may influence warfare. This question is of particular importance given the ongoing conflicts involving Salafi Jihadi movements. Though they are decentralized and far from cohesive, the term Salafi Jihadi is generally used to refer to a set of radical Islamic groups that includes Al Qaeda.

Evidence from around the globe suggests the importance of religious motivations as one of many important drivers of internal and international conflict. While it was common during the Cold War to view religion as no longer truly “on the agenda” as a key variable in international politics, such a view is clearly outdated. As the now-familiar story goes, the end of the Cold War released a variety of pressure valves around the world that, in combination with other factors, led to resurgence in the explicit influence of religion on politics. Alternatively, as Daniel Philpott has argued, it is possible that religion was always there but scholars just chose not to notice for a few generations. Regardless, at present religion seems to play an important role in the politics of many countries and religious extremism has taken root in many locales. Governance gaps in parts of the Islamic world have been filled by Islamic groups delivering social services. Some of these groups, with extreme interpretations of Islam, also then advocate and utilize violence in an attempt to achieve their goals. The issue is not just Islamic. Many groups with religious connections have risen to power in many countries across the globe. However, the most important manifestation of religion in international politics, at present, has to do with the behavior of Salafi Jihadis and groups like Al Qaeda.

What can we learn from the histories of groups like the Catholic Crusaders and English Puritans that might help in understanding the trajectory of the Salafi Jihadis today? There are several potential areas of comparison, ranging from the social context in which groups exist and the content of their religious beliefs, to the way actors responded to religiously-motivated warfare and the military requirements for violent activities. It is important to recognize that there are a great many differences between these groups and the use of historical analogies is fraught with risk. No two groups or contexts are ever the same. For example, the Salafi Jihadi movement is incredibly diffused compared to the Crusading movement and cannot be regarded as a monolith in any way. However, caveats, it is important to learn what we can from history.

First, the Crusading period lasted from the late 11th century until the mid-16th century, a period of several hundred years. The longevity of the Crusades suggests that, while we hope the Salafi Jihadi movement faces leadership turmoil and fades in the next generation, it is unrealistic to expect that that will necessarily be the case. The Crusades only ended in the face of competing ideas – the nation-state and the religious challenge presented by

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Protestantism. However, prior to the rise of these competing ideas, the Crusades persisted for several hundred years despite ample evidence, in the form of extremely high costs and frequent defeats, that Crusading was not necessarily the most efficient use of resources. The persistence of the Crusading institution – recruiting enough soldiers in each generation to continue – despite strong material incentives against Crusading suggests the importance of religious motivations. Both the Salafi Jihadis of today and the Crusaders of the past revolve around transnational religious ideas and followers from several different countries.

However, globalization and the Information Age have vastly increased the ability of smaller numbers of people to generate destruction. In the medieval period, the Crusaders had to amass armies to engage in direct battles for territory, requiring a high degree of societal mobilization. The use of terrorism requires fewer group members and costs less, requiring a lower level of societal mobilization. While Salafi Jihadis do appear to have territory goals in mind, they seem resigned to achieving those goals through more indirect means than direct conquest with an army. This ironically makes direct defeat harder, especially given the lower levels of societal support required for them to survive. The Crusades show that it is the rise of competing ideas that can most effectively counter religiously-motivated warfare. However, the differing circumstances between past and present may make the continuation of violent campaigns easier for the Salafi Jihadis.

Second, religiously-motivated violence seems most risky, from an escalation perspective, when participants believe there are non-material individual benefits to participation. Religion shares with other motivators for behavior, like nationalism, ethnicity, or language, the idea of participation by the individual to help the group survive. Despite great personal risk, individuals sometimes participate in actions designed to help the group as a whole survive and succeed. However, religion adds the additional possibility of an *individual* benefit to participation in particular action (with participation in a violent campaign as just one example). For example, the Crusaders received remission of their sins through the granting of a spiritual indulgence by the Pope. For Salafi Jihadi, participation in violent Jihad demonstrates their fidelity to Islam, meaning they will receive a faster journey to heaven and spiritual benefits when the time comes. This sort of spiritual “benefit” to participation is most coherent for those religious traditions in which salvation requires both faith and acts.

Finally, like English Puritans with regards to Protestant Christianity, Salafi Jihadis follow an especially intense version of Islam. Their beliefs, in part, revolve around their alienation from the material world and, like the Puritans, Salafi Jihadis feel an obligation to transform the material world towards a more Godly system. There are a number of potentially interesting similarities in the positionality of the English Puritans and the Salafi Jihadis that are worth exploring in future research. The comparison, though imperfect like all comparisons, also raises questions about war termination strategies. The English Puritans, though they initially achieved their goals in the English Civil War, burned out within a few generations. What will happen to Salafi Jihadi movements, and the core of Al Qaeda, as leadership transition questions arise?

These historical lessons do not point to any simple answer to the question of how religion is likely to influence warfare in the future, but they do suggest that Salafi Jihadi movements are unlikely to simply cease and desist. In general, especially as globalization places pressures on local communities while the Information Age enables instant communication between similarly-minded people spread throughout the globe, there is no reason to expect the recent “resurgence” of religion to end.

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