

Kristin Fabbe

***Religion and Political Legitimacy: Religions as Unitary Actors?***

If one thing is clear from this week's readings, it is that the relationship between political legitimacy and religion not only varies widely across countries, it is also often ambivalent. Yet, accepting that religion can be a powerful source of legitimacy for those wishing to govern—as well as potential source of opposition—it is undoubtedly important to at least recognize the types of religious variables that may influence political outcomes. Is it a religious actor's legal status relative to the state, its strategic calculations, its ideological disposition or pressure from outside religious competitors—or some combination of the above—that determine whether a religious group bolsters or undercuts a given regime?

Although all these factors matter to varying degrees depending on the circumstances, a lack of clarity over the exact nature of the religious “unit of analysis” clouds the explanatory power of these potentially important variables. Without a solid and systematic understanding of religious actor's goals, ambitions and preferences, making a case for why religious groups support one or another political faction is nearly impossible. Yet being privy to such information requires precise knowledge of the boundaries between, as well as the schisms within, the religious actors of interests. Religions are not always unitary actors. The extent to which there are internal divisions or solidarity within a given religious group is a crucial issue that is given little consideration by Philpott, Gill and Taylor.

The lack of clarity in Philpott's analysis results in part from the fact that he is simply stretching himself too thin in trying to explain the posture of religion towards democracy and violence across regions, religions and regime types. The over-ambitious nature of his undertaking causes him to waver between treating religions as unitary actors and looking at internal divisions within religious groups. When describing whether or not certain religious groups support democratization, religions are unitary actors (the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, the Orthodox Church, Islam) defined by country. Yet in his explanation of terrorism, the unitary actor assumption breaks down. He acknowledges that

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few people actually become terrorists or support terrorism; yet he contends that religious theology is a strong determinant terrorist activity. It is not theology itself, but interpretations and manipulations of theology by small fringe groups within larger religious bodies that bolster terrorist objectives. The question is therefore, why certain Muslims—or Catholics for that matter—go radical and violent. How and why do the goals, ambitions and preferences of radical religious militants differ from everyday followers? Furthermore, what goals, ambitions and preferences do religious and non-religious terrorist groups have in common? Theology may be a justification used by terrorist groups themselves, as well as a tempting *ex post facto* explanation, but I am simply not convinced that it is the chief motivation of terrorist activity. Philpott's contention “that religious communities are prone to violence when they hold a political theology that interprets their scriptures, traditions and divine commands so as to favor an integrationist state”(27) simply fails to answer the more essential question of which members within a religious group will pick up arms and which will support peaceful solutions.

Although the case studies in Taylor's article on “Prophet Sharing” go further in acknowledging just how important internal division can be, her lack of clarity with regard to this issue undermines the wider argument. In the Egyptian case, for example, the Islamic brotherhood, Islamic militants and the Cleric's of Al-Azhar all have different relationships with state and are often jockeying with one another for power and influence. Still, Taylor is not clear in telling us how and why these divisions arise and what exactly sustains them. The founder of the Muslim Brotherhood studied to be a cleric at Al-Azhar so why did these groups break ranks with one another? What is the difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and the militant Islamic actors that Taylor mentions? Are there really no clerics that are initially members of militant opposition factions? In short, what is the exact nature of the relationship between the clerics and the opposition and how does this matter? Taylor distinguishes the groups by saying that clerics seek only authority whereas the opposition seeks political power. Yet I doubt that these categories are really so fixed. The interesting—but underdeveloped—issue in Taylor's piece is the question of when members of a given religious community shift from seeking mere religious authority

to striving for political power.

Lastly, the issue of treating religious groups as unitary actors is somewhat less important to Gill's story, which emphasizes competition between Protestants and Catholics in various countries. Still the contrast with the above cases is illuminating. The question here is how Catholics managed to maintain a united front when challenged by both Protestants and the State. As Gill mentions, Catholics initially directed action "outward against the Protestants, frequently leading to violence" and that it was "not uncommon for evangelicals to be physically attacked by Catholic mobs or have their churches burned down"(415). Eventually, however, all Catholics somehow realized that violence could not stop Protestantism. Why did Catholic groups not split between those willing to use violence and those unwilling to do so, as occurred in Egypt? How did various Catholic churches across a number of countries come to settle on very similar, non-violent mechanisms for regaining their influence? A logical answer to the above question seems to be that something about the internal structure of Catholicism itself played a crucial role in causing those churches faced with competition to act in relatively uniform manner. The solidarity of the Catholic church was key.

To conclude, in all cases mentioned, solidarity within a religious organization, or the lack thereof, seems to be crucial. Failing to treat this issue systematically causes confusion. Interestingly, political scientists rarely treat more traditional political actors in such a slapdash and unsystematic fashion. The relationship between religion and politics may indeed be ambivalent as Philpott claims; but it is downright incompressible when religious actors remain ill-defined.