

# Blasphemy and Violence<sup>1</sup>

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Why did riots in response to the 2005 Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad occur in nine Muslim states but not in 43 other states in which Muslims form a majority of the population? I show that the location of the cartoon riots is best explained by combining insights from the study of politics with arguments from the sociology of religion. Protests were mobilized by radical Islamist movements alarmed by the moral threat posed by the blasphemous cartoons. In states characterized by political rights and civil liberties, regimes responded haphazardly to the demonstrations, leading to confrontations between security forces and angry rioters. This finding can be generalized beyond the Muslim world: We should expect reactive religious violence wherever fundamentalist movements are confronted by transgressive acts, committed by threatening opponents, in a political environment that permits protest but fails to protect the religious principles of the movement.

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In September 2005, a Danish newspaper, the *Jyllands-Posten*, published a series of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. One of the cartoons showed the Prophet donning a turban-like bomb, inscribed with the Islamic creed, with an ignited fuse. Another showed an anxious cartoonist sketching a portrait entitled “Mohammad” while nervously straining to hide his work from view. The cartoons unleashed a flurry of reactions in Denmark, including formal protests by ambassadors from Muslim countries, severing of diplomatic ties with Denmark by Syria, Libya, and Saudi Arabia, and judicial charges of blasphemy against the newspaper (Bilefsky 2006; Cowell 2006; Smith and Fisher 2006; Mueller and Oezcan 2007; Nelson 2007).

The cartoon controversy might have ended there had it not been for a delegation of Muslim clerics from Denmark who embarked on a campaign to circulate the cartoons throughout the Muslim world. In addition to the cartoons, their dossier contained information and images concerning the mistreatment of Muslims in Denmark, including offensive photographs unrelated to the cartoons. The response to these materials, as well as the re-publication of the cartoons in several European papers, proved violent. Angry mobs torched Danish embassies in Syria, Lebanon, and Iran and attacked the Norwegian and Austrian embassies in Damascus, EU offices in Gaza, and the Italian consulate in Banghazi, Libya. In

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TABLE 1. Cartoon Riots in Muslim-Majority States

<i>No riots</i>	<i>Riots</i>
Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brunei, Burkina Faso, Chad, Comoros, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kuwait, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leon, Somalia, Sudan, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, UAE, Uzbekistan, Yemen	Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestinian Authority, Syria

Nigeria, Pakistan, Libya, and Afghanistan, more than one hundred anti-Danish rioters died in riots and clashes with police (Fattah 2006; Fisher 2006; Gall and Smith 2006). When police in Denmark and Germany exposed death threats, assassination attempts, and terror plots related to the affair, it became clear that the Muhammad cartoons had ceased to be a laughing matter.

Denmark's "biggest international crisis since World War II," according to Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen, resulted in nearly two hundred fatalities and one thousand casualties across nine Muslim states (Olsen 2006; Ritter 2006). How did the publication of twelve cartoons in a local European paper lead to the most violent Muslim protests against the West since the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*? As far as Western leaders were concerned, the responsibility for the riots lay squarely on the shoulders of authoritarian regimes, accused of manipulating their populations for political purposes. At the same time, a spate of blasphemy-related violent incidents in the Muslim world seemed to suggest that the cartoon riots expressed genuine Muslim outrage.<sup>2</sup>

Complicating these contrasting accounts, the *political manipulation* explanation on the one hand and the *religious outrage* explanation on the other, was the unique geographic pattern assumed by the cartoon riots<sup>3</sup> (see Table 1). Violence was not confined to states ruled by authoritarian regimes; nor did riots occur primarily in countries dominated by radical Islamist movements. Peaceful protests took place in both types of states and did not correlate to obvious economic or social indicators. Thus, one way of shedding light on the causes of the cartoon riots is to ask: Why did riots in response to the Danish cartoons occur in nine states (Afghanistan, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories, and Syria) but not in 43 other states in which Muslims form a majority of the population?

I show that the locations of the cartoon riots are best explained by combining insights from the study of politics with arguments from the sociology of religion. Protests were mobilized by radical Islamist movements alarmed by the moral threat posed by the blasphemous cartoons. Authoritarian regimes were able to suppress or capitalize on these protests, resulting in subdued or orchestrated demonstrations. But in states characterized by political rights and civil liberties,

<sup>2</sup> Similar differences of opinion have characterized analyses of the response to Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, with interpreters divided over whether the motives for the backlash against Rushdie were best viewed as power driven or as faith based. For explanations of the Rushdie affair anchored in politics, see Sardar and Davies (1990) and Weatherby (1990). For rejections of the political account based on a religious logic, see Pipes (1990) and Siddiqui (1989).

<sup>3</sup> My investigation of riots in this paper is limited to Muslim-majority states only. I define riots as mob violence against persons or property resulting in damage or fatalities. This definition excludes acts of murder, terror, or assassination executed by individuals.

regimes responded haphazardly to the demonstrations, leading to confrontations between security forces and angry rioters.

In the first part of this paper, I introduce several bodies of literature, from political science, anthropology, and the study of comparative religion, which underpin conventional explanations for the cartoon riots. These research programs focus on violence as a by-product of either authoritarian rule or religious extremism. In part two of this paper, I introduce a *moral threat* argument, drawn from sociology, that offers an alternative account for the causes of the cartoon violence. This structuralist approach subsumes both the political structures that enable and constrain violence, on the one hand, and the religious symbols that drive violence, on the other, into a single framework. My *moral threat* argument links theories about pollution and social revulsion with findings regarding threat perception and the behavior of social movements under authoritarian rule.

I rely on these arguments to form three hypotheses in the third part of the paper: the *political manipulation* hypothesis, the *religious outrage* hypothesis, and the *moral threat* hypothesis. I then turn, in the fourth part of this paper, to test these hypotheses by exploring patterns across cases. I examine salient cases in detail to explicate the evolution of protests into riots, identify the actors instigating the riots, and explore the role of regimes in constraining or encouraging violence. The analysis confirms a weak correlation between political indicators and the presence or absence of riots, undermining the *political manipulation* hypothesis. I also show that the presence of Muslim communities characterized by strict interpretations of blasphemy is insufficient in accounting for instances of violence, thus challenging the *religious outrage* hypothesis. In most cases, the *moral threat* argument fares better than both these hypotheses: confrontations tended to ensue where powerful Islamist groups tried to attack Western symbols but were constrained from doing so by relatively liberal Muslim regimes.

I conclude this paper by evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the three hypotheses and by examining the implications of my argument for the study of religion and violence in general. Rather than adopt essentialist explanations that reduce religiously motivated violence to politics or religion, we should combine insights from political science and religious studies to shed light on the political conditions under which religion is most likely to result in conflict. Such a methodology should proceed from the religious microfoundations of a political phenomenon, constructing successive layers of explanation, each more removed from the religious and closer to the political, until it arrives at the outcome to be explained.

### Theoretical Background

Were the cartoon riots orchestrated by authoritarian Muslim regimes, were they an expression of grassroots outrage over blasphemy, or were they organized by radical social movements driven by a political-religious agenda? Four distinct research programs from political science, anthropology, and the comparative study of religion can shed light on these questions and help resolve the riddle regarding the geographic distribution of the cartoon riots.

#### *Authoritarianism and Violence*

As the death toll from violence mounted, Western observers of the Danish cartoon crisis converged on a parsimonious political explanation for the violence: Authoritarian regimes were orchestrating the protests in order to penalize the West and distract their own citizens from domestic discontent. Iran and Syria, argued Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, “have gone out of their way to inflame sentiments and use this to their own purposes. The world ought to call

them on it” (Sands and Sammon 2006; Sukhtian 2006). Sean McCormack, State Department spokesman, opined that “things like burning down embassies don’t happen by accident in Damascus” (Fronrunner 2006). Like Rice, Danish Premier Rasmussen suspected that “Syria and Iran have taken advantage of the situation because both countries are under international pressure” (Facts on File 2006). British Prime Minister Tony Blair seemed to believe that the Iranian government was using the cartoon crisis to divert attention away from scrutiny over its nuclear program, stating that “it is not a coincidence that the moment this row emerges over the cartoons, that Iranians leap straight into the middle of it” (United Press International 2006d).

These claims mesh well with the literature regarding the role of authoritarian regimes in fomenting violence. The lack of transparency that characterizes authoritarian regimes, the absence of constraints on repressing the population and the control that such regimes exert over the security apparatus of the state would facilitate the staging of riots such as those that occurred in response to the Danish cartoons. Moreover, the normative variant of the democratic peace argument suggests that, unlike democracies, which are driven by shared norms of persuasion and compromise to settle both domestic and international disputes peacefully, authoritarian regimes are less hesitant in employing violence to resolve conflicts (Doyle 1986; Stohl and Lopez 1986; Dixon 1993, 1994; Maoz and Russett 1993; Russett 1993; Mousseau 1998).

Authoritarian Muslim regimes may also have exploited the cartoons in order to create a “rally around the flag” effect. High-profile events, such as international conflicts, can be employed in order to cause a surge of patriotic instincts, increase national cohesion, mute criticism of the regime, and raise public approval of the leadership, national political institutions, and policies (Mueller 1973; Brody 1991; Parker 1995; Schultz 2001). These effects create incentives for regimes to engage in diversionary violence or “scapegoating,” most commonly by initiating international conflict (Rosecrance 1963; Stohl 1980; Levy 1989).

#### *Taboos and Transgressions*

Whereas the literature on authoritarianism and violence emphasizes a political logic, a second set of explanations, drawn from anthropology, emphasizes a religious logic. This literature requires some elaboration because it strays far afield from the comfort zone of most political scientists and into the study of religious taboos and their transgression. The concept of blasphemy—the dishonoring of a deity, its messengers or precepts—plays a central role in this explanation.

Taboos are restrictions enforced by fear of supernatural penalties (Smith 1894:149-150; James 1925:11). The anthropologist James Frazer, who dedicated an entire volume of his encyclopedic *Golden Bough* to the topic, cataloged all manner of taboos, from prohibitions on eating, touching, or even looking at certain objects, to more esoteric taboos, such as the prohibition on stepping over persons, superstitions against knots, or prohibitions against calling particularly sacred or dangerous items by their name (Frazer 1911).<sup>4</sup> Because certain cultures do not distinguish holiness from danger, sacred persons and sacred things can be both threatening and threatened at the same time. Taboos act as “electrical insulators” that surround the sacred with prohibitions, symbols, and rituals designed to emphasize the danger of crossing or blurring the boundary between sacred and profane (Frazer 1911:224; cf. Durkheim 1915; Douglas 1996:22).

Bans on figurative imagery offer one example for such a taboo. Where portraits are believed to capture the soul or essence of a person, taboos prohibit

<sup>4</sup> For a review and critique of taboos in Frazer, Robertson Smith, Radcliffe-Brown, Mead, Freud, and others, see Steiner (1956).

paintings or photographs of humans in order to protect the subjects from harm. Taking an image is believed to remove a person's soul or to allow the image taker to inflict injury by harming the image. The taboo on figurative images is often employed to protect the most revered (or dangerous) subject in a community, be it the deity, a priest, a prophet, or a king (Frazer 1911:96-100).

*Muslim Aniconism and Blasphemy*

The taboo relevant for explaining the Danish cartoon riots is not, strictly speaking, rooted in a Muslim prohibition on depicting the Prophet Muhammad as no such prohibition exists in Muslim law.<sup>5</sup> The Qur'an prohibits idolatry but has little to say about figural representation and formal jurisprudence is indifferent but not hostile to human images in art (Grabar 1977:45-47). Rather than prohibit images, Islam, like most religious movements, limits the types of images that can be used and the manner in which they can be used. It is the underlying meaning of a representation, not the fact of representation as such, that is potentially offensive to Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

Traditionally, copies of the Qur'an were not illustrated and Islamic official and religious art (albeit not private art) avoided the use of figures and images.<sup>7</sup> Depictions of the Prophet were rare and, in practice, eschewed.<sup>8</sup> According to some historians, Muslim disinterest in icons stemmed from a lack of need for religious images as God cannot be represented, there are no intercessors to depict and there is no continuous Qur'anic narrative amenable to illustration. According to others, the paucity of figural representation in Islam can be traced to the movement's puritanical roots, which associated figural imagery with luxury, frivolous and prideful display, and distraction from devotion. The belief that figurative art excessively glorifies both the artist and the individual portrayed found backing in *hadith*, oral traditions about the Prophet, in which he was said to chastise those who made or owned pictures (Hodgson 1964:240-241; Apostolos-Cappadona 2005).

This convergence between the lack of interest in images and suspicion of their negative effects has become increasingly entrenched in Muslim practice. In popular custom, the aversion to iconography now amounts to an all-out prohibition against any depiction of the Prophet, despite significant variation across traditional Muslim schools of thought regarding this complex issue. Formally speaking, however, the transgression committed by the Danish cartoons is not desecration (mishandling a sacred object or person), but blasphemy (speaking ill of a sacred object or person).

The Qur'an depicts blasphemy as a grave sin, deserving of hell.<sup>9</sup> Islam's sensitivity to this particular offense can be traced to the early experience of hostility

<sup>5</sup> The false claim that Islam prohibits depictions of the Prophet appears in coverage of the riots by the *New York Times* and others, as well as in Mueller and Oezcan (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Thus, early Muslims permitted their Christian subjects to worship with icons but took offense at the Christian adoration of the crucifix. In Muslim eyes, it was the symbol of the cross that was provocative, not depictions of biblical characters or saints, because it symbolized the resurrection of Jesus, a blasphemous notion to Muslims (King 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Figural representation was common in private Muslim art and decorates the palaces of most Muslim dynasties, particularly those of the twelfth and the mid-fourteenth centuries, after which the popularity of private figural art declined (Grabar 1977:47-48).

<sup>8</sup> Muslim manuscripts produced in the Ottoman and Safavid courts are often illustrated with figures and images. Where images of Muhammad exist, most often in Shi'a and Sufi depictions of the narrative in chapter 17 of the Qur'an, they are meant not as icons but as illustrations of historical or literary texts. Some of these leave the Prophet's face visible, but most cover his face and even his body with a veil.

<sup>9</sup> Blasphemy can take the form of insult to God, the Prophet, or an important aspect of Islam (*sabb*), vilification of God (*shatm*), infidelity to God, and rejection of his revelation (*kufi*), heresy (*zandaqah*), and, at its worst, apostasy (*riddah*). See for example suras 4:140, 5:73, 6:108, 9:74, 28:55, 39:08, and 39:33 of the Qur'an.

to the Qur'anic message by the Arab clans of Mecca. Muhammad's opponents heaped ridicule and abuse on him, accused him of lunacy, and rejected his revelation as a lie (Ernst 1987). In retaliation, Qur'anic passages condemned "hypocrites" who denied its true message, even direct relatives of the Prophet, to a fiery death.<sup>10</sup> Muhammad is said to have ordered the assassination of poets who composed insulting verses about the Prophet and his followers. Surah 9:61 of the Qur'an warns that "those who annoy the Messenger of Allah shall have a grievous punishment," a threat that, combined with the precedent provided by the poets' assassination, guided Ayatollah Khomeini's decision to issue a death sentence against Salman Rushdie. The taboo transgressed by the Danish cartoons, like the taboo transgressed by Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, was thus a prohibition against insulting the Prophet, not a prohibition against depicting him.<sup>11</sup> The cartoons elicited outrage not because they were drawings but because they were cartoons; that is, *irreverent* drawings.

A transgression of this magnitude requires an act of expiation. In some societies, according to Frazer, physical means are used to purge the ills brought about by transgressions of taboos (Frazer 1911:214; cf. Webster 1942:35-39; Radcliffe-Brown 1952:135; Freud [1913], 1989). If the offender is unwilling or unable to redeem himself for his blasphemous actions, then the community must do so in his stead. Islamic law provides various procedures for removing contamination, such as confession, repentance, freeing a slave, fasting, or charity (Reinhart 1990). Such acts are said to cover, blot out, or drive away the fault caused by the transgression (Chelhod 2008).

Blasphemy, however, constitutes a unique transgression because it is often interpreted not as mere unbelief (*kufr*), but as constituting apostasy (*riddah*), a capital crime. Leveraging Muslim notions of blasphemy to explain the cartoon riots requires identifying the social movements most likely to act violently in response to acts of blasphemy.

### *Islamism*

A final research program that underlies conventional explanations for the cartoon riots associates violence in the aftermath of the publication of the cartoons with radical Muslim movements. These movements reacted sharply to the publication of the Danish cartoons and played a key role in justifying, organizing, and leading the ensuing riots.

The term "Islamism" captures a broad array of fundamentalist and revivalist movements, ranging from the revolutionary to the reactionary (Esposito 1983; Roy 1994, 2006, 2007, 2008; Kepel 2002; Lewis 2004). Islamists have adopted a strict interpretation of Muslim law regarding apostasy and heresy. They share in the belief that the nascent Muslim community during the Prophet's lifetime offers the model for the ideal society. To recreate this authentic Muslim way of life, ruling regimes should be reformed or overthrown so that Islamic law becomes both state law and political ideology, shaping politics, economics, and social justice (Roy 2006:58-59, 2007:63). Islamists believe that the primary obstacle facing this revivalist goal is Western influence, which has infiltrated the Islamic world with its corrupting laws and customs. The resulting betrayal of authentic Islamic values is tantamount to idolatry (Lewis 2004:24, 134).

<sup>10</sup> See for example sura 111, in which Abu Lahab, half-brother of Muhammad's father, is consigned to hell with his wife for their treatment of Muhammad.

<sup>11</sup> Khomeini had justified the death sentence by admonishing Rushdie for "[daring] to insult the Islamic sanctities." The comparison between the two transgressions was made explicit by the leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Sheikh Hassan Nassrallah, who declared that "If there had been a Muslim to carry out Imam Khomeini's *fatwā* against the renegade Salman Rushdie, this rabble who insult our Prophet Mohammed in Denmark, Norway, and France would not have dared to do so" (Agence France-Press 2006).

### The Moral Threat Argument

To bridge the gap between the purely materialist explanation offered by the literature on authoritarianism and the ideational explanation offered by the literature on taboos and transgressions in Islam, I now propose an alternative explanation that emphasizes a *moral threat* logic. My argument rests on a series of claims from sociology that investigate how groups respond to perceived attacks on their moral order. My approach here is structuralist, subsuming both the political structures that enable and constrain violence on the one hand, and the religious symbols that drive violence on the other, into a single framework. Structuralism, as developed by Emile Durkheim, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, and others, seeks to explain social elements in terms of their contribution to a coherent system of beliefs and practices. Mary Douglas' structuralist contribution to the study of pollution is particularly relevant to the topic of blasphemy because it highlights the relationship between a social group's beliefs regarding desecration and that group's perceptions of imminent threat. I combine Douglas' argument with insights from the literature on threat perception and the analysis of social movements in order to arrive at the conditions under which perceptions of threat may result in violence.

#### *Desecration and Disgust*

At the core of Douglas' *Purity and Danger* lies the claim that humans make sense of their existence by imposing order on the universe, making distinctions and performing separations (Douglas 1996; cf. McCormack 1967; Spiro 1968). The result is a systematic ordering and classification scheme, or "symbolic system." Like Durkheim, Douglas suggests that sanctity is exemplified by appropriately distinguishing things into the mutually exclusive categories. The blurring of categories, the crossing of lines that distinguish things from one another, constitutes desecration (Douglas 1996:54-55). Douglas takes the argument further than Durkheim, arguing that desecration endangers not only the symbolic system of which that prohibition is part, but also the society that gave rise to that system, indeed, the very concepts of society and order.

A society might respond to such acts of desecration by performing rites of purification or restitution (Douglas 1996:124-126, 137; cf. Levy-Bruhl 1936). Alternatively, the group might employ violence against desecrators in order to rid itself of contamination and re-establish its boundaries (Douglas 1996:40-41; cf. Ford 1998). Actions designed to prevent or punish desecration, while not identical to rules that uphold the moral principles of a society, serve to clarify and buttress these rules. Where moral disapproval lags or where society is incapable of wielding effective sanctions against improper behavior, pollution rules step in to threaten the perpetrator with divine sanction and social opprobrium (Douglas 1996:133). As Durkheim had already concluded in his study of moral education, punishments by the group are designed to restore the moral status quo ante by re-establishing the hegemony of a taboo (Durkheim 1961:1965-1967). We are thus likely to observe powerful social responses to breaches of these rules when a society both perceives that its boundaries are threatened and feels helpless in its attempts to secure these boundaries.

The philosopher John Kekes built upon Durkheim's and Douglas' argument by focusing on the role that fundamental prohibitions play in buttressing the moral order of a society (Kekes 1992). According to Kekes, moral rules are thus designed not merely to protect the boundaries of a particular society, as Douglas proposes, but to form the very bulwark of what that society consider to be civilization. "Gross, flamboyant, flagrant transgressions," like cannibalism or incest, that flout fundamental rules, provoke "deep disgust" and threaten to subvert

the moral foundations of a society (Kekes 1992:442-443). Unlike regular disgust, deep disgust is an instinctive, knee-jerk response driven by an observer's identification with the victim of a transgression and by the observer's fear that the transgression will invade his own life.

#### *Threat Perception and Social Movements*

These theories about moral transgressions as challenges to the social order leave two primary questions unanswered: Which threats are most likely to provoke extreme responses and under what conditions are social movements likely to respond violently to such provocations? The literature on threat perception offers a partial answer by investigating how the identity of perpetrators "primes" the viewers' interpretation of an act, in this case the perception of a religious offense.<sup>12</sup> Transgressive acts that might be interpreted as accidental or insignificant when perpetrated by members of the in-group will be interpreted as intentional, salient, and hostile when perpetrated by outsiders, particularly if those outsiders are perceived as threatening. The more powerful, proximate, hostile, and unfamiliar the outsiders appear, the more threatening their actions are likely to appear.

The literature on social movements and repression adds the final component to this argument by conditioning the level of violence practiced by a social movement on the level of repression in a given society. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly, and others have proposed that social movements are not inherently violent or peaceful. Instead, political and social conditions determine the behavior of social movements (Tarrow 1994; Tarrow, McAdam, and Tilly 2001).<sup>13</sup> When regimes promote democratic rights, such as the rights of assembly, association, and collective voice, they create a thriving environment for social movements (Tilly 2004, 2005). When these movements are disenfranchised, however, their agenda shifts from reform to revolution, and their activism becomes polarized. These movements may then opt for violence as a survival strategy. Public violence and acts of sacrifice become part of the social movement's repertoire, attracting adherents, signaling the support of a significant constituency, and spreading the movement's message (Tarrow 1994; Tilly 1999).

Several authors have drawn on these ideas to explain the causes of religiously induced violence. Natalie Zemon Davis, for example, has shown that Catholic-Protestant mob violence in sixteenth-century France was driven not only by economic or political motives, but fulfilled religious purposes as well. Mobs initiated violence to restore social cohesion and purity by either urging the political authorities to perform their duties or wresting political control out of the hands of authorities and performing social purification of their own (Davis 1975).

### **Hypothesis Formation**

#### *Hypothesis I: Political Manipulation*

The literature on authoritarian violence offers the most parsimonious hypothesis for explaining the cartoon riots, the *political manipulation* hypothesis. As contemporary proponents of this hypothesis have blamed authoritarian states for initiating the riots, testing the validity of this hypothesis requires ascertaining whether states in which riots did or did not fall along democratic and authoritarian lines,

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<sup>12</sup> On threat perception in social- and political-psychology, see Tajfel (1978), Tajfel and Turner (1979), and Kemmelmeier and Winter (2000). On threat perception in political science, see Walt (1987) and Rousseau and García-Retamero (2007).

<sup>13</sup> I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for directing me to these texts.

as coded in conventional indexes such as the Polity Project or the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy.

*Hypothesis II: Religious Outrage*

The literatures on blasphemy and Islamism, on the other hand, propose that the cartoon riots were driven by religious outrage. To test the *religious outrage* hypothesis, we need to examine statements by the protesters themselves, establishing whether protesters perceived the publication of the cartoons as an insult to the Prophet amounting to blasphemy and apostasy, and whether they conceived of their actions as an expiation of these acts.

Such statements, however, can provide little more than anecdotal evidence, because they cannot explain how individual protesters organize into violent movements. The *religious outrage* hypothesis identifies Islamist movements, defined above, as the most likely candidates for organizing protest in response to acts of religious outrage. If this hypothesis is correct, then the presence of powerful Islamist movements in a given state should correlate with riots in that state. To prevent bias in my selection of Islamist movement, I adopt Olivier Roy's list of significant Islamist movements (Roy 2006:60-75).

*Hypothesis III: Moral Threat*

A third and final hypothesis combines insights from both prior hypotheses with my *moral threat* argument. This hypothesis conditions violent protest by social movements on the perception of an imminent threat to their moral order. Both Douglas and Kekes would suggest that the groups most likely to respond vehemently to blasphemy are those that most identify with the object of the desecration and that feel that the blasphemy poses a real danger to their way of life. A group's response to blasphemy should be most extreme if the group lacks confidence in the ability of authorities to stem the threat, yet also feels powerless to confront that danger by itself. Thus, as in the *religious outrage* hypothesis, the *moral threat* argument would expect Islamist movements to emerge as the most likely candidates for fomenting riots. These groups considered the cartoons to be more than just offensive. The illustrations, which inflamed both their imaginations and their fears, provoked "deep disgust": protesters were able to place themselves in the position of the target of the blasphemy, experiencing revulsion both on their own behalf and on behalf of the Prophet, while at the same time experiencing dread that the disgusting offense will invade their lives, that they will not be able to "keep the horror at bay" (Kekes 1992:435). The cartoons, which might have been disregarded or downplayed had they originated in the Muslim world, appeared as yet another menacing gesture from an anti-Muslim West.

Yet unlike the *religious outrage* argument, the *moral threat* argument does not expect Islamist movements to engage in violent protest across the board. Authoritarian regimes can be expected to suppress or co-opt Islamist protest, resulting in subdued or orchestrated demonstrations. Islamist movements that enjoy representation in liberal regimes can be expected to stage peaceful demonstrations. Counterintuitively, violence most likely occurs under regimes characterized by significant political rights and civil liberties, in which Islamist movements are disenfranchised. These states permit Islamist protest against moral threats, but fail to protect Islamists from these threats by enacting censorship or penalizing religious offenders. Disenfranchised Islamists in these liberal states can be expected to protest violently, leading to confrontations between the security forces of the state and angry rioters.

Testing whether the *moral threat* argument provides a good explanation for the location of the Danish cartoon riots thus requires distinguishing between Islamist

groups based on whether they perceived the cartoon as a menacing threat, the degree to which they enjoyed formal political representation, and the extent to which the state in which they were acting extended political rights and civil liberties to its citizens.

To determine the presence of an influential Islamist group in a given state, I employ the same list of movements as for the *religious outrage* hypothesis. To code for political rights and civil liberties, I rely on the Freedom House rankings for 2006–2007, sorting states into “free” on the one hand and “partially free” and “not free” on the other. The Freedom House index offers an advantage over alternative indices because it focuses on political rights and civil liberties, such as the right to assemble and the freedom to protest, and thus offers a better estimate of the extent to which Islamist protest in response to the cartoons was permitted, resisted, or suppressed.<sup>14</sup>

### Hypothesis Testing

#### *Testing the Political Manipulation Hypothesis*

Empirical evidence from the cartoon riots offers some support for the *political manipulation* hypothesis. Many authoritarian Muslim regimes that had previously prohibited demonstrations permitted protests against the cartoons. In several of these states, demonstrators were bussed in at the governments’ expense. In Iran and Syria, police forces seemed to stand idly by as protesters set fire to European embassies, leading Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the United States to accuse these regimes of failing to act in good faith to restrain the violence (Gall and Smith 2006). Efficient crackdowns by Iran and Syria’s internal security apparatus during prior instances of protest led several European diplomats to suspect that the regimes had orchestrated the cartoon riots (Fleishman 2006; Pace 2006).

Syrian machinations were also identified in neighboring Lebanon, where religious and political leaders suspected a foreign hand in the instigation of violence. Lebanon’s Social Affairs Minister, Nayla Mouawad, characterized the Lebanese riots as “an organized attempt to take advantage of Muslim anger for purposes that do not serve the interests of Muslims in Lebanon but of others beyond the border” (Mroue 2006). Noted Islamism scholar Olivier Roy summarized these suspicions: “What is happening in the Middle East is primarily political manipulation—Syria taking revenge for its expulsion from Lebanon, Hamas striking back at the European Union for its rebuff on financial aid, Afghans anticipating the replacement of U.S. troops by European ones, and Iranians lashing back at the E.U. for its stance on the nuclear issue” (Perelman 2006).

Upon closer observation, however, the *political manipulation* argument does not provide a satisfying explanation for the location and nature of the cartoon riots, on several counts. For one, five of the nine states in which protests turned violent were not authoritarian at all but were classified as relatively free in 2006. Freedom House ranked Lebanon, Nigeria and Afghanistan as “partially free” based on its assessment of political rights and civil liberties in these states in 2006, yet in all three, protests escalated into riots. The Palestinian Territories underwent democratic elections only a week prior to attacks on European institutions in the West Bank and Gaza. Riots also took place in Indonesia, a full-fledged democracy.

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<sup>14</sup> Other estimates of state freedom, such as data included in the Polity Project or the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Index of Democracy, emphasize constitutional attributes relevant for distinguishing democratic regimes from authoritarian regimes, such as the nature of elections and executive authority, which are less useful for estimating regime reactions to protests. Moreover, whereas the Freedom House index offers data on all Muslim-majority states for 2006 (with the exception of the Palestinian Authority, which underwent parliamentary elections a week before the riots), the Polity Project lacks crucial data for Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia for 2006.

Moreover, any explanation that links the cartoon riots to the authoritarian regimes under which they occurred must account for peaceful demonstration in numerous authoritarian Muslim states, from Morocco to Qatar. The political manipulation argument thus fails not only to explain the majority of cases in which violence did happen but also some two dozen cases in which it did not happen. The Muslim states of Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, for example, ranked lowest worldwide in terms of civil liberties and political rights, yet no riots occurred there. If, as an editorial by the *Washington Post* suspected, Egypt and Saudi Arabia had instigated the violence because it provided “a convenient refuge for authoritarian regimes” (Washington Post 2006), why did protests in these two authoritarian states stop short of the threshold of violence?

*Grassroots Riots in Libya and Pakistan*

Even where riots did occur under authoritarian regimes, the actions of these regimes did not always comport with the expectations of a *political manipulation* argument. Unlike Syria and Iran, the Libyan and Pakistani regimes did not stand idly by as protests were taking place but attempted to defend Western institutions from attacks. In Libya, for example, fatalities resulted from fighting between protesters and Libyan police forces attempting to protect the Italian consulate in Benghazi. The Libyan demonstration occurred after Italian Reforms Minister Roberto Calderoli, a leading member of Italy’s Northern League, announced that he would wear a T-shirt displaying one of the Danish cartoons. Given Calderoli’s prominent role in blocking immigration from Libya so as to promote the “Christian identity” of Italy, it was not unreasonable for protesters to conclude that Calderoli’s gesture was a slight aimed directly at a Libyan audience (Associated Press Online 2006b; el-Deeb 2006).

More than 1000 demonstrators reacted to his televised appearance by hurling rocks and bottles at the Italian consulate, then entering the grounds and setting fire to the building. The police responded with gunfire and tear gas in a futile attempt to disperse the crowd while firefighters tried to put out the fire. Eleven people, including both police and protesters, were killed in the exchanges that followed, while the staff of the Italian consulate escaped unharmed. The Libyan government “strongly denounced” the violence and issued a formal apology to the Italian ambassador (New York Times 2006c; United Press International 2006e). The absence of parallel demonstrations at the Italian Embassy in the capital Tripoli suggests that the riots, far from being instigated by the government, were the product of weakening state authority in the outskirts of Libya (el-Deeb 2006).

The Pakistani regime’s response to the protests paints a more complicated picture. Initially, the regime sanctioned peaceful protest and several elected officials supported the demonstrations (Lancaster 2006b). Gradually, mainstream opposition parties, hard-line Islamic groups, and fundamentalist movements came to assume control of the protests. The political platforms represented by these movements varied: some pressed for democratic reforms, others opposed President Pervez Musharraf and his alliance with the West, and yet others represented constituents angered by corruption in the Pakistani judiciary and executive (Associated Press Online 2006a; Massod 2006b). While many were driven by political agendas, outrage over the cartoons provided a cohesive element that drew angry crowds to the streets. Leading the more violent protests were members of *Sipah-e-Sahaba*, a Deobandi Islamist movement, and *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*, a banned jihadist group, as well as members of the United Council of Action (*Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal* or MMA), Pakistan’s largest Islamic party. Only upon grasping the extent of the violence and identifying its organizers did the regime launch an aggressive campaign to ban all protest and arrest agitators (Murphy 2006; Voice of America 2006f).

President Musharraf had initially denounced the cartoons, commenting in mid-February 2006 that “the most moderate Muslim will go to the street and talk against [the cartoons] because this hurts the sentiments of every Muslim” (Khan 2006a). In the days that followed, 3,000 students rioted in the diplomatic enclave in Islamabad, 15,000 protesters in Lahore attacked Western businesses and 70,000 protesters in Peshwar went on a rampage, attacking Christian and Western institutions (Jan 2006; Khan 2006b; Lancaster 2006a; Massod 2006a; Shahzad 2006a; United Press International 2006f). Security forces, initially indifferent to these protest, attempted to control the crowds by means of tear gas and batons but ultimately resorted to gunfire, killing three rioters in Lahore and two in Peshwar, and injuring scores of others.

The riots in Islamabad, Lahore, and Peshwar led to a dramatic escalation in government repression. The regime deployed thousands of paramilitary and police forces in major cities to close schools and colleges, guard government and foreign installations, block streets leading to potential protest venues, and control major intersections. All rallies in East Pakistan and in Islamabad were banned indefinitely. Police arrested hundreds of protesters defying the ban and rounded up religious activists, clerics, opposition lawmakers, and religious school administrators, including the founder of *Lashkar-e-Tayyaba* and the head of the MMA (Khan 2006c; Tanveer 2006; United Press International 2006g; Voice of America 2006e.g). Protests, once permitted, continued to attract massive crowds but proceeded peacefully (Shahzad 2006b; Voice of America 2006h).

The responses of the Libyan and Pakistani governments to the cartoon riots and the reasons why protests turned violent in these two states fly in the face of the *political manipulation* argument. Casualties in both cases resulted from confrontations between rioters and security forces attempting to control the protests. The contrast between these two cases and the riots in Iran and Syria, where government manipulation was evident, is stark.

#### *Religion as a Missing Variable*

Even where the *political manipulation* hypothesis can account for state orchestration of riots, as in Syria, it still fails to explain why the Danish cartoons provided a useful tool for the manipulation of local populations. By conceiving of the cartoons as a mere pretext for violence, the *political manipulation* hypothesis marginalizes the role of religious interests, which in turn causes difficulties as one tries to generalize its claims to non-Muslim authoritarian states. If authoritarian rule, rather than Islam, best explains these violent responses to blasphemy, then we should expect to encounter historical evidence of authoritarian regimes responding similarly to opportunities for political manipulation, regardless of religion.

Yet, the Nepalese monarchy has not used repeated Muslim–Hindu conflict over the desecration of sacred sites in India and Pakistan as an excuse for mobilizing anti-Muslim riots, despite the regime’s identification with Hinduism. Authoritarian regimes in majority Christian states, such as Swaziland and Zimbabwe, have not incited violence in response to major blasphemy controversies surrounding art, literature, or films deemed offensive to Christians,<sup>15</sup> nor did the Vietnamese regime seize on insults to Buddhism, such as the destruction by the Tamil Tigers of the Temple of Buddha’s Tooth in Sri Lanka in 1998, in order to orchestrate anti-Hindu riots.

<sup>15</sup> These included, most famously, the film *The Miracle* (1951), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (novel in 1951, film in 1988), the film *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979), Andres Serrano’s photograph *Piss Christ* (1989), and Chris Ofili’s painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1999). A comprehensive review of blasphemy incidents can be found in Webster (1990).

An explanation anchored exclusively in politics cannot illuminate aspects of the cartoon riots that led to a violent outcome in this case but did not lead to violence in cases involving other religious movements. This explanation also fails to consider the justification for violence provided by the participants themselves: blasphemy and insult to Islam.

*Testing the Religious Outrage Hypothesis*

At the grassroots level, outrage was evident in indignant reactions by protest participants throughout the Muslim world. One Pakistani protester described his response to the cartoons as “a great shock... a lightning bolt that struck the heart of those who love the Prophet.” Another explained: “Muslims keep on being killed all over the world and we stay quiet. But love for the Prophet [pause] is such that we cannot bear anyone ridiculing it. There is nothing to be explained, it’s not a scientific thing or a contract. It’s not that kind of relation: it’s a relation of love.” A third rioter emphasized a different set of emotions: “They had been rude to our Holy Prophet... and I got angry. I swear I would kill the guy who’s done these cartoons if ever he comes in front of me!” (Blom 2008: para. 22, 24, 63).

To ascertain systematically whether this outrage provides the best explanation for the cartoon riots, we need to test for the presence of Islamist movements in states in which riots did or did not occur. Islamist movements have emerged around the Muslim world by drawing on familiar Islamic themes and images to attract supporters. Because they are able to use mosques as mobilization sites and network hubs, they have prospered even in autocratic states, where they often form the only effective opposition movement (Lewis 2004, 133). Influential Islamist movements include the *Jamaat-i-Islami* in Pakistan, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Palestinian Territories, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, and the Islamic Defender Front in Indonesia. Only in Iran has the Islamic Revolution succeeded in establishing an Islamist state. There were thus active Islamist movements in all states in which the Danish cartoons prompted unrest, with the exception of Libya and Syria which had successfully suppressed their Islamist movements.

Nonetheless, the presence of an Islamist movement in a given state is insufficient in and of itself for predicting religiously motivated rioting. After all, Islamist movements have arisen in most Muslim states. Some of the most powerful of these organizations are active in states where violent protest did not take place. These include states in which Islamist movements were integrated into the politics of the ruling regime, like the Felicity Party in Turkey, the Congregation for Reform in Yemen, and multiple Sunni and Shi’a parties in Bahrain. In other states in which rioting was absent, Islamist parties were excluded from the political process in 2006 and opposed the regime, as did the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, *Jamaat e-Islami* in the Indian subcontinent, the Islamic Resistance Party in Tajikistan, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, the National Islamic Front in Sudan, and the Islamic Courts Union in Somalia. In the absence of an argument that can delineate the political conditions under which Islamist protest is likely to result in violence, the concept of Islamism is of limited utility for linking notions of blasphemy to the cartoon riots.

The weakness of the *religious outrage* argument thus mirrors the weakness of the *political manipulation* argument. Where the one focuses on the religious interests of radical movements without delineating the political conditions for their effectiveness, the other emphasizes the political interests of elites to the exclusion of the religious interests being manipulated. Harnessing the strengths of both arguments requires a combination of religious and political logics that can

link the motivations of the Islamist movements that fomented the rioting with the motivations of the regimes that confronted the riots, resulting in casualties.

*Testing the Moral Threat Hypothesis*

The *moral threat* hypothesis expects intense grassroots protest where Islamist movements lacked confidence in the ability of the ruling regime to fend off a threat to the moral order. Where these groups were excluded from the political process, mass protest formed their only means of drawing attention to the threat posed by blasphemy. Islamist movements acted to expunge the threat by scapegoating, indiscriminately attacking Western institutions that symbolized the source of the threat. “The government didn’t take any action on this,” explained one Pakistani rioter, “only the people did something” (Blom 2008: para. 63).

However, where Islamist movements were incorporated into the political framework of the state, they used their formal influence and political clout to take official action against the cartoons. In these states, Islamist political groups staged organized and peaceful protests or issued formal condemnations of the cartoons. This argument thus divides all existing Islamist movements into two sets: those disenfranchised by the ruling regime of the host state and those subsumed into the political structure of their host state.

Where did riots ensue? Authoritarian regimes were able to crack down on Islamist dissent prior to the eruption of riots. Under these regimes, in Egypt, Jordan, Somalia, or Sudan, protest was quashed before it even began. On the other hand, regimes that afforded their citizens the freedom to assemble and protest faced severe constraints in confronting Islamist protesters. Limited in the means they were willing to employ in suppressing dissent, these regimes often responded haphazardly to the protests. In Pakistan, for example, “the police sent mixed signals: in some parts of the procession it displayed empathy, chanting slogans with the crowd, in others it used repression” (Blom 2008: para 65). The resulting confrontations between the security apparatus of these regimes and angry rioters produced the cartoon riot casualties. Weak state capacity was neither sufficient nor necessary for the outbreak of riots; though, it seems to have played some part in the Pakistani case, as I discuss below. Riots occurred not because relatively liberal Muslim states were unable to suppress protest, but because they were unwilling to do so.

As the table below illustrates, the moral threat argument divides states with Islamist movements into four categories (see Table 2). States in the top-left quadrant are authoritarian states that disenfranchised influential Islamist movements. No riots occurred in these states, with the exception of Pakistan, because

TABLE 2. Protests and Riots in States with Significant Islamist Movements

	<i>Few Political Rights and Civil Liberties*</i>	<i>Significant Political Rights and Civil Liberties†</i>
Islamists in Opposition	Protests Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Somalia, <b>Pakistan</b> , Tajikistan	Riots <b>Afghanistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Lebanon (Muslim Brotherhood)</b>
Islamists in Government	Riots <b>Iran</b>	Protests Bahrain, Yemen, Turkey, Palestinian Authority ( Hamas), Lebanon (Hezbollah), Jordan, Kuwait

(Notes. Bold font designates states in which riots occurred in response to the Danish cartoons.

\*Ranked “not free” by *Freedom House* for 2006–7.

†Ranked “free”/“partially free” by *Freedom House* for 2006–7.)

regimes were able to stem dissent, often arresting Islamist leaders, controlling demonstrations with overwhelming police force, or prohibiting protest altogether. Riots were also absent from states in the bottom-right quadrant, for obverse reasons. Here, Islamist groups found ample opportunities for expressing dissent by peaceful means. As these regimes afforded Islamist parties a voice in the political process, violent protest proved unnecessary.

Riots occurred under one of two conditions. First, regimes characterized by significant political and civil rights that marginalized Islamist movements, represented in the top-right quadrant, left these groups with no alternative but to express their grievances by protesting. In Iran, on the other hand, the state itself represented Islamist interests. In line with suspicions by Western leaders, but for reasons other than those proposed by the *political manipulation* hypothesis, the Iranian government orchestrated the cartoon riots in Teheran.

*Deadly Protests in Indonesia, Nigeria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan*

Evidence from the riots in Indonesia, Nigeria, Lebanon, and Afghanistan lends credence to the *moral threat* hypothesis: As in Pakistan, protests initiated by Islamist movements degenerated into violence when security forces lost control over demonstrations and resorted to deadly force.

In Indonesia, the riots were organized by the Islamic Defender Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI), a hard-line Islamist group that has confronted Western and secular incursions by means of violence in the past. On 3 February, hundreds of FPI members went on a rampage in the lobby of the Jakarta building housing the Danish embassy, but failed to get past security (Nickerson 2006; United Press International 2006b; Voice of America News 2006c,d). Three days later, a mob in Surabaya attacked and smashed windows at the Danish consulate, then moved to the US consulate, where they threw rocks and bottles and tried to breach a security wall. Police fired warning shots to disperse the crowds and scuffled with protesters, wounding one protester and two police officers. “We did not ban the demonstration,” explained Surabaya’s police chief, “but when it turned violent, with attempts at destruction, we had to stop it” (United Press International 2006c; Witte and Nakashima 2006). Foreign Ministry spokesman Yuri Thamrin added that “the government does not condone violent protests... Indonesians have the right to protest, but must do it within the law” (Collins 2006). Two weeks after the attacks in Surabaya, hundreds of Muslims attempted to storm the US Embassy in Islamabad, smashing the windows of a guard post but failing to push through the gates (Kotarumalos 2006).

It remains unclear who led the riots in Nigeria, which resulted in more than 120 deaths within a single week (New York Times 2006b). Protests did, however, originate from mosques of the Movement for Islamic Revival (*Ja’amatu Tajidmul Islami*), an Islamist Shi’a movement led by Abubakar Mujahid (Isaacs 2001; Finkel 2002). The violence began in northeast Nigeria, where Muslims protested the cartoons as well as the alleged desecration of a Qur’an by a Christian teacher (Polgreen 2006). Attempts by police to disperse the demonstrators with tear gas turned the mob toward the city’s Christian population. Protesters burned thirty churches and looted shops owned by Christians during a 3-hour rampage, killing 18 people. Hundreds of soldiers and paratroopers joined police armed with rifles to patrol city streets throughout Nigeria, killing at least one protester (Balint-Kurti and Clayton 2006; Fisher 2006; Owen 2006). Christian Nigerians avenged these attacks by assaulting Muslims in majority Christian cities in the east with machetes and shotguns, looting Muslim homes and shops, killing fifty Muslims, and burning two mosques (New York Times 2006a).

Lebanese leaders were quick to place the blame for the violence in Beirut on outside “infiltrators,” presumably Syrians (Gall and Smith 2006). Indeed, of the

174 protesters arrested, 76 were Syrians (Irish Times 2006). Nonetheless, the more violent protests were organized by the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya*), an Islamist movement led by Faisal Mawlawi (McCarthy 2006). Twenty thousand protesters clashed with 2,000 security forces, after demonstrators set fire to the building housing the Danish and Austrian consulates. The mob vandalized cars, police vehicles, office buildings, and a Maronite church in the predominantly Christian Achrafieh section of East Beirut (Zoepf and Fattah 2006). One protester, trapped by flames, died after jumping from the third floor of the consulate building. Lebanese security forces required 2 hours to regain control of the crowd, using water cannons and tear gas. Twenty-one members of Lebanon's security forces were injured in the exchanges (Fisk 2006).

In Afghanistan, thirteen protesters died within 3 days in clashes between protesters and police. Afghan officials blamed al-Qaida and Taliban militants for instigating the riots but could offer no evidence to substantiate those accusations. Afghan observers described the riots as "a massive uprising" in response to "an incredibly emotive issue [that] really upset Afghans" (Cooney 2006). One of the organizers of the protest in Kabul, for example, was a 23-year-old baker who wanted "to teach a lesson to the infidels that they should not repeat this" (Witte 2006). This interpretation of events was supported by the location of riots. Whereas coalition operations against the Taliban and other antigovernment forces were concentrated in Southern Afghanistan, the riots, often led by local clerics, occurred in the north (Baldauf 2006).

### Evaluating the Evidence

The *moral threat* argument combines elements from the two prior hypotheses while overcoming many of their inherent weaknesses in order to accurately predict where riots did and did not happen. The *political manipulation* argument hinted at regime type as providing the crucial political conditions for religiously motivated rioting but could not explain why most riots occurred in states characterized by civil and political liberties. The *religious outrage* argument correctly pointed to Islamist movements as the most likely instigators of anti-Western riots, yet this argument could not differentiate states with active Islamist movements in which riots did not happen from states in which violent protest occurred. The *moral threat* argument offers an explanation for deadly clashes between liberal Muslim regimes and Islamist movements responding to the moral threat posed by the cartoons. This argument sheds light on the identity of rioters, their targets, and the reasons for fatalities. It accurately predicts spontaneous riots as well as orchestrated riots, peaceful protest, and subdued protest and can thus explain not only where violence did and did not occur, but also why it occurred and what shape it assumed.

Although the *moral threat* argument offers an explanation for the majority of riots, it only explains violence in states with significant Islamist movements. This leaves some room for exclusively political or religious arguments to explain riots that occurred under extreme political or religious circumstances. The Syrian riots, which showed all the signs of orchestration by the regime, fit well with the *political manipulation* argument (Fleishman 2006; Pace 2006; Vick 2006; Voice of America News 2006b). Similarly, riots in the Palestinian Territories were organized by the Al Aqsa Martyr's Brigades, a violent offshoot of Fatah, a week after the Hamas victory in the first Palestinian parliamentary elections. Fatah, still exerting authoritarian rule in the Palestinian Territories, orchestrated the riots before Hamas had had the opportunity to form a government or assume responsibility for the internal security of the Palestinian areas (Barzak 2006a,b; Brinkley and Fisher 2006; Lake 2006; Mitnik 2006; Smith and Fisher 2006; United Press

International 2006a; Voice of America 2006a). The riot in Libya, on the other hand, exemplifies the *religious outrage* argument: a case in which popular anger in response to a specific provocation was sufficient in and of itself to explain rioting, even in the absence of an Islamist movement.

Two cases seem to present a challenge for the *moral threat* argument. The first is Pakistan, an authoritarian regime that should have suppressed the riots, as did its authoritarian counterparts in Egypt, Sudan or Algeria, for example. The Pakistani failure to control the riots can be explained in terms of the two variables driving the *moral threat* argument. Pakistan is one of the few authoritarian Islamic regimes that grants its citizens significant freedom of assembly and protest.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Pakistan harbors the largest Salafi-influenced population in the Muslim world as well as one of the largest Shi'a communities in the world.<sup>17</sup> Pakistan's liminal political status combined with the formidable challenge posed by Pakistani Islamists helps explain why the riots in Pakistan resemble those in Afghanistan and Nigeria more than they do subdued protests under authoritarian regimes.

The riots in Lebanon present an additional challenge, as Hezbollah, an influential Islamist party, held fourteen out of 128 seats in the Lebanese parliament at the time of the riots. Yet, a closer look at the events of February 2006 confirms the *moral threat* intuition. The Lebanese riots were instigated by the Muslim Brotherhood as well as, by some accounts, the Salafi *Hezb al-Tahrir* party and Wahhabi elements from the Palestinian Ein el-Helweh refugee camp. Hezbollah, on the other hand, called for calm during the riots and staged peaceful protests (Fisk 2006).

### Implications

My findings in this paper have implications for our understanding of violent responses to religious provocation within and without the Muslim world. At the same time, the *moral threat* argument has implications for the study of religion and international relations in general, because it exemplifies a novel approach for exploring the microfoundations of religiously motivated political behavior.

Are Muslims inclined to respond disproportionately to acts of blasphemy? Condemnation of apostates in Egypt, Turkey, and Bangladesh; the lynching of a Christian teacher in Nigeria for allegedly desecrating the Qur'an; the conviction of a British schoolteacher in Sudan for naming a teddy bear "Muhammad"; and the deadly riots in response to rumors about the desecration of Qur'ans in Guantanamo Bay have led some to conclude that Muslims are exceptionally sensitive to perceived slights against their religion.<sup>18</sup> The *moral threat* argument challenges such preconceptions about Islam's unique proclivity for blasphemy-motivated violence.

Several scholars have offered essentialist arguments about the relationship between blasphemy and Islam. Richard Webster has traced Muslim intolerance

<sup>16</sup> Although the Freedom House Index ranks Pakistan as "not free" (compared to "partially free" Afghanistan and Nigeria, for example), other indices assign Pakistan a more ambiguous classification. Both the Polity Index and the Economist Intelligence Unit's Index of Democracy, for example, ranked Pakistan as more democratic than Afghanistan in 2006. Indeed, the Economist Intelligence Unit ranks Pakistan as more democratic than Nigeria, which Freedom House ranks as "partially free".

<sup>17</sup> According to Pape (2005:117), Pakistan, at 43 million, and Nigeria, at 37 million, are the two states with the largest Salafi-influenced populations, followed by Indonesia, Egypt, and Sudan. Pakistan and Nigeria thus account for more than half of the world's Salafi-influenced population. The world's largest Shi'a populations are, in descending magnitude, in Iran, Pakistan, India, Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan.

<sup>18</sup> Apostasy cases are listed in Griffel (2001:340). Christianah Oluwatoyin Oluwasesin, a Christian teacher in Nigeria, was lynched by her pupils for allegedly desecrating the Qur'an on March 21, 2007. Gillian Gibbons was convicted of insulting Islam and briefly imprisoned in November 2007. Allegations of Qur'an desecrations at Guantanamo led to riots across the Muslim world in May 2005.

toward blasphemy to Islam's failure to undergo a "conscience-centered revolution" parallel to the Protestant Reformation. Because the Qur'an and the Prophet have retained their status as external sources of authority in Islam (Webster 1990), Muslims continue to construe acts of blasphemy as attacks against their religion, whereas Puritans and their modern-day followers, for example, have internalized blasphemy laws, judging blasphemy as a mere moral offense. Atran (2006) has drawn attention to the importance of honor as a sacred value in Islamic societies. If blasphemy is perceived as an insult, Muslims might be expected to defend their honor irrespective of the economic and political costs of doing so. Pipes (1990:112, 131-132) has explained the violent aftermath of the Rushdie Affair in terms of Muslim "literal-mindedness," the perception that art expresses the personal opinion of its creator and entails truth claims. This, combined with a "conspiratorial mentality," is said to lead Muslim readers to interpret blasphemous art as part of a larger Western campaign against Islam.

In this paper, I have tried to offer an alternative to such arguments about Islam and violence by demonstrating that the riots in response to the Danish cartoons cannot be reduced to either a political or a religious logic. Like members of other religious communities, Muslims respond to religious provocations under particular circumstances. Most Muslim communities did not respond with riots to the publication of the cartoons, even where Islamist movements predominated. Violence occurred primarily where radical groups enjoyed the freedom to organize and protest the cartoons but lacked state protection of their sacred values.

The *moral threat* hypothesis is the least parsimonious of the three hypotheses presented here, yet its strength lies in its generalizeability. A *moral threat* approach can be used to explain religiously provoked violence by fundamentalist movements worldwide. By identifying the actions most likely to threaten a given fundamentalist movement, we can forecast where and when fundamentalists are most likely to respond violently to religious provocations. Doing so, in turn, requires both an understanding of the principles and practices held sacred by specific movements, and identification of the perpetrators whose transgression are most likely to be interpreted as threatening by members of the movement.

Fundamentalist Jews in Israel, for example, have not responded violently to blasphemous imagery. For reasons readily traceable to Jewish belief and practice, the desecration of the Sabbath amounts to a far greater offense than does blasphemous action or speech. Fundamentalist Jews perceive the desecration of the Sabbath to be a particularly heinous offense when committed by other, secular, Jews in the holy city of Jerusalem. While they are free to protest such transgressions in Israel, they must also suffer the costs of residing in a liberal democratic society that seems disinterested in protecting their most sacred values. Consequently, ultra-orthodox protesters in Jerusalem have attacked secular Israelis driving through their neighborhoods on the Sabbath and have assaulted moviegoers attending screenings on the Sabbath (Reuters 1987; Greenberg 1996). There are no parallels to these assaults in Jewish communities outside Israel, where the interaction between ultra-orthodox communities and non-Jews is minimal. It is the unique combination of a sacred value transgressed by an opponent perceived as threatening that sparks fundamentalist Jewish violence in Israel but not elsewhere.

The Jewish sensitivity to Sabbath desecration in Jerusalem is mirrored by a Hindu sensitivity toward slights committed by Muslims against Hindu relics and shrines in India (Hassner 2003). Protestant fundamentalists in the United States, on the other hand, see abortion as the primary secular threat to their sacred value system. Extremist Hindu violence in response to desecration of sacred space and Protestant attacks against abortion clinics are unique to India and the United States, respectively. In these environments, fundamentalists who are confronted by transgressive acts committed by opponents are permitted the public

expression of religiously motivated anger, yet receive no state protection of the values that they consider crucial for their identity and existence.

Beyond its implication for violence motivated by offenses to religious values, my argument also dovetails with a burgeoning literature on religion and violence that strives to combine observations about religious belief and practice with an understanding of political incentives and constraints (for example, Philpott 2007; Svensson 2007; Horowitz 2009). These analyses exemplify an emerging methodology in the study of religion and international conflict that emphasizes a sensitivity to religious detail, be it the theology, organizational structure, iconography, rituals, or beliefs of the religious groups involved, but also a willingness to generalize from particular religious movements, regions, or instances to arrive at broader conclusions for international relations.

With a nod toward Clifford Geertz (1973), one might call such an approach to the study of religion and international affairs “thick religion.” Instead of striving, fruitlessly, to reduce religiously motivated violence to either religion or politics, this methodology proceeds from the religious microfoundations of a political phenomenon and then tries to construct successive layers of explanation, each more removed from the religious and closer to the political, until it arrives at the outcome to be explained. This approach rests on the assumption that the study of religion and international politics is necessarily an interdisciplinary exercise. In addition to politics, we ought also to study religion directly, be it through the sociology of religion, comparative religious analysis, or theology. Merely viewing religion through a political lens will not do.

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