

# Correspondence

## Debating the Role of Religion in War

Ron E. Hassner  
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*To the Editors (Ron E. Hassner writes):*

Michael Horowitz's compelling article deserves praise for pushing the agenda on religion and war beyond two contemporary obsessions: the fixation on religion and nonstate violent actors, particularly insurgents and terrorists, and the emphasis on Islam as the primary religious movement associated with violent conflict.<sup>1</sup> By examining how religion affected the duration of the Crusades, Horowitz persuasively demonstrates that religion has also shaped the behavior of conventional, Christian military forces.

This is a step in the right direction, but it is an all-too-cautious step. Because Horowitz overemphasizes the narrow, causal effects of religion, at the expense of exploring the manifold ways in which religion can pervade and constitute all aspects of warfare, his argument suffers from endogeneity and missing variable bias. As I show below, these difficulties result in an argument that both overstates and obscures the primary effects of religion on war. Historical analyses such as these distract from what should be scholars' primary concern regarding international security and religion: exploring the role of religion in contemporary interstate war.

### ENDOGENEITY AND MISSING VARIABLE BIAS

Horowitz argues that it was religious fervor that drove the Crusaders to continue their campaigns long after the costs exceeded the benefits. Religion shifted "individual- and group-level calculations about the utility gained from continuing to fight"; thus "religion played an important role in extending the Crusades" (pp. 170, 180). Horowitz may have the causal story backwards: the duration of the Crusades might have affected the religious fervor with which they were fought. As the evidence of growing failures and insurmountable obstacles increased, the Crusaders would have turned to religion for reassurance and ex post justification of their enterprise.

How might one tell apart these two accounts in which religion drives duration or duration drives religion? Horowitz's documentation of the rituals and beliefs that accompanied the Crusades fails to resolve this dilemma. The miraculous discovery of the Holy Lance in Antioch may have been the factor that motivated the Crusaders to ultimately defeat the Muslims besieging the city. Alternatively, the charismatic monk Peter Bartholomew might have felt compelled to produce the lance after a majority of the besieged Crusaders deserted the city and the rest, at the brink of starvation, prepared to surrender.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the Crusaders fasted and circumambulated Jerusalem in a barefoot

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1. Michael C. Horowitz, "Long Time Going: Religion and the Duration of Crusading," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 162–193. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. See *Gesta Francorum et Aliorum Hierosolymitanorum* [The deeds of the Franks], chaps. 10–15, and Raymond d'Aguilers, *Historia Francorum qui Ceperint Jerusalem* [The history of the Franks who cap-

procession on July 8, 1099, because they believed the divine vision reported by Peter Desiderius, who promised the imminent collapse of the city walls. Or they might have participated in this ceremony because shortages in supplies, severe losses in manpower, infighting among the various contingents, and a failed assault on the city on June 13 necessitated a cooperative ritual. The unusual ceremony failed to bring down the walls around Jerusalem, but it did lead to a public reconciliation between the different Crusader factions, which then launched a coordinated and successful assault on the city five days later.<sup>3</sup>

One way to resolve the endogeneity conundrum is to investigate whether religious fervor declined over the course of the Crusades. If, as Horowitz suggests, religion provided an initial stimulus that fueled the Crusades, then religious enthusiasm should have ebbed over time as the Crusaders came to exhaust the ideological capital that religion provided and grew disillusioned with the religious rationale behind their actions.

The history of the Crusades provides no indication of such a decline in religious enthusiasm. Crusaders continued to cite religious motivation well into the fourteenth century and, even as they were turning on their coreligionists, employed religious language and justifications to rationalize their actions. The miraculous apparitions associated with the First Crusade, such as the celestial vision of St. George and the discovery of the Holy Lance, found their matches in subsequent campaigns, if reports from participants are to be believed. The knights of the Fifth Crusade marched into battle behind priests carrying the True Cross. On the eve of the Sixth Crusade, "a luminous crucifix, with the marks of the five wounds of the Saviour, appeared suddenly in the heavens [which] greatly inflamed the enthusiasm of the people"; in the aftermath of the Seventh Crusade, "a celestial light shone every night on the bodies of the Christian warriors that remained unburied";<sup>4</sup> and so forth.

The failure of religious enthusiasm to decline as the Crusades dragged on could, of course, be explained by identifying the numerous occasions on which religious leaders in Europe reinvigorated the religious rationale driving the Crusades. Horowitz correctly points to several instances in which popes, following Urban II, reissued the call for Crusade. Yet this observation, rather than resolving the endogeneity problem, merely replaces it with a missing variable bias. For if the Crusades were sustained not by the grassroots religious beliefs of the participants but by occasional external encouragement from the popes, then it is papal motivations, not the motivations of the Crusaders, that require scholars' primary attention. Papal politics thus become a crucial variable missing from the analysis.

#### OVERSTATING AND UNDERSTATING THE ROLE OF RELIGION

So did religion shape the Crusades or did the Crusades shape religion? The answer is "both." Religion was not a force external to the Crusades that exerted a unidirectional causal effect. Instead, religion permeated every aspect of the Crusades, defining its

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tured Jerusalem], chaps. 4–9, both quoted in August C. Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1921), pp. 174–182.

3. Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2006), pp. 153–157.

4. Joseph Fr. Michaud, *History of the Crusades*, trans. William Robson (London: Routledge, 1881), Vol. 2, pp. 227, 268; and Vol. 3, p. 15.

meaning and significance to participants while evolving in response to the experiences of these actors. Simply put, it is as impossible to think of the Crusades without religion as it is to think of medieval Christianity in the absence of the Crusades.

By adopting causal language to investigate the link between religion and war, scholars risk both overstating and understating the influence of religion. The primary effect of religion on war is constitutive, not causal: religion principally shapes the identity of the actors and how they conceive of war, its meaning and context. This, in turn, may affect how participants speak, reason about, or justify conflict. Only then might religion, on occasion, influence behavior. Because religion can pervade all aspects of human behavior and decisionmaking, identifying its role in war requires exploring its impact across the board. Religion can shape not only the causes or duration of a conflict; it can influence the identities of participants and opponents; the legitimacy of weapons and targets; the timing and location of confrontations; how soldiers dress, eat, fight, and die; tactical and strategic calculations; or the conceptualization of victory and defeat.<sup>5</sup>

Consider, for example, the oblique ways in which the religious calendar has shaped the United States' experience of war. In deciding to launch a surprise attack on Trenton on December 26, 1776, George Washington may have hoped to catch the Hessian troops off guard, celebrating the second day of Christmas with revelry and drink, as was the German tradition.<sup>6</sup> One of the factors that influenced the choice of December 7 as an advantageous date for an attack on Pearl Harbor was the Japanese perception that Sunday observance would affect U.S. troop readiness. As Chiefs of Staff Hajime Sugiyama and Osami Nagano explained to Emperor Hirohito, "A Sunday would be best for the naval task force's attack on Hawaii: relatively high numbers of warships will be berthed at Pearl Harbor, Sunday being a day of rest and recreation."<sup>7</sup> The Vietcong launched the Tet Offensive against U.S. forces on the most important holiday in the Vietnamese religious calendar, Tet Nguyen Dan. As a result, half of the South Vietnamese military was on recreational leave and could be mobilized only with great difficulty.<sup>8</sup> More recently, U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq have been hampered by sectarian attacks, timed to coincide with Friday services and Muslim religious holidays, particularly Ramadan and the Shiite observance of Ashura.<sup>9</sup>

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5. In-depth analyses of the pervasive role of religion in conflict are few and far between. See James A. Aho, *Religious Mythology and the Art of War: Comparative Religious Symbolism of Military Violence* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1981); R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Madawi al-Rasheed and Marat Shterin, eds., *Dying for Faith: Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

6. David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 151, 201–205.

7. James William Morley, ed., *The Final Confrontation: Japan's Negotiations with the United States, 1941*, trans. David Anson Titus (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 322–323. For the source of this citation, see *ibid.*, p. 404 n. 293.

8. Gen. William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Dell, 1976), p. 424; James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 221; Ronnie E. Ford, *Tet 1968: Understanding the Surprise* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p. 103; and Clark Dougan and Stephen Weiss, *Nineteen Sixty-Eight* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1983), p. 12.

9. Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 64.

In none of these instances did religion cause war; yet in all of these cases, religious beliefs and practices influenced how participants conceived of themselves and their actions. Limiting the role of religion to the causal thus sets the bar too high: it risks both overstating the effect of religion on war and overlooking the diverse pathways, short of triggering war, through which religion can influence violence. Rather than conceive of religion as a deviant factor that forces behavior off the rational path, students of religion and violence should think of it as an omnipresent factor, pertinent wherever actors who are also members of a religious community engage in violence. This will provide international security scholars access to a wide universe of previously unexplored cases in which the religion of contemporary soldiers and policymakers can play as important a role as the religion of suicide bombers and Crusaders.

Doing so will require, foremost, forgoing the reification of religion for a clearer conceptualization of what is meant by religion. Religion is a system of beliefs, a collection of symbols and practices, and a social structure. Which of these elements extended the duration of the Crusades, in Horowitz's account? Possible factors might include the authority of the popes, the numinous power of relics and battlefield miracles, the demands inherent in formal Catholic theology, or the personal beliefs and superstitions of participants.

Indeed, it is not always clear whose religion Horowitz is writing about in his analysis of the Crusades. It is unlikely that the French participants of the First Crusade of 1096 were motivated by the same "religion" as the German Crusaders of the sixteenth century. Leopold VI of Austria, who led the Fifth Crusade, was not driven by the same religious principles as Saint Francis of Assisi, who joined the same Crusade to make peace between Christians and Muslims. Thus the second requirement for an in-depth analysis of religion and war is the development of a more nuanced understanding of how the multiple components of religion affect various actors in different ways.

#### THE PATH AHEAD

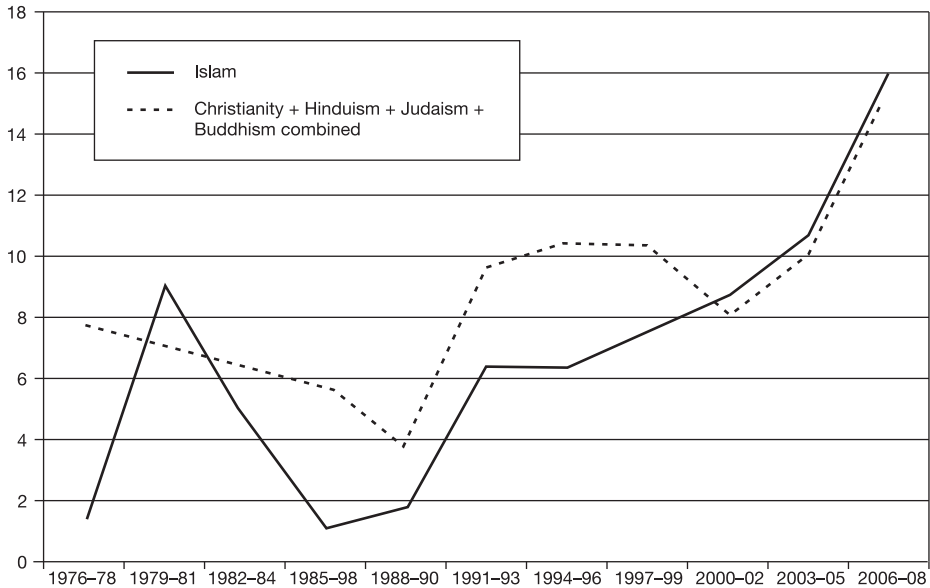
Horowitz's focus on non-Muslim warfare is timely, given trends in the coverage of religion and war, including in the pages of this journal (see figure 1). From 1976 to 2009, the average number of *International Security* articles referencing major world religions tripled. This encouraging development is marred by a consistent overemphasis on Islam. Since 2001, scholars of religion and conflict have become consumed with Islam: *International Security* now publishes more articles with references to this religious movement than to all other major world religions combined.<sup>10</sup> This bias reflects a preoccupation with religion as a deviant force in international security that is perceived as disproportionately affecting the behavior of non-Western and nonstate actors.

Once scholars conceive of religion as a pervasive force in warfare, we can start shifting the emphasis of our analyses away from extreme cases, involving religious extremists and fanatics, and toward the typical universe of religion and contemporary

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10. This trend is by no means unique to *International Security*. More books about Islam and war have appeared in print since 2001 than ever before in history, from the invention of moveable type in the 1450s until 2001. The average *New York Times* edition after 2001 mentions Islam about three times as often as did the average edition between 1999 and 2001. See Ron E. Hassner, "Religion and International Affairs: The State of the Art," in Patrick James, ed., *Religion, Identity, and Global Governance: Ideas, Evidence, and Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).

Figure 1. Average Number of *International Security* Articles Per Year Referencing Islam Compared with All Other Major World Religions Combined



NOTE: To arrive at these figures, I searched for *International Security* articles containing the words Islam/ic, Muslim/s, Christianity, Christian/s, Hinduism, Hindu/s, Judaism, Jew/s, Jewish, or Buddhism, Buddhist/s. An article that included more than one reference to a single religious movement counted as a single entry, but an article referencing multiple religious movements counted as multiple entries. I averaged the number of articles in a given three-year period, starting with Vol. 1, No. 1 (Summer 1976) and ending in Vol. 33, No. 4 (Spring 2009).

interstate conflict. What these standard cases may lack in drama, they make up for in quantity, relevance, and significance. It is time to shift resources away from studying “other people’s religion,” be they insurgents or Crusaders, and focus on how religion is shaping the experience of modern states on the battlefield.

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*Michael C. Horowitz Replies:*

I would like to thank Ron Hassner for his response to my recent article.<sup>1</sup> Hassner’s well-researched work on religion and war is at the forefront of scholarship on this issue. While Hassner and I agree far more than we disagree, in this rejoinder I argue that

1. Michael C. Horowitz, “Long Time Going: Religion and the Duration of Crusading,” *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2009), pp. 162–193.

many of his criticisms are actually misunderstandings that, when resolved, strengthen my original argument.

In my article, I argue that the Crusading indulgence and other religious aspects of Crusading played a critical role in the longevity of the institution, which survived from the end of the eleventh century until the late sixteenth century. After the triumph of the First Crusade in 1099, the movement experienced generations of defeats, culminating with the loss of all territory in the Levant after the battle of Acre in 1291. Yet the institution of Crusading remained vibrant for another 250 years. Although successive defeats chipped away at its support, Crusading ended only when the rise of the Protestant Reformation drove the final stake through the Catholic Church's embrace of the enterprise: the mid-sixteenth-century Council of Trent prohibited the sale of indulgences and failed even to mention Crusading. The longevity of the post-1291 period of Crusading demonstrates how religion fueled this movement long after its initial justification had ended.

Hassner and I disagree over whether political scientists should study historical cases to discern potentially generalizable patterns. Hassner argues that analyzing the Crusades "distract[s] from what should be scholars' primary concern regarding international security and religion: exploring the role of religion in contemporary interstate war." Later he asserts that scholars should eschew researching outlier cases and "other people's religion."

No single case can tell scholars all they seek to know, but cases, even outliers, can yield important insights. In addition, a Catholic movement such as the Crusades is not representative of "other people's religion"—the United States alone is home to about 68 million Catholics. More important, Hassner presents a false choice between studying the past and studying contemporary wars that might be more relevant if mine was the latest in a series of *International Security* articles on the Crusades, rather than the first. Studying the Crusades helps to show what Hassner would like to see: the examination of cases outside the context of Islam and terrorism where religion has mattered. If we cannot find "religion" in the Crusades, we are unlikely to discover it elsewhere.

Studying the Crusades is also important for the reasons I lay out in my article: it can yield useful lessons for policymakers concerned with today's violent, transnational, religious movements (pp. 172–174). The Crusades are potentially more relevant to understanding Salafi jihadis in the war on terrorism than, for example, the Napoleonic Wars or other "traditional" interstate wars. Given that the systematic study of religion and war is still in its infancy and that the Crusades remain highly resonant in the public sphere, it makes sense to use the case of the Crusades to build a foundation for future research.

My article evaluates how religious belief, in combination with other factors, lengthened the duration of the Crusading movement. Hassner argues that I may have the story backwards, stating that "the duration of the Crusades might have affected the religious fervor with which they were fought." Citing examples from the First Crusade, he writes that my argument may have an endogeneity problem, because "as the evidence of growing failures and insurmountable obstacles increased, the Crusaders would have turned to religion for reassurance."

The Crusades were founded as a religious enterprise, and historians generally agree that the Crusading indulgence played a crucial role in supporting the institution. Even after the Crusaders knew they were likely to fail, as documented by the charters and

statements they left behind, Crusading continued. Why? On this, Hassner and I seem to agree. People at war always have the option of continuing to fight when the war goes poorly, but they typically do not, which is why most wars are relatively short and the Crusades are so unusual. That some Crusaders “turned to religion for reassurance” when Crusades did not go well, as Hassner notes, is evidence that religious belief increased their duration, thus reinforcing my argument. Hassner is actually demonstrating an additional causal mechanism in favor of my claim, not an endogeneity problem. His examples from the First Crusade occurred prior to the institutionalization of Crusading within Catholicism, which I point out in my article (p. 181). My argument deals with a subsequent period.

Hassner then states, “If, as Horowitz suggests, religion provided an initial stimulus that fueled the Crusades, then religious enthusiasm should have ebbed over time.” He cites examples of Crusading in the Levant after the First Crusade, between 1099 and 1291, to show that religious fervor existed despite repeated defeats. Hassner’s characterization of my argument, however, is inaccurate; I claim that religion both permeated and prolonged the institution of Crusading, not just that it provided the initial impetus. Hassner also confuses whether support existed to the same extent it did before the above-mentioned defeats with whether enough support still existed to field a Crusading army. As I note, defeats undermined enthusiasm for Crusading, but the institution persisted because of genuine conviction, social networks, and the power of the Catholic Church in medieval Europe (p. 193).

Additionally, all of the examples Hassner uses to refute my argument occurred before 1291, when the Crusaders controlled territory in the Levant and had numerous motivations to continue fighting. After their defeat at Acre in 1291, however, the Crusaders no longer held territory in the Holy Land. Yet Crusading continued as a result of residual enthusiasm and the “lock-in” of the institution (p. 174). Hassner seems to have missed that my central argument is about this subsequent period. Crusading after 1291 is primary evidence of what I call its “stubborn persistence” (p. 183). The shift to the selling of Crusading indulgences (which began with Pope Innocent III in the early thirteenth century), the formalization of the theology of the Crusades in Church canon, and the underlying support in some segments of society for Crusading created sunk costs in the institution that defeats on the battlefield undermined but did not overwhelm. Although other incentives began to play an even larger role in Crusading from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, I show that the institution could not have remained vibrant without a religious impetus. Religious enthusiasm was also not the same in every location and in every period of the Crusades (which addresses another point Hassner raises about the diversity of Catholic beliefs during the Crusading period, an observation my article shares). Moreover, even if Hassner were correct that religious enthusiasm did not diminish prior to 1291, that would merely reinforce my point. It would mean that religious beliefs led to calculations about the costs and benefits of continuing to fight that were different from what purely material explanations would predict.

Hassner next claims that my argument may omit the influence of papal politics or other motivating factors for the continuation of the Crusades, but I explicitly acknowledge the potential relevance of papal politics. Positive responses to the popes’ calls for recruits show the broad relevance of religion at the time, regardless of whether papal politics influenced the timing, or whether other factors were also involved. In addition,

I argue that other variables also mattered (p. 180), a point that accords with the conclusions of historians of the Crusades such as Norman Housley, Jonathan Riley-Smith, and Christopher Tyreman.<sup>2</sup>

Hassner wonders whether scholars should consider religion a causal or a constitutive factor. He writes, "So did religion shape the Crusades or did the Crusades shape religion? The answer is 'both.'" My article is entirely consistent with this perspective. My argument that religion played a causal role in prolonging Crusading does not exclude the notion that Crusading influenced religion. This is true whether one views religion as causal, constitutive, or both (as I do). Although my article is more narrowly focused because of space constraints, the underlying argument is consistent with treating religion as constitutive. Using causal language in this case does not "risk both overstating and understating the influence of religion"; rather it lays the foundation for the research agenda Hassner outlines.

Hassner's discussion of the role of the religious calendar is novel and represents another scholarly step toward understanding the relationship between religion and war. Although it does not address the possibility that religion can at times be a causal factor or that it mattered in the Crusades, I hope he pursues this line of research. Hassner's argument for considering religion in all its depth, not as a deviant factor that causes actors to stray from "rational" decisions, is another area where we agree. Finally, Hassner and I agree on the need to evaluate religion beyond just issues surrounding Islam and terrorism.

To conclude, I argue in my article that religion permeated the Crusades in a way that significantly lengthened their duration. This is not a point I think Hassner disagrees with, and as I explain above, the arguments he makes actually reinforce my core argument. The study of religion is a unique example where, because of globalization and changes in the international security environment, researching the distant past may yield even greater benefits than studying the recent past. Moreover, given that systematic theorizing about religion and war is in its early stages, trying to identify patterns in historical cases such as the Crusades is not a distraction. Rather it is an important part of theory building concerning religion and international politics. For this reason, I hope our exchange, and my article, are closer to the first word on this topic than the last.

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2. I examine papal politics and other factors in greater depth in Michael C. Horowitz, "Religion and War: From the Crusades to Al Qaeda," unpublished book manuscript.