Ethics and Religion

RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND VIOLENCE

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Abstract

I examine three main topics. The first is organized violence in the name of religion. I focus on collective violence by groups whose members share a religious affiliation. Having a taxonomy that distinguishes collective violence in the name of religion from other cases (e.g. an abortion clinic bomber) is important, because the causes of violence in the name of religion vary by type and by context. The second topic is how to frame collective violence in the name of religion. Should we focus on theology, religious convictions, or religious doctrine? Should we discount religious doctrine as a variable altogether? Or should we characterize religion as about identity, a source of community allegiances, and group affiliation? I argue that when we adopt the label 'religious violence' and apply it to organized violence, one of our central focuses should be on ways that religion is an identity. Thirdly, I present a short case study that considers collective violence by Uighur Muslims in northwest China, Xinjiang province. This example is helpful because it illustrates that the identity approach is well suited to navigate some hard questions about how to classify (i.e., as religious, as ethnic, as a response to political domination, etc.) organized violence in the name of religion.

Keywords: Religious Violence, Identity, Collective Violence, Intersectionality, Xinjiang

Introduction

There are a number of competing accounts of violence in the name of religion. One well-known example is the civilization thesis.[1] On this view attitudes about the relationship between political and religious authority, a propensity to violence in the name of religion, and commitments to authoritarian or democratic politics, reflect the dominant religious traditions that inform the collective identity of a society. This view also holds that conflict between irreconcilable religious traditions is a major source of violence. Another view, defended by the New Atheists,[2] holds that the non-rational nature of religious convictions, in particular the priority of faith over reason, inspires adherents of religious traditions to commit violence on

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[1] Samuel Huntington, "Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* (Summer, 1993).
[2] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 2005).

the basis of a blind obedience to a conception of religious authority. Both of these views assign causation to religion to explain violence in the name of religion. By contrast, others claim that the very idea of religious violence is problematic, because its rests upon vague or poorly defined concepts. According to one account, the very idea of religious violence is mostly a myth.[3] The current ideological frame for demarcating the secular from the religious is an artifact of the modern nation state and other historically contingent factors. This is said to undermine the idea of religious violence as defended by those aligned with the civilizational approach and New Atheism.

In this paper I defend an alternative to these views on religious violence. The label religious violence is sometimes apt, yet it is a great oversimplification to assign causation to religious doctrine or religious conviction whenever violence in the name of religion occurs. According to what I will call the identity approach, human identity impacts human agency in ways that reflect many kinds of value commitments, including religious, political, and cultural. These value commitments can trigger violent responses based on perceived threats to a collective identity. The identity approach offers a more plausible framework for understanding collective and organized violence in the name of religion compared to the other views that I consider. It is not, however, a general theory of violence in the name of religion. Though I do not rule out *a priori* that one could develop a plausible general theory of violence in the name of religion, we should exercise skepticism about generalities when investigating the phenomenon of religious violence. For example, the role that religion plays in a campaign for national liberation against a foreign occupation may differ in significant ways from the role religion plays in inter-religious violence between groups whose religious identity strongly correlates with ethnic identity. Moreover, given the politically charged nature of debates on religious violence, it is important to avoid the pitfalls of hypotheses on religious violence that serve political aims rather than an effort to understand the causes of a complex issue.

By section the paper is organized as follows. First, I present the idea of collective violence in the name of religion. I focus on violence by groups whose members share a religious affiliation. I consider some competing ways we might frame collective violence in the name of religion. Should we consider such violence as a product of non-rational metaphysical convictions as the New Atheists suggest we should? Is it a fair characterization of Christian doctrine that it contains incipient Lockean notions about the relationship between political and religious authority, whereas other religious traditions, such as Islam, lack such a doctrinal basis for the modern liberal state? This is a central thesis of the civilizational approach.[4] In the second section I defend the identity approach to collective violence in the name of religion. In the third section I offer a brief case study that considers collective violence by Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, China. This example is helpful for several reasons. First, Uighur identity in contemporary China is a composite of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity markers. Since all three forms of identity – ethnicity, religion, linguistic – face significant levels of oppression by the Chinese state, violence in response to such oppression cannot in any straightforward sense be called, 'Muslim violence'. Second, the levels of oppression against a

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3   William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Conflict* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
4   For an excellent critique of this view, see Alfred Stepan, "Religion, Democracy, and the 'Twin Tolerations'," *Journal of Democracy* (11:4, 2000), pp. 37-57.

religious and ethnic minority in Xinjiang represent a paradigm example of how collective violence is a response to repression. And third, collective violence by Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang offers a helpful illustration of the identity approach to violence in the name of religion. I conclude in section IV.

I. Collective violence in the name of religion

Not all violence in the name of religion is collective. The Tsarnaev brothers [i.e. Boston Marathon Bombers], an abortion clinic bomber, a religious migrant in a diaspora community, or an individual who is 'radicalized' by social media, can commit violence in the name of religion that is not collective violence. A general theory of violence in the name of religion would examine these and many other types of cases. Yet an important first step requires having a taxonomy that distinguishes collective violence in the name of religion from these other cases.

Variables that we need to consider when thinking about violence in the name of religion include: geopolitics; the intersection of religious with other identity markers such as ethnicity; the intersection of religious identity and political grievances (e.g. the U.S. and British sponsorship of the coup that overthrew the democratically elected president of Iran in 1953 remains a focal point in contemporary Iranian politics); military occupation; and the strong correlation between repressive state religion policies and violence in the name of religion.[5] These factors contribute to violence in the name of religion in different ways in different contexts. Therefore, the very idea of 'religious violence' is hopelessly vague unless formulated in a way that carefully distinguishes these and other relevant variables, as well as noting the interaction effects between salient variables.

In *On Violence* Hannah Arendt offered the following observation,

> It is…a rather sad reflection on the present state of political science that our terminology does not distinguish among such key words as "power," "strength," "force," "authority," and finally "violence-all of which refer to distinct phenomena… To use them as synonyms not only indicates a certain deafness to linguistic meanings, which would be serious enough, but it has also resulted in a kind of blindness to the realities they correspond to.[6]

Arendt's comments are helpful for two reasons. One is that taxonomy matters to how we think about violence in the name of religion for reasons just mentioned: some violence in the name of religion is collective, some is not; and the causes of violence in the name of religion in one context can differ significantly from other contexts. Second, how we frame violence in the name of religion will, for good or for ill, orient our judgments about what counts as evidence for what we are trying to explain.

Four framing strategies for understanding violence in the name of religion can be evaluated in light of Arendt's comments: 1) New Atheism; 2) the civilizational approach; 3) the myth of religious violence; and 4) the identity approach to organized violence in the name of religion. In the remainder of this section I briefly summarize each.

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[5] See for example, Brian Grimm and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York, London: Harcourt Press, 1970), p. 43. There is a nice discussion of this passage in John D. Carlson's, "Religion and Violence: Coming to Terms with Terms," *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, Andrew Murphy (ed.) (Blackwell, 2011): (7-22), p. 15.

According to Sam Harris religion is, "the most prolific source of violence in our history."[7] He also claims that, "...faith is precisely what differentiates every Muslim from every infidel. Without faith, most Muslim grievances against the West become impossible even to formulate, much less avenge."[8] This view assigns causation to religious faith, which in turn is construed as an irrational source of belief formation. On this view, faith is immune to salient evidence that might undermine a religious conviction, a source for dogmatism, and a wellspring for all manner of delusions and fantasies. Harris' view is that that religious belief and doctrine beget violence.

In "The Clash of Civilizations?" Samuel Huntington famously claims,

> It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new [post-Cold-War] world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.[9]

Civilizations on this view define and demarcate identities, which in turn serve as the basis for competing ways of organizing government and society. Conflict emerges from relations between powers that represent different civilizational identities. Civilizational identities overlap with nation states, the political units that embody the power that expresses civilizational identities. This view differs from that of the New Atheists, in part because it claims that not all religious identities are sources of non-rational convictions that give rise to intolerance and fanaticism. Partly for this reason, the civilizational approach has gained traction among the American Christian right, many members of whom claim that non-Christian forms of religious identity, in particular Islam, are incompatible with democratic political values.

In his recent book, *The Myth of Religious Violence* William Cavanaugh argues that there are no trans-historical or essential properties to religious belief, doctrine, or identity. We lack an account of necessary and sufficient conditions for something to qualify as religious. Therefore, "[w]ithout a clear distinction between what is religious and what is not religious, any argument that religion per se does or does not cause violence becomes hopelessly arbitrary."[10] On this view, what we now call religion is an artifact, somewhat like the national identities that are artifacts of the modern nation state. Those who attribute causal powers to religion by contrast assume that religion, like a natural kind, has essential properties that can be clearly delineated. Such properties are said to have causal powers all by themselves, independently of confounding variables or other possible explanations. Yet if we don't have a stable conception of what counts as 'religion' that view is unsupportable. Cavanaugh's thesis is motivated largely by skepticism towards prevailing accounts of religious violence.

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[7] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Terror, and the Future of Reason,* quoted in Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence,* p. 212.
[8] Harris, quoted in Cavanaugh, p. 213.
[9] " Clash of Civilizations?", p. 1.
[10] Cavanaugh, p. 21.

In stressing the idea of religion as about identity, a fourth position endorses what is sometimes called a functional approach to understanding religion. Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*[11] is the most famous example of a work that defends this view. On Durkheim's view,

> *a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single community....[A] second element...is not less essential than the first: demonstrating that the idea of religion...must be something eminently collective.[12]*

The identity approach also informs a number contemporary positions ranging across disciplines from social science, anthropology, and moral psychology.[13] One thing these views have in common is the conviction that religious identity is a composite of multiple factors, including: religious doctrine, culture, historical memory, and political allegiances, among others. What in contemporary parlance is called *intersectionality,* or the idea that human identity is a composite of multiple factors, is central to this way of thinking about religious identity.

Notice that if we do not heed Arendt's warning, we won't have a reliable means of adjudicating the merits of these incompatible positions on violence in the name of religion. This is a compelling reason to stipulate which kind of violence in the name of religion we hope to understand. Here the focus is on collective violence.

In *The Politics of Collective Violence*[14] Charles Tilly has given us a useful taxonomy for types of collective violence. Tilly distinguishes brawls, scattered attacks, sabotage, riots, violence that emerges from broken negotiations, as well as campaigns of organized collective violence. Making progress in understanding the significance of collective violence depends in part on being able to isolate what triggers a gun fight between cowboys over a card game from what triggers interreligious violence between Hindus and Muslims in modern India. Likewise if the Kurdish PKK in eastern Turkey is supported in part by agents who harbor grievances about past promises that have been reneged (e.g. promises to negotiate on fair terms by the Turkish state, promises by the American government to support an independent state), then what Tilly terms broken negotiations will be an important factor in that conflict. It may be that triggers for organized violence in one context appear in organized violence of another, but that cannot be settled *a priori.* To make progress here we need to examine multiple contexts, such as interreligious violence in a new post-colonial state, violence between a

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[11] Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* trans. by Carol Cosman (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912/2008).

[12] Durkheim, p. 46.

[13] Jonathan Haidt explicitly defends a version of the functionalist approach in, "Religion is a Team Sport," *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), pp. 246-273. David Sloan Wilson adapts some features to the functionalist approach in *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Tim Crane offers a number of interesting ideas on religion as identity in *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017). And Asef Bayet in *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007) emphasizes ways that religious identity is informed by interpretive practices that vary by cultural, national and regional contexts. Rezi Aslan also emphasizes ways that religion is an identity in his new book, *God: A Human History* (New York: Random House, 2017).

[14] Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

new religious group and members of a dominant religious identity, violence in the name of religion that follows a military invasion by a foreign state, or a charismatic religious leader who calls for mass violence.

Violence in the name of religion can take these among many other forms, ranging from al-Qaeda sponsored terrorism, to organized violence by mainline Protestant Christians against Mormons in 19th C America, to a resistance movement composed mainly of Muslims against French Occupation in Algeria, or Buddhists fighting Hindu soldiers in Sri Lanka. Each of these cases can be classified as violence in the name of religion. Yet 'religious violence' is not a very helpful label if we consider each of these cases without trying to identify the causes that trigger them. The predominately Muslim members of FLN who waged a violent campaign against the French government in Algeria often invoked religious values to mobilize support for their cause. Yet given all the factors in play, the label, 'war for independence' is more apt than 'religious violence'. Likewise, the sarin gas attack by members of Aum Shirinko in a Tokyo subway were conducted by agents who had considerably different motives than the 9/11 attackers who represented al-Qaeda.[15] So one distinction worth paying attention to is violence in the name of religion that lacks a political goal and violence in the name of religion that has a political goal. Moreover, once we settle on a classification of violence in the name of a political goal there are further questions about causation. It may turn out that the propaganda expressed by a group presents religious values as the primary rationale for collective violence, when in actuality the intersection of political variables, such as domination, repression, and resistance, are more salient causes.

Tilly's work is important for my project in part because he sharpens the taxonomical options for how we classify violence in the name of religion. Taking his taxonomical concerns as a cue, my focus is on one species of violence in the name of religion; namely, organized violence by groups. To be sure, this category has fuzzy edges, as well as paradigm cases. A suicide bombing campaign by the Tamil Tigers or a terror campaign by the FLN in the war for independence in Algeria are paradigm cases. A knife assault on a police checkpoint by 20 Uighur men by comparison might look more like a scattered attack or a riot. Yet if there are a sufficient number of such attacks over an extended period of time, depending on the relevant variables (e.g. internal colonialism by the Chinese state, material and moral support from the Uighur diaspora community outside China, ethnic, religions and linguistic differences between Uighur and Han Chinese), there may be good reasons to classify this as organized and not just collective violence.

Matters are in fact more complicated than the brief characterizations here suggest. For instance, for some questions, we need hypotheses that test for multi-causation. This is true of individual case studies (e.g. interreligious violence between Sunni Muslims and Coptic Christians in Egypt, or Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians in the Balkans, etc.) as well as comparative studies (e.g. violence between religious groups in democratic and in authoritarian states). The identity approach is intended to offer partial insights into a complex phenomenon.

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[15] Steve Clark, *The Justification of Religious Violence* (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2014).

II. How to Frame Collective Violence in the Name of Religion

Some ways of framing organized violence in the name of religion render causes invisible, produce false positives, reinforce confirmation biases, or serve a political agenda. Consider the claim that people join al-Qaeda because they hate the freedom enjoyed by American citizens. Assigning the label 'religious violence' is one thing; properly identifying causes for such violence is another. When we adopt the descriptor 'religious violence' and apply it to organized violence, in some contexts it is helpful to examine ways that religion is an identity. In this section I present the argument in favor of the identity approach.

The identity approach emphasizes unifying and exclusionary characteristics of religious identity. Religion unites by forging shared community identities but also excludes by demarcating non-members. This way of thinking about religion is important to questions about religious violence because it helps us see that organized violence is often triggered by perceived threats to a shared identity. In this respect, religious identity like ethnicity and nationality, can mobilize groups to support violence.

One of the best studies on collective violence in the name of religion is Robert Pape's *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.*[16] Pape's central thesis is,

> The bottom line is that suicide terrorism is mainly a response to foreign occupation. Isolated incidents in other circumstances do occur. However, modern suicide terrorism is best understood as an extreme response strategy for national liberation against democracies with troops that pose an immanent threat to control the territory the terrorist view as their homeland.[17]

On Pape's view, political occupation plays a greater role in motivating support for suicide bombing campaigns than religious belief. His data set for this claim includes every known suicide bombing from 1980-2003.

Here is a condensed synopsis of Pape's research,

> 1. In well over 90% of all cases—across states and across religious identities, the best explanation for what motivates support for a suicide bombing campaign is that such violence is believed to be an effective means to a political end. Religion mobilizes support. But religion is not the trigger. Nor is it the end. Occupation is the cause; freedom from occupation is the end.
> 2. Democracies are more vulnerable to suicide attack, because their constituencies can more easily pressure political elites to withdraw from a conflict.
> 3. Religion is a variable, but mainly when there is a religious difference between occupied and occupier. This factor suggests that we should pay at least as much attention to perceived threats to a community identity as to the religious composition of a group that supports suicide terrorism.

Democracies with militaries perceived as occupiers are more likely to be targeted by suicide bombing campaigns, because such campaigns are political strategies and democratic states are more likely to change tactics in response. Since political elites in authoritarian states are not answerable to public opinion to the same extent, their survival as elites and perceived legitimacy does not depend on domestic pressure, such as mass protests against a military campaign abroad.

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[16] Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[17] *Dying to Win,* p. 23.

Consider also for example a post-colonial struggle by a colonized group whose religious identity differs from that of the colonial power. Should we characterize violence by the National Liberation Front in the Algerian war for independence as collective religious violence or a political struggle for independence? The French massacred thousands, and tortured many.[18] When religious identity converts political grievances (e.g. against oppression) into a narrative of struggle against a foreign power, violence in the name of religion is not straight-forwardly religious violence.

The social science research identifies ways that the configuration of identity markers within groups and between groups is relevant to whether collective violence in the name of religion is likely to occur. Philosophical accounts of identity can make a helpful contribution in this context. Consider *the intersectionality problem.* Identity is a composite whose elements typically include nationality, ethnicity, language(s), historical memory, political affiliation, and religion or non-religion. What some call 'religious violence' to designate violence in the name of religion might have a political cause or may be a response to a perceived threat to multiple overlapping identity markers, including ethnicity and religion. The religion as identity approach will not tell us everything about organized violence in the name of religion, but it does offer a perspective that is helpful in bringing to light factors that are ignored by other accounts of violence in the name of religion.

The composition of human identity is intersectional: ethnicity, language, religion, political affiliation, nationality, profession, hobbies; all of these contribute to a person's identity in the sense of shaping what matters to her and why. Intersectionality poses a problem for explanations of organized violence in part because this fact about human identity makes it difficult to identity the primary motives that trigger organized violence. It is true that some identity markers play a more significant role in collective violence than others. Collective violence in the name of the nation or of a religion is more likely than collective violence in the name of the Andrie Tarkovsky Film Society or the International Cricket Fan Club.

Yet even if we settle the issue of which identity markers do and which do not have the potential to enjoin support for collective violence, questions remain. Collective violence might have a political end, yet circumstances might be such that framing the discourse in terms of religion is more effective as a means to that political end. Why should we expect discourses that seek a justification for collective violence to be any less prone to self-serving strategies or even self-deception than any other discourse in which power is a central concern?

Likewise, the intersection of religious and political affiliation, for example, can render an agent's religious identity apt to be influenced by her political affiliation, or vice versa. Ethnicity may be relevant too. An obvious example is white Protestant identity in the context of American politics. A white American with a Protestant religious identity may have a Protestant religious identity that differs significantly from that of a German Protestant, or a Latina American Protestant, or African American Protestant.[19] In some contexts, invoking the identity marker 'Protestant' will be less informative than invoking a composition of identity

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[18] For a detailed account, see Alistair Home, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (New York Review Books Classics, 2006).

[19] See Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000).

markers, or even just non-religious identity makers. For example, in the American context it may turn out that being white is a better predictor of one's conception of religion and politics than being Protestant.

The New Atheists claim that non-rational religious convictions, rather than perceived threats to identity, cause violence in the name of religion. The evidence suggests that this claim is false. The civilizational approach does emphasis identity, and does not in principle suffer from an anti-religious bias. Yet this view construes identity in ways that are not fine grained enough. For instance, generalizations such as 'western Christianity' or 'Confucian identity' are useful for some purposes, such as understanding broad historical trends or the historical roots to self-understanding among large groups of persons. Yet collective violence in the name of religion occurs in many different contexts and under many different political conditions. On this measure, the civilizational approach overgeneralizes to the point of offering a very poor explanation of collective violence in the name of religion. It characterizes political conflicts, such as a war for independence between Algerian Muslims and the French colonial state, as a 'clash of civilizational identities'. Yet Algerian Muslims were motivated to participate in collective violence against the French colonial state, not because they are Muslims, but because they wanted to resist oppression. Moreover, despite the fact that Cavanaugh makes an important contribution insofar as he offers compelling rebuttals to the New Atheist and the civilizational approaches, he has not shown that the idea of religious violence is a myth. A better characterization is to claim that collective violence in the name of religion is complicated, stemming as it does from multiple variables that intersect in ways that vary by context. The case of collective violence by Uighurs in contemporary China is one illustration of this.

III. Collective Violence in Xinjiang

In Northwest China, Xinjiang province, Uighur, face extreme repression by the Chinese state. Despite the many falsehoods that stand behind the 'one China' policy, according to which China is a unified state in which all citizens are equal, the reality is that China is a multicultural and multi-religious society whose state policies promote a conception of national identity that is mostly opposed to this diversity. Uighur citizens are mostly Hanafi Sunni Muslims. Uighur is a Turkic language, and Uighur society is distinct from the Han dominated conception of Chinese citizenship that stands behind official state policy. It is true that some concessions have been granted to Uighurs in China. For instance, during the era of the 'one-child' policy Uighur were given an exemption. Yet the rationale for this was reasons of state power, in particular conflict reduction, not accommodation of distinct religious or cultural practices. As Bovingdon puts it in *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*,

> …even though Uyghurs have expressed deep dissatisfaction with governance in Xinjiang and pointedly called for policy changes, Beijing…[has]almost never responded by accommodating those demand or entertaining public discussions of the concerns. Instead, officials have strengthened unpopular policies and cracked down on both political speech and spaces for assembly outside party control.[20]

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[20] Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), Kindle Version, Loc 2496.

Given these contextually relevant factors we can ask, is organized violence in this context religious, interethnic, mostly a political response to oppression, or triggered by some combination of these or other factors? A brief look at the occasional organized violence committed by Uighurs in Xinjiang will help guide our thinking about how to answer this question.[21]

The following list of some major incidents in the past ten years is helpful for context,

July 2009: significant protests by Uighurs in Urumqi resulted in 140 deaths[22]
July 2013: a car with several passengers drove into a group of pedestrians at Tiananmen Square killing 2 and injuring nearly 40[23]
March 2014: a group of Uighurs armed with knives attacked civilians at a train station killing 29[24]
August 2014: three armed Uighurs killed a controversial imam in Kashgar outside the famous Id Kah Mosque in Kashgar; many believed the imam was too supportive of the Chinese Communist Party and its repressive policies[25]
December 2016: a group of assailants attacked a regional Communist party office, detonating a bomb[26]

This partial list includes collective violence by groups of individuals who may not have had any affiliation with known groups, as well as violence that known groups—e.g. The East Turkestan Liberation Organization—took credit for. Some acts of violence in the name of Uighur identity were likely well coordinated while others where by comparison more spontaneous.

Though not a totally neutral description, for starters let's call this violence in the name of Uighur identity. So how might we move beyond a general label, 'Uighur violence' to one that helps us understand why there is organized violence in Xinjiang? Here is a plausible perspective. Consider the following: the mass surveillance state in Xinjiang imposes a level of repression that exceeds the authoritarianism in most other Chinese provinces, as well as nearly every other authoritarian state. At random check points Uighur are force to surrender cell phones from which all data can be downloaded in a matter of seconds; Uighur are force to make audio recordings at such check points—presumably to assist in identification when cell phones are tapped; some two million Uighur men were ordered to surrender their international passports, effectively undermining the right to migrate or travel abroad; Uighur businesses are forced to sell alcohol, Uighur university students are prohibited from fasting during Ramadan; and an estimated 5% of the Uighur population has been detained in mass 're-education' camps, or more accurately gulags.[27] Too be sure, the mass surveillance state exists in other

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[21] See James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). See also James Millward's recent op-ed, "What its Like to Live in a Surveillance State," *New York Times,* Feb 3rd, 2018.
[22] Tania Branigan, "Ethnic Violence in China Leaves 140 Dead," *The Guardian,* July 6th, 2009.
[23] Jonathan Kaimen, "Islamist Group Claims Responsibility for Attack on Tiananman Square," *The Gaurdian,* Nov. 25th, 2003.
[24] Hanna Beech, "Deadly Terrorist Attack in Southwestern China Blamed on Separatist Muslim Uighurs," *Time,* March 2nd, 2014.
[25] Edward Wong, "Teenager Arrested in Killing of Imam in Western China," *New York Times,* August 25th, 2014.
[26] Reuters in Beijing, "Xinjiang Attack: four 'terrorists' and one bystander killed, says China," December 29th, 2016.
[27] "A Summer Vacation in China's Muslim Gulag," *Foreign Affairs* (February, 28th, 2018).

regions too, including Tibet. Yet by comparison, the scale of the surveillance state in Xinjiang is probably unrivaled anywhere on the planet.

Are these factors relevant to how we frame collective violence by Uighurs in Xinjiang? That's a rhetorical question, of course. But notice that when we frame violence by a Muslim population as 'religious violence' we are prone to overlooking other possible factors that may be more relevant to explaining such violence. And in Xinjiang it is reasonable to explore the following hypothesis: the relation between Uighur citizens and the Chinese state is a primary cause of support for violence; ethnic and religious identity are the means by which support for violence is mobilized. Moreover, we can use the current situation in Xinjiang to formulate hypotheses about what might happen in the future, depending on how oppressive the surveillance state becomes and how effective it is at repressing resistance to it. Total domination would prevent collective and organized violence, but not the will thereto. Although internal colonialism differs from traditional colonialism (e.g. the French subjection of a Muslim population in Algeria), and of course differs from military occupation by a foreign power, there is data which support the claim that violence in the name of an identity, religious or otherwise, is frequently triggered by a response to oppression or some source for a deep and enduring grievance. In the case of religion, "…countries with the lowest levels of religious hostilities have the lowest average levels of religious repression and those at the highest levels of hostilities have the highest levels of repression."[28]

There are two reasons this context is useful as an illustration of the central ideas on religion, identity, and violence that I've presented. First, it illustrates the intersectionality problem. Uighur citizens differ from Han and other Chinese co-nationals along ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity markers. Most are Hanafi Sunni Muslim. Some approaches to collective violence won't seriously ask the question, *'which identity marker is most salient?'* If one is predisposed to believe that religious convictions are what motivate collective violence, then it's easy to ignore other variables that might be more salient. Others, such as the Chinese state, claim, without providing any evidence, that collective violence in Xinjiang is organized by religious extremists and with ties to global jihadists. The case of collective violence by Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang is better understood if we adopt the identity approach. If we assume that religion is what motivates violence by a Muslim population, we will not see the other factors mentioned above. In fact, organized violence in Xinjiang is arguably a paradigm example of violence that is sometimes committed in the name of religion but whose underlying causes are political.

Secondly, contemporary Uighur identity in Xinjiang is partly an artifact of Chinese state power. Identities, religious or otherwise are not formed independently of material conditions. These conditions include: state policies on religion; state policies on language – in Xinjiang Uighur is often written in Arabic script not Mandarin, yet the state actively represses Uighur in favor of Mandarin; education policy – which promotes a secular and anti-multicultural conception of national identity; and economic and status inequalities between Han and Uighur citizens. The Chinese state is committed to re-shaping Uighur identity, by means of extraordinarily oppressive political power, into an imagined identity deemed more

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[28]Ari Sarkissian, *Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 19-20.

compatible with the Han nationalist agenda as applied in other contexts, most notably Tibet. These are key elements in the so-called 'one China' policy whereby the state seeks to forge a national identity that reflects an imagined national identity in which religion, ethnicity, languages - are gradually erased as a result of forced assimilation. As Mathew Longo notes in *The Politics of Borders,* when the state worries about citizens along border zones,

> ...the state's attempt to nationalize the periphery is more than just a security measure designed to breed loyalty--it is an attempt to create in its own image the very place farthest from its own likeness.[29]

Longo isn't considering China when he makes this claim—rather his focus is on Western governments, such as the U.S., including efforts by the U.S. to build loyalty among Hispanics after the annexation of Texas and the expansion in the southwest. This is an apt description of one way a state policy towards a religious or other minority group qualifies as internal colonialism. Modern Uighur identity in China is impacted by this, among other factors. For instance major oil fields have been discovered in Xinjiang, a fact that makes energy security another factor motivating Chinese state policy in the region.[30]

IV. Conclusion

I have proposed an alternative to some influential accounts of violence in the name of religion. The New Atheists attribute violence in the name of religion to belief, in particular, belief that is fantastical, delusional, and irrational. We should reject that view. One reason is that if we are interested in understanding violence in the name of religion, we want to discover ways to reduce such violence. The New Atheists offer no help here. They may claim that reducing violence is not their aim, in which case, fair enough. We can then ask whether their project is of any use to political philosophy or other practically oriented projects, and the answer is, no. Second, the social science research on organized violence in the name of religion does not support the claim that religious belief is typically the underlying cause of collective violence. So even if the New Atheists claim they are not interested in reducing violence, there are compelling evidence-based reasons to reject their account of collective violence in the name of religion.

The civilizational approach offers a more plausible framework, in part because it incorporates factors such as historical memory, imagined group identities, and intellectual traditions within the history of a religious doctrine. These are important influences on religious identity. Yet proponents of this view construe civilizational identities in ways that are too general, sometimes Orientalist and chauvinistic, and frequently exaggerate the role that ideas play in explaining conflicts between groups. We need a more fine-grained account of identity than what the civilizational approach offers. It is not unfair to characterize the civilizational approach as based on a conception of power politics we might glean from reading Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* or storied accounts of European colonialism in the 19th C that envision the world as a chessboard on which the great powers determine the fate of the

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[29] Matthew Longo, *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11* (Cambridge, UK; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 68.
[30] Edward Wong, "China Invests in Region Rich in Oil, Coal and Strife," *New York Times,* December 20th, 2014.

weaker powers.[31] There are many factors play a role in how agents politicize their religious identity that this approach to conflict ignores. I have combined some ideas from social science with philosophical accounts of identity to argue that the religious identity approach is superior to the civilizational approach.

Cavanaugh argues that the idea of religious violence is mostly a myth, resting as it does on confused or unhelpful definitions of what counts as religious. Though much of what he argues offers a welcome contrast to the New Atheist and the civilizational approaches, there are contexts in which assigning the label 'religious violence' is apt. For instance, even when collective violence in the name of religion is triggered by political factors, such as occupation, religious identity is a salient variable. We can avoid the pitfalls of New Atheism and the civilizational approach, both of which Cavanaugh rightly opposes, without having to jettison entirely the idea of religious violence. For example, a social scientist that seeks to understand interaction effects between ethnic and religious identity markers might discover that religious identity is a salient cause for collective violence, but only under special conditions. 'Religious violence' would be an apt label in that context.

Finally, I hope that this paper can serve as an example of how to approach a complex and politically charged issue with the caution and intellectual humility that the subject matter demands. Too many accounts of religious violence conflate different species of violence, depend upon anti-religious biases, or enlist self-serving characterizations of religious traditions. Responsible scholarship on religion and violence should avoid apologetics as well as punditry.

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[31] See for example, Peter Hopkirk's classic, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia* (New York, Tokyo, London: Kodansha International, 1994).