Does religion bring more conflict than peace? A survey of Americans' attitudes toward religion and conflict

Mehmet Ali Balkanlıoğlu[1]

Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine Americans' attitudes towards their disagreement with the statement that religion is more likely to reinforce conflict, especially violent conflict, than to promote peace before the September 11. Many studies showed that after 9/11 the opinion of the American people has radically changed about the potential for religion to be misused by some people for their own purposes. In this sense, we need to know Americans' attitudes towards religion and conflict before 9/11. This is a new study clarifies the Americans' attitudes about the issue before the 9/11 by utilizing General Social Survey (GSS) 1998 data. This article hypothesized that race, class, gender, age, marital status, political party affiliation, regional diversity, and religion make a difference in Americans' attitudes regarding this issue. Logistic regression is used to test the hypotheses. This research shows that slightly more than half of American respondents (56%) disagree that religion brings more conflict than peace. This indicates that there is a tendency among Americans to believe that the overall effects of religion support the ideal of peace.

Keywords: Religion; Conflict; Peace; September 11

---

[1] Assist. Prof. Dr., Fatih University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Sociology, mabalkanlioglu@fatih.edu.tr

Introduction

What produces the conflict? If "all the great religious traditions view themselves as religions of peace" (Barringer, 2005, p. 521) what does religious terror mean?

Religion is one of the most important phenomena in the world affecting many things, such as social life, political life, economy, peace, conflict, etc. (Karlsson, 2003, pp. 13-14). Thus, regardless of being religious or atheist, people all over the world are affected by religious things directly or indirectly in their lives since "religion continues to make a claim on public life" and individual life style (Juergensmeyer, 2003, pp. 219-220).

There is an ongoing debate among scholars whether religion is the reason for conflict. Specifically, the issue has been discussed widely after 9/11 and every terrorist attack in the world after this date. In fact, it became one of the main debates after 9/11 in America. Therefore, Americans' attitudes towards the question of whether religion is more likely to reinforce conflict than to promote peace are examined in this study. Although empirical studies of this topic are limited, the GSS 1998 data includes information that can be used to investigate it. This project uses this data to explore Americans' attitudes regarding the relationship between religion and conflict, particularly violent conflict, and to relate these attitudes to several demographic and socioeconomic background variables.

Literature Review

Religion and Role of Religion from the Sociological Perspective

Religion itself and its role have been discussed broadly since the time of early sociologists. In this sense, for Karl Marx, "religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself, or has already lost himself again… Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people". Thus, humankind creates religion and oppressors use religion in order to make oppressed people, who are poor and exploited, feel better (Marx, 1843, http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critiquehpr/intro.htm).

According to Durkheim, "religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden--beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them" (Durkheim, 1995, p. 44). He focuses on the function of religion and believes that religion

unifies the citizens with an identity and also aims to explain the world (Durkheim, 1995, pp. 429-430). As a result, religion is the reflection of society and it is very effective phenomenon for every society.

Weber, as Durkheim, examines religion and the role of religion in society. He believes that there is a link between religion and social change. In other words, religion could play a very significant role in social change. In this regards, he gives an example of how Protestant ethics have influenced and encouraged the development of Capitalism. Weber also underlines that religious values are diminished as scientific and technological achievements continue, that is secularism (Weber, 1964; 1978).

Many sociologists followed the Weber's secularization ideas in the twentieth century. To them, "the modern age brought about a steep decline of religion both on the public scene and in the minds of individuals" (Berger, 1990, p. 25). However, neither religion nor the role of religion has disappeared as predicted. Furthermore, it has been influencing not only the minds of individuals but shapes the social, political, economic, etc. structures in the world including violence, as well.

Conflict and Religion

It is believed that there is an interaction between conflict and religion. Hence, it is almost impossible to find a society where there is no conflict occurs either among the members of insiders or outsiders (Ross, 1986, p. 428). On the one hand, conflict along with rapid change in the society may affect the religion (Gamarra, 2000, p. 271). On the other hand, religion is one of the key factors for both conflict and conflict resolution (Abu-Nimer, 2001, p. 685; Gopin, 1997, p. 1). That is, "in so many of today's conflicts—within states, between states and with non-state actors—religion is either part of the problem or part of the solution and, in many cases, both" (Barringer, 2005, p. 521).

As Haynes examined, religious differences and intolerance might create the violence and conflict among the members of same and different religious groups. When violence related to religion, it takes more public attention (2009, pp. 52-53, 72). Swensson stated that "the different dimensions of religion in armed conflicts should be kept analytically separate" (2007, p. 944).

Some factors other than religion could create a type of conflict. For example, Huntington believes that the reason for conflict is neither economy nor ideology but struggle among

civilizations. He says "the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural… Conflict between civilizations will be the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world" (1993, p. 22).

Also, the relationship between religion and different issues in terms of conflict has been discussed by scholars. Wald and Shye proposed that conflict might be between religious and secular sectors, too (1994, pp. 157-178). Tessler and Nachtwey mentioned that religion impacts the personal and international affairs, such as political attitudes and conflict, in different levels (1998, pp. 619-636). Conflict between religion and science is also widely discussed by scholars (Nelkin, 2004, pp. 139-152; Shepherd, 1972, pp. 230-239; Sappington, 1991, pp. 114-120).

In addition, religion can also influence family relations. For example, religious affiliation preference impacts the spouse's relationships with family of origin, in-laws, relatives, social environment, etc. (Balkanlıoğlu, 2011). Also, "conflict can be amplified or inhibited based on the extent to which family members differ and agree about such religiously based parameters" (Mahoney, 2005, p. 689).

Seul stated that since religion provides both individual and group identity, it might be the reason for intergroup conflict (Seul, 1999, p. 557). Moreover, Ellingsen believes that religion has continued to be one of the significant sources of identity; therefore, we will witness the revival of religion and religious conflict (Ellingsen, 2005, pp. 305-332).

In conclusion, as Fox mentioned, religion might affect conflict in many ways, but its influence can vary over time. For today, the impact of religion on conflict has been augmenting (2004, pp. 715-731). In contrast, some scholars provide support for the idea that religion can be seen as a force for peace instead of conflict. For instance, Yildirim mentioned that religion could create peace and coexistence among the different religious groups as in the example of Medina Charter (2009, pp. 439-450). It is crucial that "… the most effective way to deal with human conflicts is to reason them out: to settle them rationally (as the phrase goes) rather than by force and violence" (Dennes, 1946, p. 344).

Balkanlıoğlu, M., A. (2012). Does religion bring more conflict than peace? A survey of Americans' attitudes toward religion and conflict. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online]. 9:1. Available: http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en

Some Terrorist Incidents Associated with Religion

Many terrorist attacks have occurred in every part of the world. The final one is committed by Anders Behring Breivik, 32-year-old Norwegian man, in Oslo and Utoya Island in Norway on July 22, 2011. "The authorities described him as a right-wing fundamentalist Christian, a gun-loving Norwegian obsessed with what he saw as the threat of multiculturalism and Muslim immigration to the cultural and patriotic values of his country" (http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/anders_behring_breivik/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=Breivik&st=cse). Moreover, he denied what he did is a criminal guilt and stated that it was necessary in order to save Europe from Muslims and multiculturalism (http://www.todayszaman.com/news-254457--norwayremembers77killed-in-massacre-by-a-right-wing-extremist.html).

In this regard, it was not the only one related with a religion. The September 11, 2001 was one of the most horrible terrorist strikes in the history of the world. After this date, West has turned Muslims into a target and has seen every Muslim as a potential terrorist. Even having a Muslim name has been enough to be arrested at the airport regardless of being an American citizen, and being a resident in US for the whole life. After having many bad experiences, leading to Islamophobia, West comprehended or should have comprehended that what it has been doing is wrong (Yanarışık, http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType =RadikalEklerDetayV3&Date=&ArticleID=1057623&CategoryID=99).

Some of the incidents related with Christianity "include the shootings at a Jewish day care center in California on August 10, 1999, the 1996 bombing of the Atlanta Olympic Games, the 1995 devastation of the Oklahoma City federal building, and a rash of abortion clinic attacks throughout the 1990s" (Juergensmeyer, 2003, p. 19). However, we cannot call these assaults as "Christian terrorism" since almost everyone started to realize that defining terrorism with any religion has been totally wrong as in the case of 9/11 and naming it as "Islamic terrorism".

Abrahamic Religions and Terror

Although some scholars will continue to use the idiom of "religious terror," many of us must understand that it is irrelevant to identify religion, particularly Abrahamic religions, with violence and/or terror. We can find some passages about violence in relation with other issues both in the Bible and in the Qur'an, but we exactly know that all of them

---

prohibit its followers to kill innocent people from any religion, belief, region, etc. (Öksüz, 2006, p. 103). For example, the sixth of the Ten Commandments is "thou shalt not kill" which forbids killing (The Holy Bible, Exodus, 20:13, n. d., p. 68). It is the same in the new testament as "thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgement" (The Holy Bible, Matthew, 5:21, n. d., p. 798). Finally, it is not different in the Holy Qur'an. Qur'an mentions that whoever unjustly kills a person it is as if he had killed all humankind. And whoever saves one's life, it is as if he had saved humankind entirely (Yıldırım, 2005, p. 112).

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that attitudes toward the relationship between religion and conflict may be related to numerous other variables, including, age, race, gender, education, marital status, political party affiliation, income, regional differences, and religion.

Data and Methods

Sample

Data from the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) is used to test the proposed hypotheses. The GSS is a nationally representative sample survey of the U. S. population with data collected on many variables such as, demographic information, opinions, attitudes, etc. The GSS represents a big sample size, more than thousands interviews, that gives us a high level of reliability. The GSS 1998 data are used for this study, since it includes measure of the variables to be analyzed in this study.

The GSS 1998 data were weighted by using "weight variable" (wtssall) because wtssall "takes into consideration the selection of one adult per household by adjusting for the number of adults in the household" (http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/soc/technology/gss7 206_weights.pdf). The dependent variable, "looking around the world, religions bring more conflict than peace" (religcon), was recorded and restricted based on only valid cases (The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research University of Connecticut, 2009, p. 1814). Even though the total sample contains 946 cases, the restricted sample contains 841 cases for the logistic regression analyses after deletion of missing values. The sample size was restricted to respondents who provided answers to the question.

Measures

Religion was used as the dependent variable which is a nominal dichotomous variable. The categories of it are 0= agree and 1= disagree.

Two of the independent variables, age (ranging between 18 and 89) and education (ranging between 0 and 20), are interval level. One of the independent variables, family income, (income98, 23 point scale), is measured at the ordinal level. The nominal variables that were measured were coded as dummy variables to make the coefficients interpretable. Therefore, race (with Black and other race as dummy), gender (male dummy), marital status (married = 1, else = 0), political party ID (Republican = 1, else = 0), regional difference (South= 1, else = 0), and religious preferences (Catholic = 1, else = 0) were dummy coded.

Methods of Analysis

Descriptive information provided includes the means and standard deviations of the variables used in the analysis. Binary logistic regression is then used to analyze the effects of the explanatory variables on the dependent variable.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Table 1 gives the means and standard deviations of the variables used in the analysis. As shown in the table, while 44% of the respondents agree that religion brings more conflict than peace, slightly more than half of the respondents (56%) disagreed with the statement that religion is more likely to reinforce conflict than to promote peace.

On average, they were about 45 years old (with a standard deviation of 16.46). Whereas 13% of the respondents were Blacks and 8% represented other races, most of the respondents were White (79%). About half of them were male (47%, with a standard deviation of .50), and the average number of years spent in education was 13 years. Also, more than half (56%) were married, and more than one third of them had a Republican Party affiliation (36%). Their annual family income was between $30.000 and $34.999 in 1998. Finally, more than one third of them (36%) lived in the South, and about one fourth of them were Catholics (26%).

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations (S. D.) of Variables Used in the Analysis, U. S. Adults, 1998 GSS

Variable	Mean	S. D.
Dependent Variable		
Religion brings more conflict than peace	.44	.50
Independent Variables		
Age	44.84	16.46
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	.13	.34
Other	.08	.28
Male	.47	.50
Years of schooling	13.38	2.93
Married	.56	.50
Republican	.36	.48
Income (23-point scale)	15.84	5.21
South	.36	.48
Catholics	.26	.44

Multivariate Analysis

To determine the correlates of Americans' attitudes towards the influence of religion with regard to its reinforcement of conflict versus promotion of peace, binary logistic regression was run. Table 2 indicates the logistic regression estimates predicting disagreement with the statement that religion brings more conflict than peace. The pseudo R^2 (.070) tells that all of the explanatory variables explain 7% of the variation in this dependent variable. The Model χ^2 (43.887) is significant at $p \leq .0001$ level.

Surprisingly, age does not have any significant effect on the likelihood of disagreement with the statement that religion is more likely to reinforce conflict than to promote peace, holding for other variables constant. In addition, education also does not have any significant relationship with the dependent variable.

It was predicted that being men and women would differ on the probability of the disagreement with the statement that religion is more likely to reinforce conflict than to promote peace. The data show that men are indeed less likely than women to disagree that religion brings more conflict than peace (B= -.502, p ≤ .001). Specifically, the odds ratio indicates that men are about 40% less likely than women to disagree that religion brings more conflict than peace, controlling for other variables in the model (.605 – 1 = .395).

As expected, there is a significant difference between Blacks and Whites on the probability of the disagreeing with the statement that religion is more likely to reinforce conflict than to promote peace. Blacks are more likely than Whites to disagree that religion brings more conflict than peace (B= .566, p ≤ .05) with Blacks being 76.2% more likely than Whites to express such disagreement (odds ratio =1.762, 1.762 - 1 = .762). On the other hand, contrary to expectations, there is no significant difference between other racial groups and Whites in terms of attitudes toward this issue.

There is a significant difference between married and unmarried people on the likelihood of disagreeing with the statement that religion is more likely to reinforce conflict than to promote peace, with married people more likely than unmarried people to disagree such statement (B= .345, p ≤ .05). That is, married people are 41% more likely than unmarried people to disagree with the statement that religion brings more conflict than peace (Odds ratio =1.411, 1.411 - 1 = .411).

There is also a statistically significant difference between identification with Republicans versus Democrats and others with regard to the likelihood of disagreeing that religion brings more conflict than peace (B= .587, p ≤ .001). That is, Republicans are about 80% more likely than other respondents to disagree that religion brings more conflict than peace (Odds ratio = 1.798, 1.798 - 1 = .798).

It is remarkable that income level was not significantly associated with the probability of disagreement with the statement that a religion is more likely to promote conflict rather than peace. Also, contrary to expectations, there was no significant difference between Southern people and non-Southern people in terms of disagreeing with the mentioned statement.

Finally, Catholics are different from non-Catholics in tending to disagree that religion is more likely to bring conflict than peace (B= .597, p ≤ .001). Specifically, Catholics are

about 82% more likely than non-Catholics to express such disagreement (odds ratio= 1.817, 1817-1= .817).

Table 2: Logistic Regression Estimates Predicting the Americans' Attitudes towards Religion Brings More Conflict than Peace, U. S. Adults, 1998

Predictor	B	Odds ratio
Age	-.004	.996
	(.005)	
Education	-.024	.976
(Years)	(.028)	
Male	-.502***	.605
	(.147)	
Race (ref. = White)		
Black	.566*	1.762
	(.232)	
Other	-.074	.929
	(.276)	
Marital status	.345*	1.411
(1=married, 0= else)	(.166)	
Republican	.587***	1.798
	(.161)	
Family income	-.014	.986
	(.017)	
South	.248	1.281
	(.157)	
Catholic	.597***	1.817
	(.177)	
Constant	.520	1.682
	(.463)	
-2 log likelihood	1081.065	
Model χ^2	43.887	
Pseudo R^2	.070	
Degrees of freedom	10	
N	841	

* $p \leq .05$ *** $p \leq .001$
Notes: The odds ratio is the antilog of the B, and standard errors are in parentheses.
Source: The 1998 General Social Survey.

Conclusion

Conflict is one of the most substantial problems for all societies, particularly violent conflict, and religion is one of the most common subjects related to such conflict. However, the nature of the relationship has long been a source of contradictory and sometimes ambiguous results. A lot of studies indicate that religion may be related in complex ways to various other sources and types of intergroup hostility and violence, including economic competition, political conflict (both national and international), and

Balkanlıoğlu, M., A. (2012). Does religion bring more conflict than peace? A survey of Americans' attitudes toward religion and conflict. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online]. 9:1. Available: http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en

---

war. There is an ongoing debate among scholars as to whether religion is more likely to promote and reinforce conflict, or religious teachings promote peace in relationships among different people and reduce the level of conflict or the likelihood of violence. Various scholars support different views.

This study presents Americans' attitudes towards the nature of the relationship between religion and conflict utilizing the GSS 1998 data. It was predicted that age, race, gender, education, marital status, political view, family income, regional differences, and religion would be significantly related to whether respondents would disagree with the statement that religion brings more conflict than peace. On the one hand, it is found that there is a significant relationship between the independent variables of gender, race, marital status, political party affiliation, religion and the dependent variable. On the other hand, the independent variables of age, education, "other" races, family income, and regional differences were not significantly related to attitudes regarding the relationship between religion and conflict in the model.

This research shows that slightly more than half of American respondents (56%) disagreed that religion brings more conflict than peace. Particularly, most respondents do indeed disagree that religion is more likely to reinforce conflict than to promote peace. This would mean that they should be expected to agree that religion is more likely to bring peace than conflict. This indicates that there is a tendency among Americans to believe that the overall effects of religion support the ideal of peace.

This study provides empirical data that can be used in conjunction with earlier analyses of the relation between religion and conflict, particularly violent conflict, and also can provide a basis for comparison with finding from future studies.

References

Abu-Nimer, M. (2001). Conflict resolution, culture, and religion: Toward a training model of interreligious peacebuilding. *Journal of Peace Research*, *38*, 685.

Anders Behring Breivik. Retrieved from http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/anders_behring_breivik/index.html?scp=1-spot&sq=Breivik&st=cse

Balkanlioglu, M., A. *Influence of Alevi-Sunni intermarriage on the spouses' religious affiliation, family relations, and social environment: A qualitative study of Turkish couples*, (Unpublished Dissertation, 2011), University of North Texas.

Balkanlıoğlu, M., A. (2012). Does religion bring more conflict than peace? A survey of Americans' attitudes toward religion and conflict. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online]. 9:1. Available: http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en

---

Barringer, T. (2005, October). Editorial: "Not peace but a sword?": Religion, conflict and conflict resolution in the commonwealth and beyond. *The Round Table, 94* (382), 521-522.

Berger, P. L. (1990). Secularization and pluralism. New York: The Free Press.

Dennes, W., R. (1946, July). Conflict. The Philosophical Review, 55 (4), 343-376.

Durkheim, E. (1995). The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (Translated and with an introduction by Karen E. Fields). New York: The Free Press.

Ellingsen, T. (2005). Toward a revival of religion and religious clashes? *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *17*, 305–332.

Fox, J. (2004, November). The rise of religious nationalism and conflict: Ethnic conflict and revolutionary wars, 1945-2001. *Journal of Peace Research*, *41* (6), 715-731.

Gamarra, J. (2000, June). Conflict, post-conflict and religion: Andean responses to new religious movements. *Journal of Southern African Studies, 26* (2), 271.

Gopin, M. (1997, January). Religion, violence, and conflict resolution. *Peace and Change, 22* (1), 1.

Haynes, J. (2009, February). Conflict, conflict resolution and peace-building: The role of religion in Mozambique, Nigeria and Cambodia. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics,* 47 (1), 52-53, 72.

Huntington, S., P. (1993, Summer). The clash of civilizations? *Foreign Affairs, 72* (3), 22.

Juergensmeyer, M. (2003). *Terror in the Mind of God* (Third Edition). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Karlsson, I. (2003). *Din, terör ve hoşgörü* (Çev. Turhan Kayaoğlu). Istanbul: Homer Yayınları.

Mahoney, A. (2005). Religion and conflict in marital and parent-child relationships. *Journal of Social Issues, 61* (4), 689.

Marx, K. (n. d.). *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right Introduction.* Retrieved from http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm

Nelkin, D. (2004, Spring). God talk: Confusion between science and religion: Posthumous essay. *Science, Technology, & Human Values, 29* (2), 139-152.

Norway remembers 77 killed in Massacre by a right-wing extremist. Retrieved from http://www.todayszaman.com/news-254457--norway-remembers-77-killed-in-massacre-by-a-right-wing-extremist.html

Ross, M. H. (1986, September). A Cross-cultural theory of political conflict and violence. *Political Psychology,* 7 (3), 428.

Sappington, A., A. (1991). The religion/science conflict. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *30* (1), 114-120.

Seul, J., R. (1999, September). 'Ours is the way of God': Religion, identity, and intergroup conflict. *Journal of Peace Research, 36* (5), 557.

Shepherd, W., C. (1972, September). Religion and the social sciences: Conflict or reconciliation? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *11* (3), 230-239.

Svensson, I. (2007, December). Fighting with faith religion and conflict resolution in civil wars. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51 (6), 944.

Tessler, M. & Nachtwey, J. (1998, October). Islam and attitudes toward international conflict: Evidence from survey research in the Arab world. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution, 42* (5), 619-636.

Balkanlıoğlu, M., A. (2012). Does religion bring more conflict than peace? A survey of Americans' attitudes toward religion and conflict. *International Journal of Human Sciences* [Online]. 9:1. Available: http://www.insanbilimleri.com/en

---

Öksüz, A. (2006). *Ceza hükümleri açısından Tevrat ve Kur'ân.* İzmir: Yeni Akademi Yayınları.

The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments. (n. d.). Oxford.

The 1972-2006 GSS instructions: Weight. Retrieved from http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/soc/technology/gss7206_weights.pdf

The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research University of Connecticut. (2009, June). *General social surveys, 1972-2008: Cumulative codebook.* Chicago.

Wald K., D. & Shye, S. (1994, March). Interreligious conflict in Israel: The group basis of conflicting visions. *Political Behavior*, *16* (1), 157-178.

Weber, M. (1978). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (Translated by Talcott Parsons). London: Roxbury.

Weber, M. (1964). *The sociology of religion.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Yanarışık, O. 'Geliyorum' diyen felaket: Norveç katliamı. Retrieved from http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalEklerDetayV3&Date=&ArticleID=1057623&CategoryID=99,

Yıldırım, S. (2005). *Kur'ân-ı Hakîm ve açıklamalı meali.* İstanbul: Işık Yayınları.

Yildirim, Y. (2009, October). The Medina charter: A historical case of conflict resolution. *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, 20* (4), 439–450.