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FRAMING RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE – INSIGHTS
FROM HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONALISM

Killing hundreds of people in the name of "cow protection" would, at first glance, appear to be a headline drawn from a Monty Python skit. Instead, it is a political problem of the first order in India. Since the 2014 election of Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) hardly a week goes by without some incident or the other involving emboldened cow protection vigilantes. All of this is despite the rather astonishing fact that rarely gets commented upon in the bewildered international coverage of cow protection vigilantes, that India is consistently one of the top exporters of beef in the world with a nearly 20% share of the world market in 2016 (just behind Brazil)!

How can it be that one of the two major exporters of beef in the world is also a country where people are being subjected to organized violence supported by a major political party and civil society organizations (the Sangh Parivar) in the name of cow protection? What could explain this seemingly bizarre situation in the world's largest democracy?

What tools do the social sciences and public policy analysis provide us with which to make sense of what, at first glance, appears patently nonsensical? Is this really religious violence at all? And if so, in what sense is it "religious"?

The purpose of this essay is to use the puzzle of cow protection vigilantism as means to provide a new general framing of the problem of "religious violence" that differs from standard academic approaches to the problem as well as those that are in the public domain (especially with regards to religiously motivated terrorism). In doing so, I seek to ask a series of first order questions of general relevance to some of the major substantive global problems in the contemporary world: 1) What is religious violence?; 2) how does religious violence relate to theology and/or beliefs?; and, 3) how does religious violence relate to a general understanding of political conflict writ large?

The answers that I provide to these questions allow for a new framing of the problem and, in doing so, I generate a new set of questions that have not been directly confronted either in scholarly circles or in the public domain. Most of these approaches fall into one of two broad categories: 1) in academic circles, "liberal" approaches predominate in which the emphasis is on the "political"

nature of "religious" conflict and violence;[1] and 2) in the public domain the "theological" and "micro-individual level" approach is predominant in which the emphasis is on explicating possible causality between theology and individual motivations to engage in "religious" violence.

In part, these two distinct approaches to the problem of religious conflict and violence are the product of different sets of questions. In the liberal academic approach, the focus tends be on political agents exploiting "religion" for otherwise narrow and selfish "political" reasons. This approach downplays the innate significance of religious differences or cleavages by pointing to the undeniable and empirical reality that difference, religious or otherwise, does not in and of itself cause conflict, let alone violence (much more is said about this important insight below). Instead, the emphasis is on what social scientists term "agency" (i.e. the motivations and actions of individual political actors in generating, for their own selfish political purposes, conflict and violence along religious cleavages that otherwise and in the absence of the agent would be inert).

These scholars emphasize two main points: 1) "religious" violence is episodic and a deviation from the norm of communal co-existence; and, 2) that at the individual level, group level identities (in this case, religion) manifest themselves imperfectly and any analysis that seeks to explain individual level behavior *based* upon group identity fails *because*, on a daily basis, the individual lives of people living in pluralist environments is not obviously a reflection of that identity.[2] This implies, therefore, that the mere existence of pluralism does not in and of itself predict individual behavior.

This approach denies the significance of religious cleavages as a cause of conflict and violence and instead focuses on agents who *exploit* these cleavages for their own selfish and individual purposes. There is, therefore, no such thing as "religious" conflict and violence in this approach.

The liberal perspective on the "cow protection movement" discussed above is that individual agents (Hindu nationalists) are using the theological status of cows among Hindus to mobilize collective action for their own narrow self-interests (in India, this is above all about winning elections). In this view, it is not the actual religious basis of the action (the sacredness of cows) that is germane, but the need for political actors in India to mobilize for elections.

The cow protection movement, in this view, is not "religious" at all but instead a "political" movement justifying its violence on the basis of religion. The explanatory weight rests on "political" as opposed to "religious" variables. We will return to these insights below.

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[1] The classic iteration of this approach in an Indian context is Paul Brass, *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997. See also Steven Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006 and Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Riots and Civic Life: Muslims and Hindus in India*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003. For a general theoretical framing of the focus of scholars on "agency" see Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
[2] See Tariq Thachil, *Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

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In the public domain, a different approach predominates and tends to frame the phenomenon for the general public as well as policy makers.[3] This approach is focused on the question of what precisely, theologically speaking, motivates individuals to engage in acts of religiously inspired violence. This approach takes for granted that there can indeed be a causal link between "religion" (implicitly defined in doctrinal terms) and conflict or violence and seeks to place the explanatory weight of the phenomenon on specific passages, strictures, and interpretations etc. of specifically religious sources.

In the case of the "cow protection movement" discussed above, the explanation is that Hindus hold cows to be sacred and it is this "religious" cause that is the source of violence by Hindus against perceived violators of their religious taboo. This is the approach that has generated public debates about whether Islam is inherently violent or not. It is also the approach that has produced public policy responses to Islamic violence that seek to persuade Muslims (and non-Muslims) that Islam and the Koran do not in fact endorse or prescribe particular categories of violence (suicide bombings being one the principal targets of these efforts). It is assumptions drawn from this framing of the problem that generated the Bush administration's attempts, in its public diplomacy in the Islamic world, to emphasize Sufi and other devotional strains of Islam over Salafist and Deobandi ones that are viewed as being the principal sources of Islamic violence.

The public discourse generated by this analytical framework is focused on countering the "religious" (in the sense of "beliefs" and theological strictures) sources of the phenomenon at an individual level. This question is relevant for some purposes, most notably for law enforcement agencies that must be able to create tools to identify individuals who are potential threats to public safety. But, I argue that the excessive emphasis on theology, which will be explored below, has shifted focus away from other framings of the phenomenon that generate insights of real importance and imply different categories of public responses to the problem of religious violence.

In what follows I seek to show why the existing approaches to religious violence are limited in their explanatory value. In the first approach, there is a denial of the significance of religious cleavages writ large. In the second approach, there is an excessive emphasis on theology and individual motivations. Instead, in this article I offer an approach derived from historical institutionalism and argue that this approach generates a useful and different frame within which to understand the phenomenon of religious conflict and violence.

The approach offered here has its limitations; most notably, it cannot address the question of why individuals engage in religiously inspired violence (i.e.

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[3] Any Internet search using the term "religious violence" will produce hundreds of examples of work in these genera. However, see for example: Ronald Lindsay, "Islamic Extremists don't have to be Islamic Scholars" in the Huffington Post http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/islamic-extremists-dont-h_b_11649482.html; Gary Gutting, "How Religion Can Lead to Violence" in the *New York Times*, August 1, 2016; and, Julia Ioffe, "If Islam is a Religion of Violence, so is Christianity" in *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2016.

"terrorism" but also more generally the phenomenon of volunteerism that is so prevalent, and disturbing, in contemporary wars). However, despite this limitation, the framework offered here is a useful way to explore a series of first order questions: namely what is religious about "religious violence?" Why do "religious" conflicts tend to generate high levels of symbolic and physical violence? And, how do "religious" conflicts compare to other categories of conflicts in general?

WHAT IS "RELIGIOUS" "VIOLENCE"?

At the outset, it is critical to emphasize that the current debate about "religious violence" is not, properly speaking, correctly phrased. "Religious" "violence," sociologically speaking, refers to a phenomenon much broader, deeper and ancient than is implied by current usages of the term.

"Religious violence" can and does also refer to ritual violence in the service of a relationship with some aspect of the supernatural. In this sense, "religious violence" is entirely *apolitical* in that it serves what could be considered to be a narrow ritual purpose in the contractual sense of binding a supplicant to some form of divine force or being in the expectation that a satisfactory sacrificial offering of blood will induce the reciprocal granting of wishes requested by the supplicant. This "contractual" religious function in which the offer of that which is most precious (blood) as sacrifice to a divine being in exchange for the patronage of that being is entirely normal anthropologically speaking and is, presumably, the most ancient and pervasive form of religious violence.

It is likely that in the very ancient past human sacrifice, as the bogs of Northern Europe keep revealing, was normal. Indeed, echoes of this very ancient practice of human sacrifice remained a part of Roman religion well into the historical era (for example, gladiatorial combat began as funeral games in which the exercise of violence for a religious purpose was explicit aside from its evident entertainment value).

Other examples from the more recent historical past include the well-known practice of human sacrifice by the Aztecs who practiced this form of blood sacrifice on an industrial scale. While human sacrifice generally went into abeyance in most societies within early historical times, the centrality and significance of blood sacrifice per se has not and is very much a part of the routine ritual lives of many, if not most, societies in the contemporary world including, Islam, Judaism and some Christian denominations.

The key point here is that most of the phenomenon properly termed "religious violence" is either entirely apolitical (about which more below) as in the case of animal sacrifice (albeit the ritual and communal consumption of the sacrificial victim does have a sociological function) or, in the case of human sacrifice, is at the very least not inherently political (for example, after the battle of Cannae in 216 BCE the Romans, in order to propitiate the gods, ritually buried alive two Gauls and two Greeks in the Forum Boarium in a stone chamber that had, evidently, been used previously for this purpose).

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The exercise of ritual violence in service of a narrow religious goal is an entirely normal part of the religious history of human beings across time and space. This type of religious violence is *non-conflictual* and is, for this reason (see below) by definition *apolitical*. The question, therefore, in the contemporary political world is not about "religious violence" per se but is, instead about "religious *conflict*" that leads to violence. Or put in slightly less unwieldy terms, it is about violence that occurs at the *intersection* of religion with politics.

WAR, POLITICAL CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE DEFINED

This discussion leads directly to problem of what political violence (i.e. "war") is in general. Therefore, before exploring violence at the intersection of religion and politics in greater detail, it is first necessary to step back a bit and consider the problem of political violence on its own terms. It also provide insights that help better frame the discussion in the third section of this essay. The abstractions laid out in the next few paragraphs are given texture in the last third of the essay and are necessary for establishing a precise conceptual toolkit for this discussion.[4]

War, as Clausewitz correctly observed, is a political process. It is the intensification of political violence undertaken to achieve some goal. War, as a concept, captures a limited (but critical) subset of interactions that involve the addition of organized violence to the normal tools of political competition. War can be defined, therefore, as a social relationship in which violence is *a* mechanism used to adjudicate outcomes.

But, the key point is that the concept of war captures an intensification of interactions but does not, in any way, constitute a negation of the social relationship in question. An implication of this is that to understand war is, by definition, to understand the underlying social relationships that are being contested.

Violence is a language used as a part of a negotiation between groups to determine some aspect of the relationship between the groups; therefore, to understand violence requires understanding the relationships that provide and define its context, without which nothing else makes sense.

WAR AS POLITICS

Wars occur when one or more actors in a political relationship seek to change the status quo in some way. The operative word here is *change*. Wars occur when attempts to change the status quo meet resistance and one or more actors seek to deploy violence as an additional means in a political negotiation. This raises the question of what precisely, in theoretical language, can be changed in a political relationship. My argument, fully

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[4] This discussion is a condensed version of arguments and work fully developed elsewhere. See Vivek Swaroop Sharma, "A Social Theory of War: Clausewitz and War Reconsidered" in *The Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 28(3): 1-21, October 2014 and ibid., "War, Conquest and the State" in Lars Bo Kaspersen and Jeppe Strandsbjerg (eds.) *Does War Make States? Investigations of Charles Tilly's Historical Sociology*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

developed in other publications, is that political conflicts can be either about the relative rank and status of the actors under stable institutional configurations (or what could be understood as the "balance of power hierarchy" of groups) *or* about the rules that govern the establishment and maintenance of rank and status (i.e. institutions or, in more vernacular terms, the structural conditions *within which* balance of power hierarchies operate).

FConflicts over relative rank and status within an accepted hierarchical structure are a normal part of human history as balance of power theory has long recognized. These are conflicts between like units about where each member of the group ranks in relationship to the other members. The classic examples of these systems are ancient Greece, Europe between the religious wars and the French Revolution, and then Europe again in the long nineteenth century. In a system of like units, conflict will be about the rankings of those units. It is very rare in balance of power systems for units to disappear entirely. For that to happen, some other logic of conflict has to be in operation.

So, in ancient Greece, for example, while Sparta and Athens fought the bitterly long Peloponnesian War, the conflict did not end with the *disappearance* of Athens: only a change in its internal governing institutions (i.e. oligarchy versus democracy) to make it less threatening to Sparta. Similarly, during the classical period of balance of power from 1648-1789, the only polity to wholly disappear was the Kingdom of Poland and that too towards the end of the period when the French Revolution had unleashed a different logic of conflict (addressed below).

In both of these examples, (as well as the Long Nineteenth Century) conflicts could lead to changes in the boundaries of polities but almost never to their actual disappearance. Indeed, it was the breakdown of this logic of political conflict after 1789 that made the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars so terribly violent and shocking to observers, such as Clausewitz, who experienced them. Nothing like these conflicts had been experienced *in Europe* before (although *outside* of Europe these types of total wars between Europeans and non-Europeans were the norm and actors routinely experienced defeat as the disappearance of their polities and on occasion of their societies).

Social systems (including *societies of states*) that use violence as a mechanism to determine relative rank and status will generate violence that is frequent but limited in scale and scope. Why this should be the case has to do with the nature of domination in balance of power systems. Dominant entities want the maximum gains for the minimum of expenditure of precious resources.

It is also worth emphasizing that violence is an inherently risky undertaking. If actors can achieve dominance and high status without the risks and expenditures associated with violence, then they will do so: violence only becomes a necessity if there is some *dispute* over the ranking system and thus, violence is accepted as a legitimate mechanism to resolve disputes of this nature. The violence expended will be limited by the logic inherent in the ranking systems themselves: the point is to dominate the maximum number of individuals in a group for the minimal expenditure of scarce

resources and so the violence in such competitions is highly ritualized and restrained by rules designed to contain the levels of violence and by implication its collateral impact on other members of the group. The point of the exercise is to gain recognition of one's status by both the individuals involved in the conflict as well as by the other members of the group.

The aim of the violence is to force an acceptance of an individual's status (and therefore access to the actual benefits that flow to those with high status) under the existing rules of the society and once that goal has been achieved the continuation of violence becomes counter-productive. Empirically, this type of violent competition has very wide resonance and can be viewed in a wide range of settings from primates to wolves to human societies and therefore constitutes the most ancient and ubiquitous form of political violence.

It is important to note that this kind of conflict requires, by definition, the basic acceptance of the rules of the game by the individuals engaged in the conflict. Therefore, these kinds of conflicts can only occur between individuals (or groups) that are fundamentally equals. This basic equality implies a level of trust that the players will accept the outcomes of violent competition as legitimate and will not seek to use non-legitimate forms of competition to advance their interests; to do so would make the benefits of victory and the consequences of defeat uncertain and insecure.

Put in slightly different language, this kind of conflict can only occur under stable institutional conditions where all concerned share limited goals and agree that a particular form of violence is a legitimate mechanism for conflict resolution. The entire structure of international relations since 1945 has been geared towards limiting conflict to legitimate units (states recognized by other states) using specific forms of conflict resolution to establish their relative rank and status. And, predictably, we have seen few, if any, legitimate polities disappear as a consequence of conquest.

INSTITUTIONS AND VIOLENCE

 Institutions can be understood as legitimate power configurations in society: they incentivize human behavior by providing individuals within the system with templates of behavior to be followed and by constraining and channeling behavior through the existence of enforcement mechanisms. The power of institutions lies in their ability to order individual behavior and the outcomes associated with that behavior. Changing institutional configurations requires overcoming the resistance of those who have vested interests in particular configurations of institutional rules.

A conflict over some aspect of the rules of a society is more than a conflict involving the specific individuals within a ranking system: *it is about the nature of the ranking system itself*. These conflicts are about some aspect relating to the very nature of social order and therefore can, in some sense, be understood as "constitutional" in nature. This is precisely why the French Revolutionary Wars were so horribly violent.

The French Revolutionary State was demanding peace on the basis of the disappearance of the entire system of dynastic politics then prevalent in Europe. There was, in effect, nothing to negotiate about. The French Revolutionary state demanded a change in the nature of the units of European politics itself *and not* merely the nature of power relations between them, *as had been the case throughout the period 1648-1789.*

What was at stake in the French Revolution was the very basis of social and political organization (i.e. institutions). In attempting to change those institutions, the French Revolutionary State had to use forms of violence not seen in Europe since the end of the religious wars in the 17th century (a point that we will have cause to return to below). Conflicts that involve some attempt to change some aspect of the institutional structure of society will generate greater levels of resistance for the simple fact that what is at stake in these conflicts involves more vested interests than is the case with conflicts that are merely about the internal ranking of individuals within a group. Why this should be the case has, again, to do with the nature of institutions, aspects of which have already been discussed.

Institutions, as defined above, can be understood as legitimate configurations of power. Furthermore, institutions do not exist in isolation from one another, but instead exist in an entangling web with other institutions in society. Changing or overthrowing particular power configurations can vary in magnitude and the degree of collateral impact on other nodal points of power and authority within a society. When challenges to it are sufficiently threatening, the stakes are raised, as are the levels of mobilizations and its consequent expression in resistance and violence. This implies that unlike limited conflict over rank and status, conflicts that involve some aspect of the institutional structure of society, by definition, involves actors who do not accept the fundamental equality of their opponents.

Conflicts over institutional arrangements can vary in intensity depending upon their capacity to mobilize resistance to changes in these power configurations. For this reason, unlike limited conflict over rank and status, these conflicts can be arranged on a continuum defined by how fundamental the challenge to the existing social order is. Conflicts about religion tend to be at the more intense end of the continuum; those involving rulers and representative bodies more towards the middle; and those involving the precise configuration of property rights more towards the lower end. What all the conflicts have in common is that they tended to be more difficult to resolve, result in greater degrees of mobilization and are characterized by greater levels of symbolic and physical violence.

As should be clear by now, the argument in this essay is that religious conflict is a form of conflict involving some aspect of the rules governing social order. In this sense, the religious wars of the 16th and 17th century were not principally caused by prejudice, bigotry or intolerance *per se*: they were, instead, a consequence of differences over how the general nature of authority was to be constructed in Latin Christendom and with what consequence.

The Protestant Reformation was a revolutionary movement in the sense that it sought not just changes in the doctrines and rituals of the Catholic Church but also, and more importantly for our purposes, sought fundamental changes in the broader structure of power relations in the society as a whole. Similarly, what makes ISIS a revolutionary movement is that it is seeking to reorder social institutions internally within the Sunni Arab world, and just as significantly, it is rejecting the basic frameworks of contemporary international relations.

In this sense, the source of the revolutionary impulse is less significant than its consequences for the current institutional status quo both internally within Sunni Arab society (i.e. tribes, states etc.) and the international system itself (the UN, the international monetary system etc.) We have seen, in relatively recent history, revolutionary movements engaging in the precise analytical categories of behavior being discussed here: most significantly and ominously, the Bolsheviks and Fascist movements in the early to mid-twentieth centuries.

In both the case of ISIS and the case of the Bolsheviks, a set of first order principles (Salafist Islam and Marxist-Leninism) generated a political impulse to engage in a radical challenge to the existing "domestic" and "international" orders. In both cases, there are no non-violent means to achieve these goals *because* the opponents of these systems (the upholders of the status quo) *would, by definition, have to disappear in order for the revolutionary groups goals to be achieved.* There is no bargaining position short of total victory or total defeat.

The cause of the violence, in other words, is not the ideology per se, but instead the political agenda to change institutions (domestic and international) along lines that those with some interest in the status quo are bound to resist. No compromise or agreement as in balance of power systems is possible *because* merely trading a bit of land here or there or by imposing an indemnity of this or that amount cannot constitute as basis for peace. Indeed, it not even possible to conceive of a peace agreement of any kind with ISIS short of its voluntary disappearance.

In this sense, the question of whether the Koran (or any other religious text) sanctions violence is irrelevant, as are the specific motivations of the individuals within the movement. What is consequential is that a political impulse to change institutions is generating conflict and not whether there is a theological basis for the means selected to bring about that change (i.e. terrorism, conventional warfare or some other form of irregular warfare). In the final part of this essay these issues are brought into sharper relief.

RELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE REFRAMED

There are two important qualifications to the following discussion that are required. First, this discussion is not about religious violence per se. Religious violence, as we have seen above, can be a normal part of religious ritual and therefore not conflictual at all. Animal sacrifice has been characteristic of a range of religious traditions and is undoubtedly violent; nonetheless it would not be classified as conflict (or at least not as political

conflict). Second, conflict within, for example, religious orders, about which particular individual is to be the abbot, or the Pope, etc. is also not included in this discussion. These kinds of conflicts are about rank and status and therefore a normal part of any dynamic within a social group.

What this discussion is concerned with is religion in the sense of rules as discussed above. Doctrine in and of itself cannot lead to political or religious conflict. Doctrine can only lead to religious or political conflict *if and only if* a group seeks to reorder authority and power in ways consistent with a particular doctrine. By this definition, heresy is a form of religious conflict because it is about social order and not simply about doctrine. But merely having theological differences within a religious community is not inherently heretical.

While it is possible to identify cases of religious conflict in which explicitly religious motivations are at the forefront (and where religious "difference" is a cause of conflict in its own right) more generally speaking this is relatively rare. Instead, much more common are conflicts involving different religious communities in which religious authority is one of the nodal points of authority that is being contested but in which identifying and isolating specifically religious motivation is much more difficult.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the former type is the Crusades in the 11th and 12th centuries in which nothing else makes sense without the specifically religious dimension.[5] A good example of the more typical pattern of "religious conflict" would be the Great Indian Mutiny which was characterized by disparate social groups responding to threats to their "way of life" which in turn was fundamentally about "religion" (or, at the very least, about issues like property and kinship and therefore connected to religion). This later understanding of what constitutes a religious conflict would also hold for a very wide range of cases including the French Wars of Religion, the medieval expansion of Latin Christendom into neighboring communities that were organized along different lines and the early Islamic conquests of the Near East to name a few.[6]

The fundamental conceptual point here is that, in effect, the addition of religious motivation to a theoretical framework on religious conflict actually adds very little in the way explanatory power. Even in the case of the Crusades what motivation explains is target selection (i.e. Jerusalem) but not what the Crusaders actually did there when they established conquest states in the Eastern Mediterranean. These political entities were actually quite similar to the conquest states established by Latin Christians in Wales, Ireland, the Baltic and so on, all of which can also be understood in religious

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[5] See Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2005.
[6] See for example Mack Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*, New York: Cambridge University Press, Second Edition 2005. On the intersection of theology and violence see Diarmaid McCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, New York: Pengiun, 2005.

terms even though the motivations for their establishment were much more complex than in the case of the Levant.[7]

This line reasoning may lead the reader to question whether these conflicts can be usefully thought of as "religious" at all? Indeed, in most of the conflicts mentioned above (i.e. the Great Indian Mutiny, the Religious Wars in Europe and so on) there are long traditions of denying the religious aspects of the conflict and focusing instead on socio-economic factors. It may therefore be useful to use the example of the Great Indian Mutiny to illustrate just in what *sense* these conflicts can be understood as religious.[8]

The Great Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 was the largest anti-colonial revolt in history and as such forms a watershed moment in the development of colonial empires. It is also a particularly good example of just how complicated "religious" conflicts can get when viewed from the prism of religious motivation. The basic facts can be briefly outlined. There was a major shift in the nature of colonial rule in India that occurred as the British defeated the other contenders for power in post-Mughal India. This shift is most pronounced in the period coinciding with the defeat of Maratha power during the first two decades of the nineteenth century and intensified in the 1830s and 1840s.

Colonial rule went from being respectful of established power structures and authority to outright assaults on them. From the British perspective, they were simply engaged in rationalizing their rule by creating British-Indian Law and by regulating social relationships necessitated by their need to dispense justice and to establish their authority. However, in doing so, the British alienated and challenged disparate groups ranging from princely houses upset about the introduction of primogeniture to various groups of Hindus unhappy with the abolition of Sati (widow burning) to various Muslim groups deeply hostile to the inroads that Christian missionaries were beginning to make in their congregations. Different groups, then, reacted to different challenges being mounted by the British to establish patterns of power and authority that ultimately led to "a chain of different uprisings and acts of resistance, whose form and fate were determined by local and regional situations passions and grievances."[9]

What gave the Mutiny coherence was the general sense of the participants that the British were engaged in a systematic attempt to destroy the religions of India in the sense of particular ways of life. Of course, while there were many Britons in the colonial administration who did indeed view Hinduism

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[7] See especially, Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950-1350*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994.
[8] Excellent introductions to this topic are William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India*, New York: HarperCollins, 2003; ibid, *The Last Mughal*, New York: Vintage, 2007. See also Ferdinand Mount, *The Tears of the Rajas: Mutiny, Money and Marriage in India, 1805-1905*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015. For excellent overviews see Piers Brandon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997*, New York: Vintage, 2008; John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain*, New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013 and ibid., *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
[9] Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, p. 18.

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and Islam with contempt and did indeed seek the conversion of the people of India, the principal concerns of the colonial administration were with the establishment of firm and uncontested domination in South Asia at the minimum cost to themselves. Their policies, however, had the cumulative effect of triggering a religious war; indeed, a very strange religious war in the sense that it brought together a tremendously diverse coalition of groups that included jihadis, sadhus (Hindu mendicants), princely lineages, elements of the British sepoy army and beyond.

This was not a conflict that was triggered by the *fact* of British/Christian rule in India; it was a conflict triggered by the policies of the British that threatened a range of social groups who responded by taking up arms. That the British understood the religious dimensions of the conflict is best illustrated by how they responded after 1858 to the issue of religion. After 1858, it became official British policy to defend orthodoxy, to prevent missionizing activity and to portray themselves as neutral arbiters in the sectarian relations of their Indian subjects.

The basic point is that beliefs, hatreds and other individual level motivations are not necessary in order to explain religious *conflict*. While, on occasion, motivations do align with the observed patterns of religious conflict, often they do not. What the above discussion implies is that the problem of what motivates an individual to engage in an act violence and *the causes* of group level conflict lie at different levels of analysis: the first is a micro-level concern (in the sense that it is a question about why an individual chooses one course of action over another) and the second is a macro-level one (in the sense that it is a question about the relationship between groups of individuals).

This implies that the approach taken in much of the public domain and public policy circles towards religious violence is problematic. The primary question about religious violence is not why individuals engage in religious violence but instead under what circumstances do religious differences *cause political conflict*. This is the question addressed in the next section of this essay.

GROUP CLEAVAGES AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Communal pluralism, whether defined in ethnic, religious or linguistic terms, is historically very normal as it is, indeed, in our own era. Under normal (stable) circumstances, as liberal scholars have long and consistently (and correctly) held, inter-communal relations are non-violent and individual level interactions follow the range of human possibilities across communal boundaries (love, hate, friendship and the like).

This norm of intercommunal peace has led scholars to a further conclusion: that because under normal circumstances intercommunal relations tend to be peaceful *when* that peace break downs it is because of the agency of political actors who have something to gain, personally, from the violence.[10] This

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[10] There is a vast and growing literature on this topic. Good introductions are Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict: Causes, Consequences and Responses*, Boston, MA: Polity, 2010; John McCauley, *The Logic of Ethnic and Religious Conflict in Africa*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017; David Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in*

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implication drawn from the norm of intercommunal peace and the observed mechanisms of its break down is problematic for the reasons discussed below. It is critical to note that while pluralism is normal in human societies across time and space *communal equality* is most definitely not. Indeed, both historically and in the contemporary world it is difficult to identify a single pluralistic society that also practices communal equality.

This means that while communal co-existence is normal, so is the reality that this co-existence, almost without exception, has also been structured hierarchically with a dominant group, establishing the framework within which other groups "co-exist" within a pluralistic society. This pluralism cum hierarchy has been practiced, *par excellence*, by Islamic states, above all the Ottoman and Mughal Empires.[11] In both of these cases, as in all other historical empires, co-existence between the dominant Sunni Islamic group and the multitude of minority religions *was*, on the whole, *peaceful*. This peace was based, as the conceptual discussion above explicates, on a shared acceptance of certain institutional arrangements that formalized the dominance of Sunni Islam while providing other religious groups with a legitimate, if necessarily secondary, place within the political order.

As long as all of the groups accepted this arrangement peace and perhaps even intercommunal harmony prevailed. Conflict, in these cases "religious" conflict, occurred when one or more groups sought to change the institutional arrangements (and by definition the power relations) between the communities. The later histories of both empires mentioned above—the Ottoman and Mughal—were wrought through with religious conflicts and violence as different religious communities sought to establish new patterns of intercommunal power relations.[12] The key issue is that the cause of these efforts to reconfigure the power relations between religious communities was inherently political because the institutions that managed communal relations were, by definition, political. It is here that we find the intersection of religion, conflict and political violence.

In the contemporary world, religion is a driving force behind political conflict in the sense that religious communities are making formal and informal efforts to change political institutions to their liking and in pluralistic religious states like Syria, but also Pakistan, Nigeria, India and many, many others, these changes come at the expense of other religious communities and, in some cases, as a direct challenge to secular institutional configurations (as in Egypt). In all of these cases, the important question from a public policy standpoint is not why individuals are drawn to religious politics but is, instead, how religious communities express their communalism politically. When framed in this way, the central focus of liberal scholarship

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Conflict, updated edition, 2000; and, William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[11] On the Mughal Empire the best introduction is John Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993. On the Ottomans see Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922*, New York: Cambridge University Press, second edition 2005.

[12] See for example Ipek Yosmaoglu, *Blood Ties: Religion, Violence and the Politics of Nationhood in Ottoman Macedonia, 1878-1908*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013.

on political agency recedes and, instead, we are confronted with the reality that there is absolutely nothing abnormal about religious communities engaging in political, collective action to rearrange institutions to their liking *and* of these efforts causing conflicts with other religious groups (and secularists in our own age) who have some degree of stake in the preservation of the existing order.

In this sense, religious conflicts have a great deal in common with the "ideological" conflicts of the recent past (the French and Russian Revolutions being prime exhibits). In both of these world historical processes, it was not the existence of liberals or Marxists *per se* that generated the terrible violence that their attempts at changing the existing social order generated. Instead, it was the logic of having to overcome the tremendous resistance of those who had a stake in the status quo that led to the terrible violence.

Religion, while differing from liberalism and Marxism in its fundamental legitimizing principles, shares with these movements the basic commonality that these are systems of basic principles that are meant, by definition, to guide the construction of social and political institutions in this world. Stated like this, the political nature of religion becomes self-evident, but also becomes less alien and surprising. Similarly, the violence that religion has the potential to generate is equally unsurprising.

All of this brings us back to the puzzle offered at the beginning of this essay: namely organized and routine violence in the name of cow protection in a country that is one of the largest exporters of beef. What are we to make of this seeming paradox? As I have argued elsewhere, neither the Indian state nor its society is liberal in the sense of being comprised of individuals equal before the eyes of the law.[13] Instead, it is comprised of different corporate groups in competition, much of it violent, over the basic institutional framework of the state and the society.[14]

These are not groups who are content to accept the basic equality (however, defined) of others. The violence over cow protection targets two groups: Muslims and Dalits (formerly called untouchables). In other words, these are vigilantes of high caste Hindus whose explicit agenda is to reduce every other group (caste and religious) to mere appendages of a social order in which all of the benefits flow to upper caste Hindus.

These cleavages, *pace* liberals, *are not made up*. These are not "invented" identities (or at least not any less real than any other social identity). Violence in India over cow protection goes back centuries.[15] There is nothing new about this. Indeed, amongst the single worst incidents of violence in British India between the Great Mutiny of 1857 and independence in 1947 occurred

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[13] Vivek Swaroop Sharma, "The Myth of a Liberal India" in *The National Interest* 140, pp. 66-71, November/December 2015.

[14] Vivek Swaroop Sharma, "Give Corruption a Chance" in *The National Interest* 128, pp. 38-45, November/December 2013.

[15] Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*, Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1994.

in the years 1892-93 in which some 75 people lost their lives in cow protection riots in Bombay alone. Note that this *was not anti-colonial violence*.[16]

Indeed, there was no violence against the British for eating beef. Instead, this was violence committed by Hindus against Muslims *in the context of the British Colonial State trying to find ways to govern a pluralistic and hierarchical society*. The violence was a language in which to speak to the British colonial government about communal hierarchy *because* the British colonial government *had to listen to widespread communal violence*. This was violence as a form of negotiation between four parties: the British, the Congress Party Nationalist Movement, upper caste (communal) Hindus and Muslims.[17]

It occurred during a period when the British began to make substantive concessions to some degree of self-government. It *really was* "religious" violence in the sense that religious communities were making claims to power and authority at the expense of other groups (especially Muslims and Dalits *but not* the British who of course, also ate beef). The basic political cum religious problem at stake in cow protection vigilantism was succinctly put by the most important Muslim thinker in late 19th century British India, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (the founder of Aligarh Muslim University) in a famous speech delivered in 1888:

Now, suppose that the English community and the army were to leave India, taking with them all their cannons and their splendid weapons and all else, who then would be the rulers of India? Is it possible that under these circumstances two nations – the Mohammedans and the Hindus – could sit on the same throne and remain equal in power? Most certainly not. It is necessary that one of them should conquer the other. To hope that both could remain equal is to desire the impossible and the inconceivable... But until one nation has conquered the other and made it obedient, peace cannot reign in the land.[18]

It is worth emphasizing that Mahatma Gandhi fully concurred with Sir Syed Ahmed Khan that religion cannot be divorced from politics. In 1915, he would declare in a speech to students in Calcutta that "Politics cannot be divorced from religion."[19] Indeed, with regards to the puzzle addressed in this article Gandhi had this to say about cow protection in 1920: "Cow protection is the outward form of Hinduism. I refuse to call anyone a Hindu

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[16] Maria Misra, *Vishnu's Crowded Temple: India Since the Great Rebellion*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

[17] John McLane, *Indian Nationalism and the Early Congress*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015; Mark Doyle, *Communal Violence in the British Empire: Disturbing the Pax*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016; and Ian Copland, "What to do about cows? Princely versus British approaches to a South Asian dilemma" in *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 68 (1), pp. 59-76, February 2005.

[18] The full text of the speech may be found here: http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt_sir_sayyid_meer ut_1888.html.

[19] Over the years Mahatma Gandhi made numerous such statements and he discussed this matter, extensively, in his autobiography. See Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography – The Story of My Experiments With Truth*, New York: Beacon Press, 1993.

if he is not willing to lay down his life in this cause. It is dearer to me than my very life."[20] Throughout his life in Indian politics, Gandhi consistently and persistently upheld the legitimacy of the principal that cow protection was a fundamental *religious* obligation of Hindus *and* he urged Muslims to refrain from killing cows voluntarily.

Gandhi and Kahn might as well as have added the obvious in the speeches from which the above quotations are drawn: in India, religion is not about an individual's "faith" but about communal identity. There is no operative liberal individualistic definition of religion in India.[21] Beef eating, therefore, has been a communal demarcation between groups in India for centuries. But it is only *a meaningful one in a political sense* only under certain circumstances.

It was also, among other demarcations, a boundary marker between Christians and Hindus. But Hindus cow protection vigilantes have only engaged in organized violence against Muslims and Dalits. This is not surprising. Christians are not, as a group, contenders for power in India. Dalits and Muslims are. Nor does this fact negate the idea that the violence over cow protection *really is religious in nature*. But not in the sense that a particular theological stricture provokes in individuals a propensity towards violence as much of the discourse in current public policy circles would imply. Individual motivation (and the question of belief) is largely irrelevant to the public policy question of why we witness religious violence and what its causes are.

Hindu vigilantes are using violence over particular issues (cow protection in this instance) as a language of negotiation with the Indian state about how communal power relations are to be structured. These vigilantes have also used other issues to engage in violence against Muslims: most nefariously the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 in which not only the mosque itself was demolished by hand, but it triggered a wave of rioting throughout Northern India in which several thousand people were killed.

And so we have an answer to how one of the world's biggest exporters of beef can also have an organized movement of vigilantes engaged in violence over the slaughter of cattle. It is about communal hierarchy. But the individual theological underpinnings of this are entirely irrelevant. *And* this does not mean that this violence is not religious. The framework offered in this essay has limitations. It cannot, for example, speak to the concerns of law enforcement agencies that really must be interested in why some individuals and not others engage in violence. It does, however, have the advantage of taking religious cleavages seriously and can explain why under conditions of conflict these cleavages tend to generate high levels of violence (as opposed to, for example, coups which are merely about rank and status).

It also has the advantage of shifting the public policy question away from theology (a cul-de-sac for western policy makers if there ever was one) towards a serious consideration of how to cope with pluralism and

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[20] Mahatma Gandhi, *Young India*, New York: B. W. Huebsch, First American Edition 1923, p. 182.
[21] Sharma, "The Myth of a Liberal India"

communal hierarchy. This is not an easy task, intellectually, for liberals to undertake, given that liberalism is grounded specifically and historically in a rejection of communalism and hierarchy in favor of individualism and equality.

But this ideological proclivity is rapidly becoming a luxury that the West can no longer indulge in. Eliminating religion as a political cleavage in Europe took two hundred years of terrible conflict and violence and resulted in religiously homogenous societies across Europe (with the notable exception of Poland). The reemergence of religious communalism in Western Europe has come as a deep and disconcerting shock to societies long used to thinking of themselves as "post-religious."

If we like religious pluralism then we will also have to get used to the idea of communal hierarchies. The principal public policy challenge of our time is how to devise responses to the assertion of communal rights (and power) in pluralistic societies that manage the inevitable conflict that pluralism, religious included, necessarily generates *without* insisting that the liberal framing of the problem (individualism) be imposed on societies long organized along communal lines. But that is the subject for another article.