

A Neo-Weberian Approach to Religion in International Politics

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Abstract

Current approaches for understanding and analyzing religion in international politics insufficiently incorporate the role of ethics in the practices of religious actors. Primordialist approaches essentialize religion, instrumental approaches consider it to be an epiphenomenon, and cosmopolitan approaches *a priori* downgrade alternative ethical constructs as insufficiently universalist. An approach to religion that begins with a constitutive understanding of religious belief and economic, social, and political practice as outlined in Weber's *Sociology of Religion*, is more helpful. However, because Weber's method insufficiently addresses ethical intentionality, the "neo-Weberian" approach I advance here incorporates the concepts of "common good" and "popular casuistry" into socio-historical contextualization. This approach provides a way to understand and theorize how religious adherents connect religious guidelines to moral action that avoids the essentialization of religion that is often characteristic of other perspectives.

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Over the past decade international politics has awoken from its fifty-year sleep to begin to take seriously, once again, the implications of religion. The “exile” of religion from international politics (Petito and Hatzopoulos, 2003) ended when allegedly ethnic and religious violence broke out in the former Yugoslavia, former Soviet republics, and Central and East Africa after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. Sociology and to a degree comparative politics were ahead of the curve, responding by the 1980s to events in Afghanistan and Iran, the spread of Liberation theologies and evangelicalism, and the “public” face of religion in Eastern Europe and the U.S. (Casanova 1994). The upshot of much of the renewed interest in religion in these fields was the rejection of the secularization thesis. Peter Berger, a doyen of this thesis (which, in brief, argued that modernization must be accompanied by secularization) now is a leader in asserting that its assumptions ignore the persistence and growth of religious belief on a global level (Berger, 1999).¹ Instead, the concept of “multiple modernities,” which acknowledges the existence of a variety of religious/secular forms in the contemporary world (Eisenstadt 2000), is replacing the assumption that modernization inevitably diminishes the influence of religion in society.

Yet in international relations, the initial attempts to make up for lost time in studying religion have often oversimplified it, trying to understand religion as unchanging dogma rather than evolving practice. When scholars take religion seriously, however, they can open up interpretive and constitutive areas of inquiry as well as

¹Casanova (1994) argues, however, that it is a mistake to reject the secularization thesis out of hand without understanding its separable analytical components regarding a) the deprivatization of belief, and b) the ability of modernizing secularizing trends to merge with differentiated spheres of social action.

important ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues for the field. Thus tensions between dogma and practice in international politics as well as in religion itself are exposed. Paradoxically, opening these lines of inquiry can also provide a more robust basis for understanding and explaining concerns at the forefront of international politics today; i.e., the relation between either religion and violence or religion and peace.

I argue that equating religion with dogma is insufficient for assessing its role and importance. Rather, the most useful way to analyze religion in international politics is through examining its practice – the intertwining of ethics and action -- in a variety of contexts, which requires conceptual and substantive work at several intersecting levels of analysis. The rules and development of religious doctrine cannot be ignored, but rather than assuming, as social scientists often do, that doctrine is fixed and unchanging – i.e., dogmatic -- we need to analyze how religious actors interpret it, both in everyday contexts and in situations of suffering, violence, and crisis.² As a result, I argue that taking Max Weber’s *Sociology of Religion* as a point of departure can teach us much about how to analyze religion in international politics, providing important insights about the relationship between religion and social, political, and economic life.³ Weber is sometimes associated with a firmly secular view of modern society (e.g., Norris and Inglehart 2004), which might make a Weberian approach to religion today seem contradictory. As Peter Katzenstein succinctly notes, however, students of both religion and secularism draw on Weber: “Work on multiple modernities is rooted in Max Weber’s

² Equating religion with rigid doctrine and/or identity is fairly ubiquitous across a wide range of social science theorizing. Prominent examples include Samuel Huntington’s famous assertion, “Even more than ethnicity, religion discriminates sharply and exclusively among people. A person can be half-French and half-Arab and simultaneously even a citizen of two countries. It is more difficult to be half-Catholic and half-Muslim” (1993). Tzvetan Todorov (1992: 249) wondered whether a pluralist stance towards otherness necessitated abandoning religious commitment. And statistical studies of the impact of religion on violence assume strong doctrinal identifications (see Fox, 2004, for an overview).

writings on world religions. Secularist thought instead draws heavily on Weber’s analysis of bureaucratic rationality” (Katzenstein 2006; see also Casanova 1994).

Weber famously refused to define religion himself. “To define ‘religion,’ to say what it *is*, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this” (Weber 1922/91, 1).⁴ Weber highlights the necessity of examining religion *in relation to* economic, social, and political processes, rather than in isolation from them. Rereading Weber today helps us understand how to do this. It is also useful for putting to rest some of his categorizations that appear out-of-date or problematic – notably the distinction between local and “world” religions, his limited knowledge of eastern religions, his inaccurate characterizations of Islam (Salvatore 1997, 133-35), and his evolutionary explanation of religious ethics. Understanding Weber’s limitations in turn points to important lacunae in his approach that need to be addressed to analyze significant issues in international politics today. One of the most serious of these gaps is Weber’s failure to capture a sense of intentionality in human action, despite his attempt to understand the ethical tensions embodied in belief. Weber allows us to see that religious ethics and action must be situated and contextualized to avoid oversimplification, and he emphasizes the “problem of theodicy” – how to cope with the existence of evil and suffering in the world -- as the major impetus for change in religious practice, but he does not help us conceptualize the ethical and hence *religiously-constructed* struggles that ensue when actors have to interpret their contexts to decide which actions are ethically justifiable and which are not. For this, I

⁴For the purposes of this article, however, I will adopt a broad definition of religion, as “any specific system of belief about deity, often involving rituals, a code of ethics, and a philosophy of life.” This is the definition of the organization “Religious Tolerance.org,” and is designed “to include the greatest number of belief systems” (www.religioustolerance.org/var_rel.htm). It thus includes traditional religions and “neo-pagan” religions as well as the “world religions” of most concern to Weber. However, it does not address directly the question of the relationship between secularism, ideology, and religion.

move beyond Weber to draw on insights in religious studies and social theory. In particular, I compare Weber's use of "ideal-types" to MacIntyre's (1990) and Asad's (2003) conceptualizations of "tradition" to ask how religious agents employ ethical constructs to determine how to act. This process, which I term "popular casuistry," is tied to actors' perceptions of the "common good" (both political and religious) that they wish to attain.

In Roman Catholic ethics, the process of case-based reasoning that relates religious rules to moral action is called casuistry (similar jurisprudential reasoning is characteristic of Islamic and Jewish law). As Jonsen and Toulmin (1988: 13-15) point out, however, casuistry was given a bad name in the mid-17th century by Blaise Pascal, who scathingly criticized the resulting moral taxonomies as partial and corrupt (especially favoring elite religious adherents) while masquerading as widely, if not universally, applicable. Jonsen and Toulmin put forth a powerful case for rehabilitating "the *art*" of casuistry as a means of morally adjudicating difficult issues ranging from abortion to the justice of wars (1988:13). I agree with them that because religiously-motivated actors of all faiths make judgments about how to act, the case process of moral reasoning represented by casuistry remains a useful concept for analyzing the intersection between belief and action. Yet I refrain in this article from concluding that the process itself can provide reasonable answers to a range of the most difficult questions. Instead, I employ the concept to develop a framework for situating how religious adherents of all types make judgments. They do so with varying degrees of theological and doctrinal knowledge and commitment; most are not theologians or religious leaders, and the lessons learned from the cases that ground their reasoning are constitutive of their socio-

economic and political contexts. As a result, I prefer to call the resulting process of interpretation and enactment of religious guidelines “popular casuistry.”

This article, therefore, proceeds in four parts. First, I situate recent work on religion within the history of the Western Enlightenment, the concept of secularization (Casanova 1994) and the “construction of religion as a category” (Asad 1993). In doing so, I examine how primordialist and instrumentalist theories about religion, as well as modern international law’s treatment of natural law concepts, each feed into the secularization thesis in interesting ways. Second, I examine how theorists in international relations have drawn on Weber for insights into methodology, science, and modernity. In this section I also analyze the ontology and methodology of *Sociology of Religion*, and explore and summarize the method and some of the findings of contemporary students of religion in comparative politics and sociology whose work Weber informs, implicitly if not explicitly. I show how this work – much of it in comparative politics, sociology, and religious studies -- is also extremely important for analyzing religion in international politics. However, questions regarding the ethical purposes of religion, particularly how religious actors cope with the problem of theodicy, remain unresolved. I argue that these questions are at the heart of much of the current interest in religion in international politics, because how we answer them influences whether we view religion as inherently intolerant, anti-modern, peaceful, and/or progressive. In the third section, therefore, I employ the concept of *common good* and develop the concept of *popular casuistry* to unearth, highlight, and incorporate religious ethics more explicitly into the Weberian framework. Religious actors attempt to realize their conceptions of the common good in social, economic, and political as well as cultural spheres (Marty 1997; Salvatore and

LeVine 2005; Byrnes 2006). According to Weber, they develop these conceptions in tandem with the political, economic, and social contexts within which they operate. They implement their resulting interpretations of doctrine by applying them to the situations they encounter, both ordinary and extraordinary. In the fourth, concluding section, I describe how this “neo-Weberian” approach that merges contextual with ethical considerations can help elucidate significant trends in religion and politics today. This article therefore emphasizes the conceptual, theoretical aspects of the approach, suggesting avenues for future substantive research.

I. Disciplinary Literature on Religion

Despite the complex array of issues connected to religion, debates about the subject in international politics still reflect simplified Enlightenment assumptions (Thomas 2003, 2005; Lynch 2000b, Shakman Hurd 2007), that assume that religion is either a dangerous (and atavistic) marker of people’s identity or an epiphenomenon of their underlying strategic and economic interests. The first assumption falls into the “primordialist” approach to religion; the second the “instrumentalist” (Hasenclever and Rittberger, 2003; Fox 2003). A third assumption – that religious ethics were important to diplomacy and the development of sovereignty historically but have been supplanted by secularism in the modern period – has characterized until recently much of the modern international law tradition and its approach to religion (Mapel and Nardin 1992). Each of these assumptions leads to variants of the secularization thesis, i.e., that modernization, secularization, and progress go hand-in-hand (Berger 1999).

Consequently, secularist assumptions ground Enlightenment concerns about religion in the world. An important segment of security studies was powerfully shaped by the primordialist thesis, represented most often by Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" in the mid-1990s, which analyzed religion almost exclusively in terms of its propensity to sow the seeds of conflict (Huntington 1993; 1995). Huntington's claims that conflicts between religions and cultures (often used synonymously) define the post-Cold War period and that a vast spectrum of values embodied in Western liberal culture bear no resemblance to those of different religious traditions incited debate which abated in the late 1990s and strongly resurfaced in 2001, continuing today.⁵ Huntington's thesis, which assumes that religious identities are strongly bounded, has also helped to justify influential foreign policy analyses, from the Balkans to the post September 11, 2001 world.⁶ While Huntington's thesis has become a straw man for some and dogma for others, a number of analysts on different sides of the political spectrum still take primordialist assumptions as a point of departure (Tibi 2006; Lewis 1996; Keppel 1994, 2005; Moore 2000).

Hasenclever and Rittberger, among others, distinguish primordialism from instrumentalism, which assumes that religion is one of many aspects of identity that can be manipulated to serve economic and/or strategic interests. The instrumentalist thesis, in this sense, is inspired both by the Marxist understanding of religion as a component of superstructure which is used by the powerful to mute the "true" interests of the

⁵He argues, moreover, that not only are wars in the contemporary era spawned by religious differences, but also that decisions regarding whether and on whose side to intervene are made today according to criteria of religious affiliation (Huntington et al, 1993).

⁶John Mearsheimer (1993), for example, argued that because of rigid identities the only resolution for the Bosnian conflict was to divide communities according to religion and ethnicity; more recently, foreign policy experts such as Leslie Gelb have advocated for dividing Iraq into Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish autonomous regions.

proletariat, and by the liberal belief that religion surfaces as an issue primarily when people become distracted from their underlying interest in individual realization and economic prosperity. In addition to both Marxist analyses and those ascribing to the secularization thesis, examples of instrumentalist understandings of religion include Robert Pape's analysis of suicide terrorism (Pape 2003). Based on a study of 188 suicide terrorist acts from 1980 to 2001 and focusing on the fact that secular Sri Lankan separatists hold the world record in suicide bombings, Pape argues that strategic logic, not religious fanaticism, explains the use of this form of violence. Studies such as Pape's are valuable in that they shift the focus away from the rigidity attributed to religion by primordialists. Nevertheless, they can also result in divorcing ethical motivations from their political, economic, and social context.

Hasenclever and Rittberger do not address, however, a third form of theorizing about religion in world politics. Students of international law traditionally addressed religion as a primary foundation for natural law and human rights doctrines (Mapel and Nardin 1992). Unlike the primordialist and instrumentalist approaches, the international law tradition does address ethics, in that it accepts and even relies on cosmopolitan notions of progress to ground claims that international law is normatively binding. Yet in much of this work, the relevance of religious motivation is treated as a phenomenon of historical import, but one which no longer needs theorizing. International relations scholars who study international law have at times highlighted the contributions made by religious thought (Brown, Nardin and Rengger 2002; Lynch and Loriaux 2000), and increasingly focus on the ethical implications of law (Reus-Smit 2004). But the ongoing justifications and debates rooted in religious hermeneutics and the notion of dynamic,

living tradition of religiously-rooted natural law (MacIntyre 1990), have been located on the margins of international relations theorizing about law. Given ongoing debates about process-oriented versus stable understandings of legal rules, the relevance of international law for postcolonial politics (Grovoqui 1996), and the applicability of shari'a to current legal constructs (An-Na'im 2008; Abou El Fadl 2005; Salvatore and LeVine 2005), bringing "religion" more centrally into contemporary approaches to international law is warranted.

Primordialism, instrumentalism, and the Enlightenment international law tradition each miss the evolution of religious doctrines and practice in international politics. The primordial model equates religion with dogma and danger, the instrumental model views it as a distraction from underlying interests, and the international law tradition treats it as atavistic, to be overridden by secularized cosmopolitanism. Each perspective also views religion as a more-or-less dogmatic "other," embodied in a type of rule structure that is rigid and unchanging. Each addresses religion in ways that are largely contradictory and ultimately incomplete, though they each emanate from Enlightenment assumptions (Lynch 2000). This is because each perspective also assumes an ideal-typical secularism, founded on norms of tolerance and division of public (government) and private (cultural and religious) spheres.

However, as Talal Asad points out in his seminal work, the concept and category of "religion" developed along with the advent of Western modernity, arising in tandem with the creation of the split between public and private spheres and the relegation of religion to the latter (Asad 1993). José Casanova takes this observation further, in noting that the result of Westphalia in 1648 was not the secular modern state, but rather the

confessional, divine-right state. Secularism, in the form of differentiation between public and private, has developed unevenly in different European as well as non-European societies, ever since (Casanova 2008). And Charles Taylor (2007) probes the resulting dominance of notions of secularity, such that religious belief becomes “one option among many.” Yet Taylor also argues in favor of a more nuanced appreciation of the ethical import of religious adherence (which he locates in the concept of “fullness”) and for a more sophisticated historical acknowledgement of the interplay between the religious and the secular. The categories of primordialism and instrumentalism, as well as the secularized forms of the international law tradition, are ill-equipped to cope with the complexities of secular/religious development noted by these and other authors (Shakman Hurd 2007; Connolly 1999).

II. Weber’s *Sociology of Religion* and Contemporary Studies

Re-examining Max Weber’s *Sociology of Religion* helps to draw out the features of his framework that are most useful for addressing these complexities. Returning to Weber accords with the call by some scholars to employ a constructivist perspective to understand the role of religion (Hasenclever and Rittberger 2003). This is because constructivism, with its emphasis on intersubjective ontology and the co-constitution of agents and structures, does not presuppose essentialist identities, as does primordialism, nor does it require an instrumentalist approach to ethical motivation.

I argue that constructivism *writ large* does indeed provide a useful approach for understanding religious belief and practice. I follow constructivist insights regarding the constitutive nature of agents and structures (Wendt 1987; 1999) the importance and

function of rules (Onuf 1989), the role of reason and persuasion (Kratochwil 1989), and the necessity of incorporating ethics (Reus-Smit 1999), along with the inclusive definition of constructivist contributions regarding intersubjectivity, context, and power articulated by Klotz and Lynch (2007). Together, these insights incorporate both the Weberian understanding of mutual constitution and change and the ethical dimension of religious belief and action. For example, Klotz and Lynch argue that “Constructivists cannot avoid the ethical dimension of our work – norms, rules, representations, culture, ideology, and all the other forms of intersubjective understandings that are at the core of the constructivist ontology cannot be analyzed in a value-free context” (p. 110; see also Price and Reus-Smit 1998; Lynch 2008). Similarly, the emphasis I place on analyzing the ethics and practice of religion in concrete situations accords with the constructivist claim that the intersubjective nature of power and meaning can be demonstrated by examining their relationship to substantive issues and events in world politics.

Contemporary returns to Weber by scholars of world politics include Friedrich Kratochwil, John Ruggie, and Patrick Jackson’s treatments of Weber’s social science methodology, and R.B.J. Walker’s discussion of the significance Weber attached to modernity. Each of these scholars provides important background insights into Weber’s analysis of religion. For Kratochwil, “[t]he world of intention and meaning [for Weber] is no longer one of measurement but rather one in which the reconstruction of the parameters of action is at issue” (Kratochwil 1989, 23). Reconstructing the “parameters of action” requires careful attention to contextuality: what actions political, social, and economic histories, institutions, norms, and trends make possible and what they make improbable. Ruggie highlights Weber’s method of *Verstehen* to indicate the emphasis

he placed on linking the general with the particular: “concepts in the first instance must aid in uncovering the meaning of specific actions and in demonstrating their social significance. That is to say, they must be capable of grasping the distinctiveness of the particular.” Ruggie outlines three steps essential for *Verstehen*: (Ruggie 1998: 30, 31).

The first is to discern a ‘direct’ or an ‘empathetic’ understanding of whatever act is being performed, from the vantage point of the actor. The second is to devise an ‘explanatory understanding’ of that act by locating it in some set of social practices recognized as such by the relevant social collectivity – in the language of the previous section, to identify what the act ‘counts as.’ And the third is to unify such individualized experiences into a historical phenomenon of broad social significance – of ‘objectivating’ *Verstehen*.

(Ruggie 1998: 30, 31)

In using the methodology of *Verstehen* and focusing on the parameters of action rather than its measurement, Weber delineated the famous concept of ideal-types. The ideal-type, according to Weber, is

a conceptual construct which is neither historical reality nor even the ‘true’ reality. It is even less fitted to serve as a schema under which a real situation or action is to be subsumed as one *instance*. [Rather, it is] a purely ideal *limiting* concept with which the real situation or action is *compared* and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components.

(Weber, 1949:93, in Ruggie, 1998:31)

Ideal-types, then, identify and differentiate social phenomena. Nevertheless, as Jackson (2008) points out, ideal-types cannot be independent of the standpoint of the researcher or the “cultural values that orient the investigation from the beginning.” The resulting methodological requirement is two-fold: to broaden reflexivity about the genesis of the ideal-types that researchers delineate, but at the same time to make those ideal-types understandable to those not sharing the same “value-orientations.” This means that a primary basis for validity assessments is the ability of the research to “make sense” to others of radically different perspectives, rather than its ability to reflect a single,

objective “reality.” The strength of the research conclusions still must rest, then, on their ability to withstand counter-arguments and additional evidence (Jackson; see also Yanow 2006; Schwartz-Shea 2006).

R. B. J. Walker’s Weber, in partial contrast to others’ focus on methodology, broods existentially over the meaning of modernity. Weber’s discussions of bureaucracy, rationality, and rationalization have methodological implications, but Walker emphasizes Weber’s ability to situate details and patterns of modern life in the context of disciplining developments in technology and communications. Weber’s insights thus led to a theory that could account for the seemingly inexorable “rationalization” that appeared to be reaching a peak in the early twentieth-century world (Walker, 1991).

Each of these assessments of Weber is useful for understanding developments in world politics, although each also tends to ignore Weber’s in-depth analysis of religion. This avoidance, whether or not intentional, reflects the general unease with which international politics has in the past broached (or not) the subject of religion and ethics. Yet Weber’s work on religion is seminal, and *The Sociology of Religion* in particular remains a classic, pointing the way towards a sophisticated understanding of religion that cuts through much of the confusion of recent debates. While students of sociology and comparative politics have paid much attention to Weber’s understandings of authority, including charismatic authority, legitimacy, and the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism, I draw on these but focus primarily on his understanding of method and socio-historical analysis as presented in *The Sociology of Religion*. This lays the groundwork for understanding the “problem of theodicy,” the theological conundrum

recognized by Weber to be a primary motive for change in religious practice, and one that also has critical implications for intentional action.

For Weber, the relationships between religion and economy, and religion and politics, are not “causal” in a strict sense. Rather, Weber developed a framework for assessing the relationship between religious ethics, cultural, economic, and political factors that allows room for situational and historical contingencies and complexities. Weber was centrally interested in the nexus of the ideational and material, but insisted that religion develops *in conjunction with* these processes, rather than as a discrete cause or result of them. As Talcott Parsons notes, “Weber repeatedly repudiated any imputation of an intent to ‘explain’ all social developments as emanations and consequences of ‘idealistic’ elements. His general position was as far removed from idealistic ‘emanationism; as it could possibly be” (Parsons, in Weber, 1963, 1991: xxxii). Religious doctrine, economic development, political change and social forms of behavior all interact, producing relatively stable forms of religious practice as well as breakthroughs and gradual evolutions toward new religious sects.

Two of Weber’s best known concepts -- “ideal-type” and “rationalization” – should be understood, then, as requiring contextualization both historically and geographically. Contextualization allows Weber to accomplish a two-fold task: first, to flesh out the way the concepts work in particular situations, and second (following Weber’s epistemological and methodological guidelines), to understand how the mechanisms of evolution and change place limits on the ahistorical generalizability of the concepts themselves. Looking at Weber’s evolutionary understanding of the development of religion from “primitive” to “world” types, and his thesis of the

relationship between ascetic Protestantism and capitalism, illustrates his use of both concepts.

Religious ideal-types include “magicians” versus “priests” and “prophets” as religious leaders, “ethical” versus “exemplary” prophecy, immanent versus transcendent (“this-worldly” versus “other-worldly”) orientations of action, “taboo” versus “ethical” religious norms, charismatic versus status-based religious authority, ascetic, mystical, and salvation religion, “primitive” religion versus the “world religions” of Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, and “irrational” versus “rationalized” religion. These ideal-types indicate evolutionary stages in religious development as well as show the influence of cross-cutting economic, political, and geographic factors. Thus, for example, Weber distinguishes between “ethical” and “exemplary” prophecy, beginning with the assertion that “prophecy arose, especially in the Near East, in connection with the growth of great world empires in Asia, and the resumption and intensification of international commerce after a long interruption” (p. 48). The disruptions of intensified commerce and expanding empires provided conditions amenable to religious movements that followed the teachings of “wandering prophets,” but these took very different forms depending on the nexus of political, economic, and other socio-cultural factors. “Exemplary” prophecy, for example, illustrated by the Buddha, provided a personal, “immanent” example of righteous living in this world in India, while “ethical” prophecy became a broader “instrument for the proclamation of a god and his [sic] will” in the Near East (p. 55). The former co-existed with multiple, pantheistic principles of divinity, and the latter developed in conjunction with pressures from “great centers of rigid social organization upon less developed neighboring peoples,” a situation which encouraged

belief in a rationalized, monotheistic, universalist deity set apart from and above the world and its peoples.

Weber's use of the term "rationalization" also requires explication. The world religions were also *rationalized* religions, although they varied in the degree of their systematization. Weber employs the terms "rational" and "irrational" in somewhat contradictory ways – the magician is irrational in that s/he makes connections that appear implausible to modern science, but at the same time the belief in the magician's powers is a rational one for the community concerned. "[R]eligiously or magically motivated behavior is relatively rational behavior, especially in its earliest manifestations. It follows *rules of experience*, though it is *not necessarily action in accordance with a means-end schema*" (Weber, 1963, 1991, 1, emphasis mine).

Yet the rise of world religions was premised upon their "rationalization" – that is, their systematization and institutionalization into broader socio-economic phenomena. For example, the "Protestant ethic" fostered by Calvinism and related doctrines became constitutive of a bureaucratized and morally-driven form of capitalism. Thus ascetic Protestantism disdained ostentatious displays of wealth yet encouraged the efficiency and diligent work habits that made such wealth attainable. Moreover, profits made through such industriousness were seen as "God-given" and a proof of righteousness, fostering an "'elective affinity' between the commercial class and Protestantism" (Philpott 2001:146). Consequently, ascetic Protestantism paradoxically encouraged the accumulation of wealth (Gerth and Mills, 1946). At the same time, many in the merchant class who were members of ascetic Protestant sects rose in prominence due to changes in production,

transportation, and communication. Thus ascetic Protestantism and “rational bourgeois [market] capitalism” each developed in conjunction with each other.

Weber argues, moreover, that once a religion is sufficiently rationalized – that is, systematized and unified – its core religious ideas come to have a logic of their own. “Once consolidated, religious ideas become a powerful independent influence on further religious development.” (Swidler, in Weber, 1963, 1991: xiii). Rationalization, therefore, refers to a religion’s bureaucratization and its ability to connect to patterns of everyday social, economic, and political life – in other words, to the way in which religion shapes social organization through routinization, rules, and ritual, and the way in which this systematization can spread to contexts other than that of its original development.

Rationalization cannot, however, prevent ethical tensions from arising that may either disrupt or solidify religious development. For example, the development of ascetic Protestantism was marked by tensions over surplus wealth. If wealth was an indication of spiritual success but material goods were evil, was it proper or sinful to accumulate and display the fruits of one’s labors? Moreover, what should be done for people who suffered from the lack of material well-being? This conundrum as well as others point to the most critical concept for Weber’s analysis of religion -- that of *theodicy*. Every rationalized religion had to come to grips with the inconsistencies produced by the fact of evil and suffering in the world despite the existence of all-powerful, knowing, or loving deities.

Weber noted two primary answers to this problem. Religious doctrine might promote retreat from the world, for example as seen in dualist beliefs that draw a radical

distinction between what is mortal, or profane, and what is sacred, or god-like. Or religion might encourage attempts to resolve the problem of theodicy by promises of a better world. This second answer can again be subdivided into two additional forms of action, which represent poles on a range of types of belief. Either ethical action can be oriented to an eventual “liberation” in this world, such as Messianism in Judaism (or liberationism in Liberation Theology), or one’s proper action in this world can be seen as preparing the way for emancipation from sin and suffering in the next.⁷ These developments demonstrate that when religions have difficulty accommodating ethical inconsistencies in given historical circumstances, tensions develop that can prompt social change.⁸

These examples indicate that historical contextualization, creating loose typologies based on observation and triangulation of sources, and maintaining the flexibility of categories to account for change resulting from the problem of theodicy, were all critical to Weber’s method for understanding religion.

Nevertheless, many aspects of his understanding of religion’s historical development were partial and faulty, stemming from his own viewpoint situated in and shaped by early twentieth-century European modernity. As Walker points out, Weber’s overarching interest was to understand and explain the seemingly systematic bureaucratization and hence rationalization of institutional forms, including those concerned with religious practice. As a result, Weber assumed an almost linear

⁷ Weber asserts that “the most complete formal solution of the problem of theodicy is the special achievement of the Indian doctrine of *karma*,” since both guilt and merit continue to be “compensated by fate in the successive lives of the soul,” and “each individual forges his own destiny exclusively, and in the strictest sense of the word” (Weber, 1963, 1991: 145).

⁸ “Theodicy” is also similar to the “halo effect” in psychology, although this latter term refers to the subset of cases in which people find reasons to keep the same beliefs rather than change them when confronted with counter-evidence.

progression from “magical” to “priestly” forms of religious leadership, from “taboo” to “ethical” religious norms, and from “immanent” to “transcendent” and universalized systems of religious belief. While he also insisted on observing the details which muddied these ideal-types, such as the fact that both taboo and ethical norms more often than not formed part of any given religious system, the main thrust of his approach to ethics remains evolutionary. Moreover, almost any of Weber’s substantive assertions regarding specific religions – for example, his partial characterization of Islam as a “religion of a warrior class” (p.262) can be called into question by empirical research. To do so, however, is often to employ Weberian methods, since Weber insisted on seeing any religion as constitutive of prevalent socio-economic forms and institutions and analyzing these on the basis of available evidence.

As a result, comparativists, sociologists, and historians continue to employ Weberian insights in analyzing the intersection of religion, economics, politics, and culture. Since the 1990s, especially, a renaissance of work on religion in these fields as well as anthropology has encouraged in-depth case study analysis of the way in which religious traditions operate in specific contexts. For example, the essays in the massive, multi-volume “Fundamentalism Project” led by scholars at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School in the mid-1990s are Weberian in inspiration (Marty and Appleby, 1993a,b; 1994a;b), because they attempt to situate different types of fundamentalisms contextually, comparing and contrasting characteristics of the economic and political conditions in which they arise. While these volumes employ the term “fundamentalism” as an ideal-type, and find commonalities such as “the world conqueror, the world transformer, the world creator, and the world renouncer,” (which form new ideal-typical

categories), they do not sacrifice complexity in favor of parsimony (Almond, Sivan, and Appleby 2004: 426).⁹

Scholars who employ Weberian-type analyses generally proceed according to three major steps. First, they identify specific forms of religious practice, linking them to socio-political institutions and trends. Second, they demonstrate the way in which such practices, institutions, and trends are constitutive of each other; that is, the way in which they shape each other's existence and development. Third, they draw out the social, economic, and/or political implications of the religious practices at issue.¹⁰ These steps need not be linear. Moreover, challenges to these studies can be based on the identification of competing institutions and trends or on evidence demonstrating alternative social, economic, and/or political practices.

One example of this type of analysis is that of Ousmane Kane (in Rudolph and Piscatori, eds., 1997), who provides a contemporary Weberian analysis of continuity and change within 19th and 20th century West African Sufism. Kane focuses on the socio-political organization provided by the *turuq* (Sufi orders of a mystical form of Islam) during both centuries. The *turuq* found common interest with French colonizers in abolishing the slave trade, but managed to keep its distance from subsequent French rule. Despite differing political and economic circumstances in each century, the *turuq*'s economic viability, political flexibility, and provision of social welfare functions "without regard to state borders" ensured its continued influence in religious leadership

⁹ Indeed, they argue, "When we observe these traits in action – when we look at fundamentalism in its particular historical manifestations – we see that fundamentalist *movements* are quite complex phenomena" (Almond, Sivan, and Appleby 2004: 425, emphasis in the original).

¹⁰ These steps align in part with those articulated by Ruggie earlier in this article, in that they draw linkages between the individual, social, and more general meanings of religious practices. However, they tend to emphasize the relationship between religion and socio-economic place and time, rather than probing individual ethical intentions.

and social organization. This leadership was also political in the local sense, although it continually made accommodations with the broader colonial and later anti-colonial political regimes in West Africa.

David Martin provides a different, transnationalized type of Weberian analysis in focusing on the global spread of Christian Evangelicalism. Over the past several decades, Evangelical missionaries from North America have succeeded in converting millions of people in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Philippines, Korea, and China. Populations in these countries were (to varying degrees) receptive to the Evangelical message because it provided a way to escape more rigid politico-religious identities in civil conflicts (e.g. Latin America), and at times provided a less hierarchical and less-patriarchal model for family and political relationships (e.g., in Africa and parts of Asia). But Martin notes that this “Evangelical upsurge” eventually took very different political forms in each of these areas of the world, from active engagement in party leadership to a rejection of political participation. Thus, the implications of Evangelical beliefs on political ideology are varied, but where Evangelicals become politically active, they have sometimes promoted more democratic and equitable gender practices both on the level of the family and on the level of political participation, a trend which might not be evident if one looks only at Evangelical politics of the previous generation in the U.S.

Miller and Yamamori (2007) also assess the socio-political impact of the rise of Pentacostalism across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, showing that a phenomenon that originally appeared to apolitical or conservative now also incorporates “progressive” characteristics and programs, defying easy political categorization. Daniel Philpott’s 2001 analysis of the religious ideas underlying modern sovereignty takes us from the

local, national, regional, and transnational geographic levels to the instantiation of Protestant norms on the international level, although these norms are still in the process of development and continue to be challenged in much of the world; in part due to the transnational practices of religion analyzed by these and other authors. More recently, Byrnes and Katzenstein, et al (2006) have analyzed religious practices in Europe, demonstrating the variety of religious experience, including Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox, and Muslim, as well as both “laïcité” and other forms of secularism, that produce degrees of public/private differentiation present on the continent. And numerous scholars (including Salvatore and LeVine 2005, Esposito and Mogahed 2007, and Wiktorowicz et al 2004), have examined contemporary Muslim-majority societies, demonstrating how and why popular appellations such as “political Islam” (An-Na’Im, 1999) and “fundamentalist Islam” (Marty et al, 1994, 1995) may well be too broad to function as useful ideal-types, since they paper over geographic, cultural, temporal, and political variations in Islamic religious practices.

In order for a Weberian framework to remain useful for assessing the role of religion in international politics, we must first return to Weber’s assumptions that a) religious ethics are critical for understanding social order, and b) religious adherence is ubiquitous in history, rather than assuming that the “Protestant ethic” inevitably results in a teleology of secularism. Weberian approaches can provide valuable explanations of the way in which religious *practice* relates to groups’ social, economic, political, and geographic contexts. They also emphasize the “meaning” and implications of the forms religion takes in different parts of the world at different times for specific political issues, such as war, peace, democracy, and human rights. Weberian methods contribute,

therefore, to our understandings of the wide variation in religious practices in different parts of the world today, corresponding to the concept of “multiple modernities” (Eisenstadt 2002). Moreover, employing a Weberian framework does not confine us to the same ideal-types used by Weber himself – in fact, if Jackson is correct, ideal-types necessarily evolve and change with the worldviews of researchers and disciplinary paradigms -- as long as religion is contextualized and the corresponding political, economic, and cultural factors are analyzed as cross-cutting religious practices. The next section articulates the conceptual apparatus necessary for analyzing more deeply the *ethical* component of religion in international politics.

III. Religion and Ethics in International Politics: Connecting the Common Good and Popular Casuistry

Despite the utility of Weber’s method of analyzing religion, it has difficulty providing the tools to understand how actors relate their ethical intentions and motivations to decisions about how to act. Understanding the relationship between contextualized ethical teachings and different forms of action is especially important in times of historical uncertainty, which breed tensions in religious doctrines. Weber allows for evolution and change when these tensions become untenable, reminding us that the “problem of theodicy,” which necessitates finding ways to interpret why bad things happen in the world, causes religious adherents to seek new solutions to ethical tensions, producing social change. But Weber’s method cannot tell us how or why people of the same faith tradition might resolve this problem differently, including suspending belief or bracketing the problem at hand.

Consequently, Weber's conceptualization of religion, ethics, and "power" can lead, according to Anthony Giddens, to a "dualism of action and structure that ... has to be overcome" (Giddens 1979). Weber's framework insufficiently accounts for how and why religious groups bifurcate, or split along even more complex lines, in times of ethical or moral tension. This is because Weber is concerned more with the "fact" of social change than with the moral validity of its ethical content for adherents. For example, in the world today there exist religious "extremists" or "radicals" of every major faith tradition who justify the use of violence to attain their ends, but these adherents often co-exist temporally and geographically with others of the same faith tradition who interpret sacred texts differently, even to the point of radical pacifism. If Mark Juergensmeyer is correct, "the line is very thin between 'terrorists' and their 'non-terrorist' supporters. It is also not clear that there is such a thing as a 'terrorist' before someone conspires to perpetrate a terrorist act" (Juergensmeyer, 2000, 8). Moreover, religious "terrorists" of differing faith traditions may well have more in common with each other than with others who claim the same religious tenets (e.g. Lincoln 2002).

It is important, therefore, to understand the constitutive relationship between religious ethics, action, and socio-economic factors on the level of the group as well as the individual. I do this here by connecting the concepts of "common good" and "popular casuistry." In explicating these concepts, I also assess notions of "tradition" vis-a-vis the contextual analysis of Weberian ideal-types.

As Salvatore and LeVine (2006), Marty (1997), Byrnes (2006), Hehir (2006), and others assert, religious ethics provide people with a foundation for pursuing goals they believe are valuable, both for themselves and others. Religion, through doctrine, rituals,

texts, symbols, and other means, guides adherents in practices designed to maintain or bring about the “common good.” Defining and assessing the “common good” for groups of people is an important component of understanding the ethical motivations provided by religious belief. The “common good” can be universalist, in the Christian sense of the dignity of the person or the Islamic sense of the *umma* that encompasses all Muslims worldwide, or it can be particularistic in a Durkheimian sense, providing the collective glue that maintains social order in a given community (Poggi 2000; also Miller and Yamamori 2007).

Religion, therefore, intersects with individual and group political, economic, and social formations, understood by some social theorists as “tradition.” As Salvatore and LeVine (2005) point out, both MacIntyre (1990) and Asad (2003) reformulate the notion of tradition to understand the relationship between religious ethics and interpretive possibilities. For MacIntyre, moral enquiry based on tradition entails a “reappropriation of the past which directs the present towards a particular – and yet eternal – future,” and it “takes place at two interrelated levels, that of theoretical inquiry and that of the moral embodiment of such inquiry” (1990: 79). Asad traces the deep entanglements between Islamic law, including juristic opinions or *hadith*, and the political economy of colonialism in analyzing changes in interpretations of Islamic tradition in the 19th century Middle East. Asad charges that “In tradition, the present is always at the center,” and that consequently “Questions about the internal temporal structure of tradition are obscured if we represent it as the inheritance of an unchanging cultural substance from the past” (1990, 222).

Drawing from these authors, Salvatore and LeVine assert that traditions both define some social and transcendent goods as above others, and represent lived experience rather than simply stultified cultural practices. “The most dynamic core of a tradition resides however not in codified procedures or established institutions, but in a sociologically more complex level, that is given by the ‘living tradition,’ that largely overlaps with more institutional levels, but is nurtured by practices. These cannot be the object of formal training, but are embedded in life narratives, and presuppose not simply a quest for ‘identity,’ but a collective *telos* of action that is necessarily transindividual and transgenerational, and is usually projected into some formula of ‘common good,’” Tradition is thus intimately linked to notions of the common good; it is “necessarily transindividual and transgenerational,” and can concern a variety of spatial constructs, from the local to the global.

Members of religious traditions in the modern world possess multiple identities, however, each of which may play a role in determining ethical choice in a given context. Moreover, both Asad and MacIntyre’s notions of tradition attempt to incorporate socio-historical movements and trends that cross spatial and temporal boundaries, such as the Enlightenment and colonialism. For both of these reasons, Weber’s method of analyzing ideal-typical identities as well as temporal and spatial contexts, and notions of the common good arising from lived traditions remain useful complements to each other. In the neo-Weberian model, the definition of the common good is only partly shaped or determined by “formal” or “authoritative” religious doctrine. How religion and its ethical guidelines (or requirements) are interpreted can vary according to socio-political circumstance, and intersecting modernities provide the opportunity for ethical

intentionality and choice. Decisions about how to act ethically within a given religious tradition may be motivated by anticipation of individual as well as “common” gain (for example the martyr who expects rewards in heaven) but even these considerations are shaped by intersubjective interpretations of religious rules and texts along with lived experience that may cut across religious identities to include other socio-political circumstances. As a result, Pape’s *religious* suicide bombers may act out of a determination to free a subjugated territory, but their intentions and actions are constitutive of the ethical justifications that intertwine notions of freedom and territoriality with particular interpretations of religious purpose. All religious adherents do not approve of suicide bombings; all (religious and non-religious) suicide bombers say they want to free specific territories from subjugation. The notion of tradition, therefore, focuses our attention on “lived experience” and even more importantly, “lived ethical purpose,” but cross-cutting ideal-typical identities – the “religious suicide bomber” versus the “religious political resister” or the “religious nonviolence activist” – allow us to grasp through categorization the multiple ways in which religious ethics may be interpreted.

As a result, I argue that the concept of “*popular casuistry*” is a useful tool for understanding the processes of moral reasoning by religious adherents. Jonsen and Toulmin (1988) appeal to the concept of “casuistry,” advocating it as a normative model for moral reasoning, to be preferred over the resort to either universalism or relativism. They discuss the rise and decline of casuistry in the Christian West and the powerful critiques leveled against it during the Reformation, when it was seen as an inherent component of the corrupt practices of some Catholic clerics and bishops. They argue,

however, that we still have much to learn from the casuistic mode of moral reasoning, and that it can help us escape from overly dogmatic postures of various stripes. Casuistic methods require beginning with general moral principles, finding “paradigmatic cases” that serve as “final objects of reference in moral argument,” clarifying the moral presumptions at issue for a given problem, proceeding in a back-and-forth manner of reasoning and argument to decide to what degree the case at issue “fits” or whether exceptions should be granted, and if so on what moral grounds they rebut the initial presumptions (305-309).

Casuistry thus points to the rule-oriented foundation of reasoning from cases provided by the Catholic tradition (e.g., from moral personhood to Just War), but this type of case-based, rule-oriented foundation for moral reasoning is employed to varying degrees by adherents of all ethical traditions. For example, Khaled Abou El Fadl highlights the similarities between Islamic and Jewish jurisprudence, especially in the pre-modern era. Like the Jewish Rabbinic tradition, which was characterized by “multi-interpretive methods and various competing interpretations,” Islamic jurists “considered a wide range of alternative interpretations and opinions on any particular point of law, and the various sages of Islamic law worked hard to earn the respect and loyal following of a number of students, who in turn worked to spread and develop their mater’s intellectual heritage” (Abou El Fadl 2005:33).

Religious rules and interpretations, therefore, must make sense to adherents given their lived experience in particular contexts. The concept of popular casuistry does not provide a tool for understanding individual cognition or group psychology. Rather, the purpose of employing the concept is to acknowledge first that religious traditions exist as

living rituals as well as repositories of ethical guideposts, and second that religious actors link these rituals and guideposts to interpretive moments in daily life. Moreover, interpretations of the ethical requirements of a religious tradition are shaped by ongoing political and economic practices (producing different ideal-typical constructs) as well as communal debates about religious authority and legitimacy.

Religious adherents reason from cases on a more informal basis than the stringent methods employed by medieval Jesuits, Talmudic scholars, or Islamic jurists.¹¹ Religious adherents employ a form of moral reasoning that incorporates the teachings of religious elites but is not limited to them, relies on precedent and sacred texts but interprets them to suit given circumstances and “cases,” and uses these resources to fill the “gaps” in guides to action present in any concrete situation. Thus the ethical content of the common good is continually negotiated by religious adherents who use informal casuistic methods to interpret doctrine in given socio-political (and spatial and temporal) circumstances. In other words, various political and economic trajectories shape the customary, sacred, humanly-authored, and social concerns that intersect with moral reasoning and decision-making. Moreover, these trajectories and ethical guidelines not only constrain people from acting, but also enable new possibilities for interpreting socio-political phenomena to bring about the common good. Ethics, as Paul Ricoeur asserts, provide us with a variety of possibilities for action, some of which can enable new socio-political relationships (Ricoeur, 1976). Such examples of internal and cross-cutting ethical

¹¹ For example, Khaled Abou El Fadl acknowledges with chagrin the fact that the careful reasoning and learned opinions of Muslim scholars in the classical age has given way to a situation today in which, “practically anyone can appoint himself a *mufi* and proceed to spew out *fatawa*, without either a legal or a social process that would restrain him from doing so” (2005: 28-29).

conflicts indicate a wide variety of possibilities for socio-political as well as ethical change.

IV. Guiding Substantive Research on Religion in International Politics

A major problem, then, with contemporary approaches to religion is that they narrow any understanding of a given religious ethic and the common good or goods it seeks to promote, assuming that religious doctrine and ethics and the common good are given rather than lived, experienced, and interpreted. When scholars and policy-makers employ such assumptions to assess the relationship between religious beliefs and violence, conceptual oversimplification and bad theory as well as policy can result. As a result, any productive attempt to understand apparent religious trends in international politics, as well as sometimes related phenomena (from Protestant capitalists to religious suicide bombers) can usefully begin with Weberian methods. These include the contextual analysis of religious belief situated vis-à-vis political, economic, cultural, and historical factors. Ontologically, as a first cut, this means that the religious “subject” is both the intersubjectively-constituted individual and the group. Methodologically, this means that both the individual and group are shaped by (and shape in turn) social, economic, and political processes.

In addition to a Weberian orientation, however, a productive framework for analyzing religion should view religious meaning as “constructed” from intentional action by individuals as well as groups, who debate and evaluate their actions against lived traditions and religious texts, which emanate from the background of previously

institutionalized (but usually still-contested) ethical systems. This brings the analysis of religion into the realm of ongoing practice in the context of difficult ethical choices.

Returning to the connection between religion and international politics, a neo-Weberian model of analysis provides critically important insights. A neo-Weberian approach does not rely on assumptions that view religious identities as primordialist and therefore *a priori* threatening as in the concept of “clash of civilizations,” or that treat religion as merely an occasional cover for other, more fundamental, interests and goals, or that posit a cosmopolitan understanding of legal norms within which religious practice must fit. Instead, such an analysis first situates a religious group’s practices within the socio-political and economic context of its adherents. Next, it asks how adherents define the common good and attempt to achieve it, given the intertwining of religious, social, political, and economic traditions. In most cases, there are common goals but tensions over how to achieve them in the most ethically justifiable way. Adherents use situated “cases” as examples of how to enact religious doctrine, but case reasoning, while essential, is also fluid and contested, exposing the gaps in any attempt to relate religious rules to moral actions. Finally, a neo-Weberian analysis probes these places of uncertainty and contestation in linking religious guidelines to action in the public sphere, and looks at the range of interpretations that are legitimized within a religious tradition as well as those that may result in a hybrid or new form of religious ethic. This pushes analysis towards a strongly hermeneutic, contextualized conception of religious rules and law (see, for Islam, Hathout 2006; Salvatore 1997; Abu El Fadl 2004; and for Christianity, Lindbeck 1984). A neo-Weberian approach, then, remains skeptical that any theoretical “covering laws” can cope adequately with either explaining religious practice

or understanding ethical purpose. However, interpretive conceptual and theoretical insights regarding the value of hermeneutic “intertextuality” are critical to the approach. Thus it assumes a commonality of conceptual language and methodological orientation but vast differences in substantive forms of knowledge.

If we employ such an analysis to break down the elements of the current fascination with Islam in international politics, several findings become evident. First, the very question of the “role of Islam” makes little sense, giving way instead to questions about the role of this or that Muslim group acting to achieve a particular understanding of the common good in such-and-such a context, with possible repercussions in transnational religious debates. Second, because delving into the ethical background, tensions, and possibilities of action have become an integral component of the analysis, it becomes impossible to ignore the content of ethical intentions. Hence, it becomes meaningless to charge any group with engaging in violence because “they hate our way of life” or similarly non-analytical indictments of Islamists (for an alternative explanation, see Halliday 2002).

Similar issues occur in attempting to articulate the role of conservative Christians in international politics. Statements by prominent evangelicals such as Richard Cizik and Jim Wallis demonstrate, for example, that the assumed unity of Christian Evangelicals in the United States is breaking apart over whether to prioritize social concerns such as forms of sexuality or global concerns such as peace and environmentalism (e.g. Wallis 2008). As a result, it is no longer possible to speak of “the Christian Right” in the U.S. as having a single voice. Moreover, the growing phenomenon of Charismatic and Pentecostal movements has also infused Catholicism and mainstream Protestantism,

causing new alignments and forms of worship in many parts of the world (Miller and Yamamori 2007). In each of these cases, ideal-typical categories such as “Islamist,” “Conservative Catholic,” and “mainstream Protestant” take us only so far. We also need to investigate the contexts that produced and reproduce the conservative Christian (including Catholic), or Islamist phenomena as well as how religious actors use popular casuistry to interpret sacred texts to sustain these tendencies in different situations. Doing so provides a sense of the tensions inherent in interpretations that enable the breakdown or reconstitution of religious ethics in a changing socio-political environment.

Two contemporary examples briefly illustrate the traditions, ideal-typical frames, and possible understandings of the common good that inform popular casuistry in particular situations. Both caution against oversimplified and dogmatic understandings of religious practice. The first concerns the ethical dilemmas confronted by some Muslims in Iraq. Given the U.S. occupation and “war on terror” and over against an Arab secularist past enforced by Saddam Hussein, followers of Moqtada al-Sadr in Iraq must decide whether to support the seemingly contradictory goals of cooperating with United States forces (for example, in maintaining a ceasefire) or opposing the U.S. military presence. At stake are questions of under what conditions Islam allows violence or requires nonviolence and even hospitality, whether to follow the political and religious lead of a relatively young Shi’a imam, how to understand Iraqi history and nationalism in conjunction with religious traditions while living in an economically-disadvantaged context, and how to promote the unity of the *umma* according to the will of an all-powerful and merciful God in a situation of extreme instability and conflict, among other issues. Moreover, the local/international political connections must be continually

assessed, especially in the midst of changing U.S. administrations and fluctuating American ideas about whether and how to engage in “nation-building” and “democracy-promotion.” The traditions of Iraqi (and more specifically, Shi’a) Muslims must be constantly negotiated across ideal-typical Iraqi, Muslim, and Arab identities, and the experiences of U.S. bombing in the early 1990s and occupation since 2003 must be assessed in order for action to make sense and be legitimized ethically. The result is a shifting but analyzable range of possibilities. From the inside of the Sadr movement, the ethico-political stakes involved in decisions about how to act are extremely high. Analysts on the outside of the movement should be wary of oversimplifying either the stakes or the range of possibilities involved in decisions about how to act.

Similarly, U.S. Catholics must decide whether to use contraception or practice abstinence as well as whether or not to condone abortion rights in their attempts to promote the sanctity of life. Recent U.S. elections have often pitted Catholics who favor the right to choose against evangelical Protestants who, along with the Catholic hierarchy, frame the issue in terms of right to life. These debates also take place against a history of Catholic social teachings that privilege economic and social justice for marginalized sectors of society, which in turn beg the question of how to evaluate the lives of existing persons versus unborn fetuses. An additional factor that influences the popular casuistry of Catholics in the U.S. is their experience of a considerable degree of independent decision-making on a variety of doctrinal issues from the 1960s until the 1980s, when Pope John-Paul II actively intervened to impose a more strongly hierarchical relationship between the national churches and Rome. U.S. Catholics, as a result, find themselves negotiating tradition through intersecting historical and ethical

contexts, as well as multiple ideal-typical identities. Some Catholics are in close political agreement with conservative Evangelical Protestants (though as we saw earlier, this latter category is also in the process of bifurcating), while others appeal to Post-Vatican II and liberationist theologies to criticize both US political power and the interpretations of doctrine proffered by recent Popes.

We can analyze these decisions about how to act as being based on a complex triangulation of appeal to religious texts and engagement with moral concerns within given political, social, and economic contexts, from which lessons are drawn from more-or-less informal case-based reasoning. This reasoning and the actions that result – e.g., the Sadr movement’s argument that a ceasefire be maintained as the best means of both promoting the welfare of its members and encouraging the U.S. to leave, or the uneasy accord on the sanctity of life as the foundation for promoting the good in Catholic moral teaching (despite strong disagreements on what types of life are most sacred) -- allows actors to satisfy ethical as well as contextual criteria. It is also dynamic, resulting in the constant production and at times re-interpretation of local, trans-local, transnational, and international religious “tradition.” Islamist groups in Iraq continue to debate the moral and pragmatic value of different forms of armed struggle for both religious and political goals, and U.S. Catholics continue to argue about the moral implications of contraception (and abortion) in their own contexts as well as in a world in which diseases such as HIV/AIDS and poverty are widespread.

Further complicating assumptions about Islam and Christianity (as well as other faith traditions) is the fact of religious syncretism and hybridity. As cultural worlds intersect and migration and communications increase, both the “world religions”

observed by Weber and the secularisms with which they co-exist continue to subdivide and realign with each other. Some faith-based actors react by reasserting “fundamental truths,” while others consciously merge ethical traditions in new casuistic formulations (Lynch 2000b).

These examples indicate that what a neo-Weberian approach to religion cannot do is provide simple, parsimonious explanations of behavior derived from the religious beliefs of actors. It can, however, provide the conceptual tools to link ethical motivations and interpretations to both context and actions. In doing so, it prevents facile assumptions about what people of a certain faith tradition will believe or how they will act. Paradoxically, in bringing ethics and context centrally into the picture, a neo-Weberian analysis can enrich our understanding of why faith-based actors might engage in violence in given situations, but it likewise compels us to assess whether popular forms of casuistry can also result in quite different interpretations of the common good, in which violence becomes “one option among many,” a last resort, or even prohibited. Linking context, practice, and ethics thus produces a richer conception of the importance of religion in international politics than that provided by primordial, instrumentalist, or cosmopolitan models.

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