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1

Introduction

AN ATTENTIVE look at international events quickly reveals that in many parts of the world religion and state power appear deeply intertwined today. Russia's increasing assertiveness abroad and its rising attraction among certain conservative milieus in Western societies have gone hand in hand with a resurgent Russian Orthodox Church. American foreign policymakers have actively sought to fight terrorism in the decades following the attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11), by attempting to govern religious landscapes globally, whether by advancing religious freedom or promoting "moderate" Islam. The modern state of Saudi Arabia and its royal family hold a unique status within the Muslim world and the wider international community by virtue of hosting Islam's two holiest sites in Mecca and Medina.

The Islamic Republic of Iran over decades developed extensive ties to largely—although not exclusively—Shi'a communities, movements, and allies in the Middle East, forming an "Axis of Resistance" that collectively mobilizes to advance shared interests and ideologies in the region. We cannot fully account for the United States' steadfast, almost unconditional, backing of Israel in its conflicts with Palestinians and regional neighbors without taking into account the advocacy and lobbying activities of pro-Israel American Jewish and Christian Zionist groups. A complex web of Hindu nationalist organizations has operated at the global civil society level for more than five decades, effectively rallying the Indian diaspora in support of the Bharatiya Janata Party ("Indian People's Party," or BJP) domestically and its foreign policy internationally.

These few cursory examples show how religious factors and faith-based forces can empower specific states and state-actors in the contemporary international system.¹ Political scientists and international relations (IR) scholars, however, have largely overlooked or poorly understood these

dynamics. For many decades, they mostly ignored religion, viewing it as an atavistic remnant of premodernity doomed to increasing irrelevance in global politics. The modern world was supposed to be secular. God, dead. Scholars have thus overwhelmingly approached state power in international affairs as driven by military and economic capabilities and considerations. Many of these assumptions are pithily echoed by the famous quote attributed to Joseph Stalin, deriding the influence of religion in the contemporary world: “How many divisions does the pope have?” As it turns out, the pope is not only still standing, but through the figure of John Paul II, the papacy played a considerable role in consigning the Soviet Union and Communism to the dustbin of history.²

Following the end of the Cold War and the tragic events of 9/11, many began to change their minds about the relevance and place of faith in our current world. It became increasingly evident that across different regions and traditions, the political salience of religious actors, identities, beliefs, discourses, practices, rituals, and places was growing rather than waning.³ Social scientists, nonetheless, have continued to struggle to make sense of the relationship between states, religion, and power in global politics.

On the one hand, most have tended to position religion, and its resurgence, in a conflictual and zero-sum relationship with the state.⁴ Such a perspective is not wrong *a priori*. There is considerable evidence that territorially bound, this-worldly states and transnational, other-worldly religions have competed and clashed across time and space for influence and authority over human affairs. Yet this is not the whole story. Mutually reinforcing relationships between temporal and spiritual forms of power, which have been the norm historically (consider, for instance, the connections between European colonialism and the Christian missionary enterprise),⁵ continue to take place in complex ways in the current international system (as suggested by the opening examples).

On the other hand, some scholars do helpfully and increasingly pay attention to the positive-sum interactions between religion and state power in international politics. However, these tend to reduce religion to a “soft power” tool, one that states might instrumentalize in public relations campaigns or as rhetorical window dressing for their pursuit of military and economic interests.⁶ Rarely is the multifaceted nature of religious power, which is not exclusively “soft,” and the independent force of holy sites, faith-based organizations, spiritual authorities, and religious networks sufficiently explored and theorized.

Overall, we still lack a comprehensive framework for identifying and exploring the complex ways that states, religions, and power relate and interact in mutually reinforcing ways in twenty-first-century global politics. This book aims to develop the conceptual and analytical tools to effectively and systematically bring faith into the study of global power dynamics. This theoretical framework explicitly sets aside lingering secularist and materialist blinders in political science and IR to approach religion as an enduring presence and force in the modern world. It moves beyond the general focus on state-religion relations as competitive and mutually exclusive to consider the variety of ways that they can relate to and reinforce each other in global politics. Finally, this framework goes beyond instrumentalist understandings of religion as a tool of statecraft to recognize faith-based actors, traditions, and dynamics as relatively autonomous forces in the international system that can be directly mobilized through, but also operate with considerable independence from, states' foreign policies.

Religion as “Sacred Capital” and States as “Religious Great Powers”

This book is guided by an overarching question: Why and how does religion become a form of power and influence for states in contemporary global politics? To begin answering this question, I propose to start with a thought experiment. Let us think about the present international system we have come to inhabit in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by visualizing it along two separate maps. The first map would be a rather familiar one, representing today's nation-states, numbering in the hundreds, with different colors and clear-cut boundaries. The second map, instead, would represent humanity's multiple, largely transnational and heterogeneous faith traditions. Among these traditions, a handful of major world religions would cover much of the map and be especially visible, intersecting across state boundaries and continents with few clear-cut demarcating lines.⁷

While these two entities and forces—states and religions—inhabit different maps in our thought experiment, they should also be understood as occupying and operating on separate, relatively autonomous spheres or, better, *societies* in global politics. When mobilizing the concept of “societies” here, I am drawing on the English School theory of IR and its conceptualization of the global sphere. English School scholars approach the modern international system as divided along two separate globe-spanning societies, which are

defined by relations among distinct units and forces. One is the *international society*, constituted by the interactions and relations among territorially bounded political units that we call states. The other is the *world society*, constituted instead by nonstate actors, interhuman processes, and transnational relations. While modern nation-states inhabit and form the international society, I suggest that religions inhabit and operate prevalently within the world society domain.⁸

Connections and interactions can and do take place between different domains and societies, and thus also between states and religions. Some of the most notable instances, I argue, occur when states happen to host within their boundaries the historical, geographical, cultural, and organizational cores of one or more major religious traditions and communities with global reach and appeal. Because of these overlaps, such states are likely to exhibit a range of significant religious characteristics: They may host prominent holy sites and cities venerated and visited by millions of followers; they may be the home of key religious figures, organizations, and groups with worldwide connections and devotees; they may find themselves at the center of complex transnational faith-based dynamics and flows, including sending missionaries abroad and hosting religious students at home; and they will tend to have demographic characteristics, social norms, political movements, legal systems, and national and foreign policies shaped in significant ways by religious actors, principles, and forces.⁹

These multiple religious factors and dynamics constitute a complex source of power for such states. I conceptualize this form of power as *sacred capital*. Sacred capital emerges from the religious characteristics, resources, and relations a country—its territory, society, and state institutions—happens to be endowed with and the producer of.¹⁰ Sacred capital points to the global advantages and influence that a state may, in potentiality, enjoy by virtue of overlapping with and housing significant historical, geographical, cultural, and organizational centers of major transnational religious traditions, communities, and networks.

Certain states will be especially central to some of the world's most important religious sites, forces, and dynamics. Although difficult to quantify, such states will likely be endowed with and count on greater sacred capital than others. I propose to think of these states as *religious great powers*, similar to the way that countries with considerable military and economic capabilities and resources are thought of as military or economic great powers. Sacred capital is a highly abstract and general concept capturing the possibility that

religion—in its multiple ideational, demographic, infrastructural, and organizational aspects—can become a form of power and influence of and for states, especially those considered religious great powers, in global politics. However, to better understand how this form of power functions, I disaggregate the concept of sacred capital into three distinct, yet intertwined and interdependent, specific types.

I label these sacred capital types as symbolic, cultural, and social. *Sacred symbolic capital* operates at the level of collective meanings and understandings and is expressed through three kinds of dynamics. First, it is implicated in efforts by religious great powers to claim and be recognized as holding valuable forms of sacred status as leaders or defenders of (the) faith in the international system. Second, it manifests in efforts by states to effectively legitimize their foreign policies by drawing on religious identities, ideas, and rituals. Third, it is entwined with a set of highly symbolic practices that I label “holy site diplomacy,” centered around the management of, access to, and performance of rituals in sacred places deployed to cement and reward allies/friends or punish and exclude rivals/enemies.

Sacred cultural capital is connected to the influence exercised over and generated by collective transnational religious belongings, beliefs, and behaviors. A religious great power’s sacred cultural capital is implicated in two kinds of dynamics. One set is tied to the capacity that societal and, at times, state actors have in globally spreading and diffusing particular religious identities, ideas, and practices—along with certain embedded social and political norms—dominant within a religious great power. Put differently, sacred cultural capital is here related to the promotion of shared religiosities globally. The other set of dynamics involves the production of attraction and consent toward, as well as common interests and preferences with, a religious great power among foreign communities, societies, and states. This process, which is generally associated with soft power outcomes, emerges from the existence of shared faith-based identities, ideas, and practices around the world.

Sacred social capital generates forms of international influence for religious great powers derived from overlapping with and being key nodes of complex transnational social and infrastructural faith-based networks. My understanding of networks here is eclectic and includes both social relations between humans and corporate actors (like spiritual leaders, religious institutions, and faith-based social movements) and connections with and between different kinds of religious objects and infrastructures (like holy sites, sacred land, and houses of worship). A religious great power’s sacred social

capital emerges from and is implicated in two kinds of dynamics. First, networks can function as conduits for the extraction, distribution, and circulation of multiple tangible objects (like holy texts, food, money, weapons) and intangible resources (like beliefs, emotions, information, knowledge) to and from distant places. The capacity of networks to act as transnational conduits can, in turn, produce forms of governance over local communities and sites beyond a religious great power's borders. Second, faith-based networks and networked actors within them can become implicated in orchestrating and organizing collective mobilization processes internationally and in foreign contexts, in ways that empower and advance the interests of a religious great power. While sacred symbolic and cultural capital shape shared meanings and identities that can inspire people to act, sacred social capital is explicitly involved in and a product of tangible processes of collective mobilization.

The role and influence of sacred symbolic, cultural, and social capital in the contemporary international system will be empirically illustrated with examples from six states. These states are ostensibly among the most prominent religious great powers of our times, and they include: India, Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

India is the spiritual and demographic home of Hinduism, Sikhism, and Jainism. The country furthermore hosts many of Buddhism's holiest sites and prominent figures like the Dalai Lama, is the source of gurus and practices like yoga with millions of followers worldwide, and has the largest Muslim minority population in the world—larger than that of most Muslim-majority countries. The Islamic Republic of Iran is intimately tied to Shi'a Islam, especially since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The country hosts in Qom the largest center of Islamic learning within Shi'ism. The modern history of the Israeli state and that of the Jewish people and religion are inextricably linked. Jerusalem is considered the holy city par excellence, sacred to all three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Within Russia resides the largest and most powerful church of the Christian Orthodox world, whose domestic role and international activism have grown significantly since the end of the Cold War. Saudi Arabia hosts the two holiest sites of Islam in Mecca and Medina. The kingdom's modern process of state formation is deeply intertwined with the history of a particular Sunni/Wahhabi branch of Islam, which a multiplicity of Saudi-based actors also actively seek to propagate globally. The United States is a fervently religious country with a long-standing tradition of religious pluralism and freedom. Today it is the source of multiple globally

expanding Protestant Christian denominations and independent churches, especially Evangelical and Pentecostal; the host of a wealthy and influential Catholic community; and a key site of world Jewry.

Methodologically these six religious great powers constitute most-likely cases, and thus are also well suited for the purposes of theory building.¹¹ Moreover, they comprise diverse examples that will allow for initial comparisons across states and religions with distinct characteristics. The six states differ in terms of their religious demographics and traditions. They include two countries that are majority Christian (Russia and the US), two that are majority Muslim (Iran and Saudi Arabia), and two that are closely tied to nonproselytizing religions with significant diasporas (India-Hinduism and Israel-Judaism). Cases vary furthermore in terms of regime type (from more democratic states like India, Israel, and the US to more authoritarian ones like Iran, Russia, and Saudi Arabia), and in terms of state-religion arrangements (from strong disestablishment in the US to a theocratic regime in Iran and everything in between).

This book will draw eclectically and selectively on examples from these religious great powers' recent past as well as the more immediate present. I do not seek to provide in-depth histories or extensive up-to-date accounts of these cases, though. Ultimately, these country-cases are treated as "probability probes," to use Jack S. Levy's conceptualization of case study typologies.¹² Probability probes are quite brief, often illustrative, cases that generally have two aims. On the one hand, they "give the reader a 'feel' for a theoretical argument by providing a concrete example of its application," while also helping to "demonstrate the empirical relevance of a theoretical proposition by identifying at least one relevant case."¹³ On the other hand, probability probes, Levy argues, "serve an important function in theory development, particularly in a multi-stage research strategy."¹⁴ I engage these six country-cases precisely with this twofold intention: to showcase and further refine the theoretical apparatus.

To sum up: My aim in this book is not necessarily to provide detailed and extensive investigations into the role of religion in the foreign policies and strategies of India, Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. Rather, cases are functional to the illustration and development of a generalizable theoretical framework for systematically and comparatively exploring the power of sacred capital in global politics. This framework is designed to make sense of and explain the multiple ways that religion can constitute complex forms of influence—chiefly understood in terms of sacred symbolic, cultural,

and social capital—for states, especially certain states understood as religious great powers, in the contemporary international system.

State-Religion Entanglements and Limits of Sacred Capital Influence

Stacey Goddard and Dan Nexon helpfully point out that in global politics, “much of the struggle for influence takes place short of force and the threat of force.”¹⁵ States, they argue, often exercise influence and pursue goals internationally through multiple means beyond deploying military capabilities, including through “wealth, legitimation, diplomatic ties, and other non-military resources.”¹⁶ A key proposition of this book is that as countries compete with each other and seek to pursue their objectives, religious great powers can count on a further set of valuable sacred capital resources and forces they can *explicitly mobilize*, and also *indirectly benefit* from, when defending or advancing their interests, values, and goals in global politics.¹⁷

The italics above are important. They highlight how sacred capital, similarly to economic and financial capital, for instance, functions both independently from and in relation to what states do. The theoretical framework developed in this book is premised on a view of religions as relatively autonomous social, institutional, ideational, and material forces within world society, which operate beneath and beyond—and often even have much longer histories compared to—modern nation-states within international society. This framework, therefore, recognizes that religious actors and dynamics may be working—again, similarly to market ones—with a certain degree of independence and autonomy from the state. Yet it still accounts for the fact that states can and do play an important role, both directly and indirectly, in either suppressing or cultivating, constraining or enabling, limiting or mobilizing, religious actors, networks, beliefs, symbols, objects, and practices at home and across the globe.¹⁸ There are, again, some interesting analogies with economic dynamics. While market forces follow their own logics and operate largely within the transnational world society domain, specific states—along with their regimes or reigning ideologies—may adopt policies that provide a greater or lesser permissive environment for capitalism to operate and thrive domestically or globally.

More specifically, I suggest in this book that countries gain and exercise power through sacred capital along a spectrum of state-religion *entanglements* conceptualized as tight, loose, or weak. The notion of entanglements here is

distinct from established discussions about state-religion *arrangements* or *policies*.¹⁹ What is being proposed through the concept of entanglement is a typology of the possible ways through which mutually reinforcing dynamics between states and religions may occur in international relations, not a taxonomy capturing distinct legal and institutional frameworks formally governing the domestic relationship between religion and state.²⁰

In the case of *tight* state-religion entanglements, states may gain and exercise power internationally by seeking to explicitly act on behalf or in the name of a religion, or by directly mobilizing faith-based organizations and networks to act on behalf or in the name of the state. In some instances, religious actors and forces may themselves capture and direct particular state institutions and foreign policies. This said, it is important to note that the concept of entanglement always presupposes some *a priori* degree of distinction, separation, and relative autonomy between state-political entities and religious-sacred forces.

At the other end of the continuum, *weak* entanglements occur when religious forces and sacred capital dynamics at the world society level function largely independently from state structures and practices. Yet they do so in ways that work to the advantage of—rather than against—a religious great power. Between these two ends of the spectrum are *loose* forms of entanglement. In this case, states mobilize religious resources and forces in the pursuit of their international objectives through more indirect means, such as normative arrangements, governance mechanisms, or tangible and intangible incentives. Conversely, under a condition of loose entanglement, a state's authority to act globally in the name of religion, its capacity to legitimize particular foreign policy practices through appeals to the sacred, or its ability to orchestrate and organize faith-based networks and actors abroad will be more dependent on the consent and blessing given by (relatively) autonomous religious institutions and communities.

The framework developed here is not a general theory or covering law in search of systematic regularities about religious power over and influence through states in global politics. It is instead designed to provide a set of conceptual tools—an analytical perspective and vocabulary—for exploring in context-specific ways how religion can constitute, through various kinds of entanglements, multiple forms of power and influence for states. There is no determinism built into this theoretical model. The possession, direct use, or indirect workings of sacred capital by and for religious great powers in the international system cannot, therefore, be predictably expected to translate into certain or desired outcomes.²¹ This becomes even clearer if we

comparatively consider that overwhelming military capabilities, for instance, do not necessarily bring about victory in war (e.g., the US war in Vietnam), nor does economic interdependence inherently impede geopolitical competition (e.g., the deterioration of Russian-Western relations since the 2010s).

Whether sacred capital leads to any effect—let alone intended and desired ones—for a religious great power can only be determined contextually and empirically, not *a priori*. Religions are not homogeneous monoliths but plural, heterogeneous, and complex social entities. These factors will likely shape, for example, how far religious legitimization by state leaders drawing on a particular faith tradition will resonate with global audiences or fall on deaf ears, or whether specific faith-based networks may or may not operate in accordance with the international objectives of a given religious great power. Even if the framework developed in this book seeks to illuminate positive-sum entanglements between states, religions, and power, this does not mean that conflicts and zero-sum dynamics are no longer a concrete possibility. We therefore can and should always expect that relatively autonomous religious actors, communities, and forces within the world society domain may function in ways that can go against the interests, values, and goals of states (and vice versa) in international affairs.

Following on from these general considerations, I argue that we can expect three main factors to limit and constrain the power of sacred capital to generate desired or intended outcomes. The first limiting factor relates to certain inherent characteristics and limits of religion as a form of capital. This includes both the plurality and multivocality of religious traditions themselves and the possibility that in any given situation, countervailing forces—secular, geopolitical, and so on—may undermine the power of the sacred. The second factor involves the likelihood that religious dynamics and sacred forces may act as a double-edged sword. The presence of religious actors, beliefs, objects, and practices can “raise the stakes” of a particular issue at hand,²² thus also inviting special scrutiny, heightening matters, and generating resistance and backlashes. Valuably for our theoretical model, such instances can act as interesting counterfactuals demonstrating the power of sacred capital even if it produces problematic effects.²³ Third, and last, when religious forces appear to be excessively instrumentalized in the naked interest of temporal power, by state as well as faith-based actors, this can lead to the profanation of sacred capital. Such processes of desacralization ultimately can undermine and erode what makes this form of capital meaningful, authoritative, and powerful to begin with.

Knowledgeable readers can appreciate how this book may contain echoes of comparable approaches that seek to provide a general account of the power

of religious and cultural factors in shaping contemporary trends. Among these, I am thinking here chiefly of Samuel Huntington's (in)famous "clash of civilizations" thesis, which argues that post-Cold War global politics would be driven largely by conflicts between states and communities pitted against each other along distinct faith and civilizational faultlines.²⁴ The differences between my arguments and the late Harvard professor's thesis are stark and important, and teasing them out can help summarize and emphasize one last time some key aspects of my proposed framework.

Huntington advances a general theory with supposedly predictive character. I develop, instead, a theoretical framework for interpreting events in context-specific ways that eschews prediction. Huntington's religiously inflected civilizations are macro identities and entities that compete and subsume national ones. In my conceptualization, nation-states and world religions remain relatively autonomous forces that can become entangled in complex and mutually reinforcing ways. Huntington adopts a monolithic, essentialist, primordialist, and deterministic approach to the role of culture and religion in driving behavior and international conflicts. I present a nonessentialist, nondeterministic, historicist, and open-ended conceptualization of religions as a form of power for states whose international conduct is not uniquely confined to conflictual dynamics. Ultimately, this monograph can be read as a critique of and alternative to Huntington's understanding of the place and influence of faith-based identities, beliefs, and traditions in the contemporary international system.

Plan of the Book

This book is divided into six chapters. Following this introduction, chapter 2 focuses on theory development. It begins with a brief survey of the existing literature, highlighting some of its limitations when it comes to understanding the role of religion as a form of power for states in twenty-first-century global politics. This exercise helps to situate and justify the need for a more general theoretical framework on religion and state power. The chapter then defines its understanding of the international system constituted by an international and a world society, develops the concepts of sacred capital and religious great powers, elaborates the spectrum of mutually reinforcing entanglements between states and religions, and finally identifies key limits of and constraints to sacred capital power and effects.

The subsequent three chapters are structured thematically, with each concentrating on one particular type of sacred capital. Chapter 3 focuses on sacred

symbolic capital, chapter 4 on sacred cultural capital, and chapter 5 on sacred social capital. Along with defining and conceptualizing in greater detail the characteristics and effects of each type of sacred capital, these chapters also illustrate the theory by drawing on empirical examples from the six main religious great powers considered in this monograph: India, Iran, Israel, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. I aim, where possible, to be comprehensive and illustrate the theory with relevant examples from all six country-cases. However, since the states and religions under examination have certain unique and distinct characteristics, some features and effects of sacred capital power may not always be relevant or apply across the board.

These chapters partly build on and speak to each other. Chapter 3 on sacred symbolic capital will dive slightly deeper into the religious history and contemporary dynamics of the six religious great powers examined in the book, which the following chapters may allude or refer to only in passing in order to limit repetitions. The chapters' conclusions relate and compare the three types of sacred capital. Each chapter can certainly be read separately. The reader will be guided in the main text or the footnotes to valuable information discussed in other chapters that may have been missed. Overall, though, chapters 3, 4, and 5 are best approached together for a more comprehensive, both theoretical and empirical, understanding of the power and effects of sacred capital.

The concluding chapter provides both a concise overview of the theoretical framework and a brief synthesis of the illustrative cases explored in the previous chapters on sacred symbolic, cultural, and social capital. These summaries act as a springboard for reflecting on and refining the theory by teasing out shared patterns and comparing differences across cases in state-religion entanglements, the relationship between multiple types of sacred capital, and the limits and constraints identified with sacred capital influence. The chapter highlights the possibility of widening the empirical research beyond this monograph's six religious great powers, including a consideration of other possible states as religious great powers as well as applications of the framework to a broader range of actors. A variety of pathways for deepening the analysis and developing the theory further are then suggested.

Last, but not least, the conclusion addresses the implications of this book and its theoretical framework for the study of religion in the social sciences and global politics more broadly. It calls for the development of a more self-conscious, interdisciplinary, and multimethod research program on the ways that state power and influence internationally are indirectly enabled by and

explicitly intertwined with religious dynamics and sacred forces. This research should not be simply seen as a “gap-filling” exercise, but rather as a pressing intellectual task in the current historical juncture marked by the crisis of liberal secular modernity and international order. In a global context progressively defined by deep pluralism and multiple forms of modernity, faith-based actors and factors are increasingly proving to be alternative, politically salient forms of identities, norms, meanings, practices, and networks across the world. In this environment, entanglements between states, religions, and power are not only to be expected but will likely define the changing character and contours of international order for the foreseeable future.

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