Crossing Borders: International Collaboration and Cooperation in Research

Why Religion Matters: Social Scientific Insights on the Role of Religion in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Abstract: This article addresses a well-developed yet contentious question: Can social science objectively analyse religion and its role in escalating or mitigating socio-political tensions? Grounded in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the essay does not attempt to provide a precise answer to this question nor to criticise the social science that simultaneously explores the notion of religion and grapples with its conceptualisation. Instead, it reflects on the evolving social science perspectives scholars use to understand how religion interacts with various social dimensions, including politics and power relations. The primary aim is to underscore the enduring significance of social scientific analysis of religion, reflect on the limitations of its Westernised perspectives, and revitalise intellectual tools for examining its multifaceted nature. To achieve this objective, the essay first (re)examines prominent Western-developed perspectives on religion within social science literature, synthesising contributions from various disciplines. It then identifies connections and discontinuities between the basis of these perspectives and broader socio-political conversations, with a specific focus on the religious dimension of the Israel–Palestine conflict as a case study. The central hypothesis is that social scientific analysis is crucial for understanding religion as a dynamic system both influenced by and influencing contextual and historical factors. This nuanced non-Westernised understanding is essential for promoting inter-state harmony or cooperation, particularly in complex situations like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Keywords: Religion, Social Science, Conflict, Peace, Israel-Palestine.

1.   Introduction: The   Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and the Significance of Religion

Since the attack in Gaza on October 7th 2023 by Palestine's radical militant group Hamas on Israeli civilians, there has been an ongoing conflict, or more accurately, a war, between Israel and Palestine. As a result, over 35,000 people have lost their lives, more than 79,000 have been injured, and approximately two million have been displaced, according to a report published by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs on May 17, 2024 (OCHA, 2024). This violent episode is an intensified continuation of nearly a century of disturbances or conflicts between Palestinian Jews and Muslims, which scholars began to reframe as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict[1] following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1947 (for a general overview see Cohn-Sherbok and El-Alami, 2022). This reframing has sought to claim the conflict as a nationalist struggle, where both sides are primarily concerned with issues of security, sovereignty, and self-determination (e.g. Sayigh, 1995; Mossberg, 2010). However, this characterisation may prevent deeper and alternative understandings of the conflict, such as those proposed by Frisch and Sandler (2004: p. 78). They instead view this conflict as a religiously motivated issue rooted in socio-political ideologies based on Islamic sharia and Jewish halakhic laws.

In support of the reframing some, such as Milton-Edwards argues that while the conflict may be "religicised", it should not be seen as directly related to religion (2006: p. 72). Instead, in her view the struggle between Israel and Palestine revolves around "territoriality, identity, ethnicity, economy, nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism"(p. 72) — factors which Milton-Edwards views as rooted in the social, political, and historical experiences of each group, rather than their religion. However, studies focusing on the power of religion in national and international politics and

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[1] The term "Israeli-Palestinian conflict" is used throughout the article to capture the broader historical and social dimensions of the conflict in Palestine region, involving both state and non-state actors. While it is not intended to overemphasise civilian action at the expense of the major responsibilities of state or rogue actors, it reflects the multifaceted nature of the tensions, beyond just political and military engagements.

conflicts, such as those by Fox and Sandler (2004) and Frisch and Sandler (2004), assert that the nationalist character of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is largely due to the norms of the international system that both sides wish to be part of. Furthermore, such works clarify that the conflict is deeply influenced by the long and convoluted history of religious discussions and struggles between Jewish and Muslim Palestinians. These historical discussions and struggles are still being used by both Israel and Palestine in their claims and actions today. Therefore, despite the dominance of politically oriented national identity in both the causation and development of the conflict, religion and religious aspirations have also played a significant role, sometimes mitigating the tension but often intensifying the conflict.

This article seeks to re-evaluate the significance of religion in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with careful consideration of Westernised social scientific perceptions of studying religion. Such consideration is necessary because, despite more than two decades of academic inquiry into religion's impact on the conflict, much of the analysis remains inadequate, as evidenced by Frisch & Sandler's discussion in their 2004 work. As Cavanaugh argues, many of these analyses are grounded in a simplistic, Westernised, dichotomy between the religious and the secular. This dichotomy perceives the religious "as an irrational and dangerous impulse that must give way in public to rational, secular forms of power" in order to prevent conflicts or violence (2009, p.5). The Westernised perception views religion as a threat to order and peace due to its dogmas, irrationalities, and conceptions of otherness in socio-political contexts. Therefore, this position assumes that a rational, peaceful order emerges only with the shedding of religious authority, as experienced in Western societies with the rise of secular values (Asad et al., 2009, p. 11).

Yet, as Wilson discusses, the secularised Western perspective assumes that religion has already retreated from global socio-politics and uses this separation as a starting point for social scientific analysis (2023, p. 5). However, as will be seen in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, religion is not just present, but has been directly relevant in many instances. Problematically, the Westernised approach regulates religion through theologically, ideologically, or politically oriented assumptions that cannot be neutral or universal, but are only subjective and particular. Therefore, to

reevaluate the significance of religion in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, scholarly efforts must include not only a thorough review but also a non-Westernised social scientific interpretation. Beckford (2003) argues that this involves analysing religion as a socio-political construct, negotiated among various groups at any time and place and for any social reason. However, the secularist skepticism within the Western scholarly community has led to an inconsistent focus on religion prohibiting a deeper, social scientific, understanding of religion (Thomas, 2005, pp. 37-46). This article aims to address this by establishing a fresh, non-Westernised conceptual and theoretical framework for analysing the role of religion in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

2. Competing Perspectives on Religion

Throughout the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, numerous longstanding questions persist without satisfactory answers. Among these questions, scholars have acknowledged the role of religion as one of the most striking and complex aspects of this enduring conflict over the past two decades (for a general overview see Waxman, 2012). As a scholar of comparative religions, anthropologist Glazier's broader commentary on the significance of religion aptly encapsulates this acknowledgment. He argues: "it has never been difficult to make a case for the significance of religion in human life" (1997: p. 3). This approach may suggest that religion is intricately woven into various aspects and dimensions throughout the convoluted history of the conflict in Palestine. However, the analytical problem is that understanding the reasons behind the significance of religion and its role in the conflicting situations experienced by the people of Palestine inevitably leads to a plethora of perspectives.

Theologians, historians, and social scientists have all delved into the question of religion in Palestine, yielding a multitude of theories regarding its nature, origin, and historical significance. They have explored its relationship with the various competing groups in the region, including their rituals, traditions, and cultural or political reflections (e.g. Mollov and Lavie, 2001; Abu-Nimer, 2004; Moore and Guy, 2012). Moreover, each discipline or tradition brings its own focus areas and interests to the study of religion, resulting in diverse observations and interpretations.

While this diversity may initially seem fruitful, it has also posed challenges for researchers attempting to understand the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through the lens of religious discourse. The contentious conceptualisation of religion in various context complicates the analytical frameworks used to explore its role in conflicts like the one in Palestine. This complexity is exacerbated when scholars pose fundamental questions at the outset of their research: What motivates the exploration of religion in understanding conflicts in Palestine? And what are the most appropriate concepts, objects, and methodological approaches for understanding the role of religion in the region?

Amidst this scholarly complexity, it is possible to argue that social scientific approaches to religion, primarily developed by anthropologists and sociologists, have consistently been among the most comfortable with raising such questions. The reason is that social science often poses questions and seeks interpretations as opposed to providing specific, determinate answers to questions related to religion (Lambek, 2008: p. 13). Consequently, it creates analytical perspectives that are not developed by "a perfection of consensus", but rather by a "refinement of debate" (Geertz, 1973: p. 29). These perspectives refract theologically informed notions of religion with empirical or ethnographic material, for such material may easily display both the subjective and objective aspects of religion that continuously change in different contexts of time, mind, and place. As a result, social scientific accounts can further complicate the study of religion, attempting to expose the multiple realities of religion as it is thought, lived, and understood within a context that might first appear quite simple.

This complexity inherent in social scientific approaches may sound unintelligent to many who share a keen interest in religion, particularly theologians or historians of religion who, are more inclined towards defining the essence of religion, its purpose, and how it should be studied (Reeves, 2018: pp. 22-27). For this reason, when transitioning from theological perspectives to the secular realm of analysing religion, social scientific approaches may seem enigmatic to some, particularly to the scholars of religion. At this point, few seem to fully comprehend the nature of social scientific inquiries into religion, and the contributions such enquiries can make to both the understanding of religion

itself and the issues it encounters, such as the case being discussed in the current article.

Consequently, as argued by Reeves (2018), it is crucial to recognise the lack of clarity stemming from diverse interpretations of what social scientific analysis of religion entails and how it should be conducted. This recognition forms a central discussion point for reframing the study of religion with a non-Westernised approach, emphasising its significance for broader social scientific investigation in contemporary conflict cases. For this reason, the re-examination of these diverse interpretations —an issue that has persisted since the nineteenth century in the Western tradition of social science development— is still necessary and will be discussed in sections 3 and 4 with reference to the evolution of Westernised understandings of religion.

3. Beyond Evolutionary Thought: Understanding Religion in Context

During the nineteenth century, influenced by the evolutionary theories that emerged during the ascent of positivist scientific thought in Western societies, social scientists placed considerable emphasis on uncovering the origins of religion, or as Gellner interprets, the quest to elucidate the "purported" development of humankind (Gellner, 1999: pp. 10–12). In this pursuit, many scholars highlighted a distinction between primitive and modern forms of thought. Notably, James Frazer, one of Britain's prominent scholars of religion, proposed that modern human culture evolved through the dissemination of ideas. To establish a universal theory explaining this process, Frazer formulated an evolutionary schema spanning from magic, through religion, to science (Frazer, 1890 cited in Pals, 2015: pp. 29–41). However, subsequent scholars critiqued such views, shifting their focus towards understanding the multifaceted nature of religion and its significance within societies. Rather than analysing religion through the lens of evolutionary progress, these scholars directed their attention to examining the complexities of religious meaning and practice across diverse societies, eschewing notions of a strict dichotomy between primitive and modern thought or a linear evolutionary trajectory.

Evans-Pritchard, for instance, famously argues in Theories of Primitive Religion (1965) that earlier scholars, such as Frazer in the 19th century, failed to recognise the rational character of primitive thought on magic and religion. He further contends, in response to Frazer, that both magical and religious worldviews persist even within industrial scientific structures. Therefore, religion cannot simply be understood as a continuation of the magical tradition and a precursor to scientific thinking in an evolutionary sense (Evans-Pritchard cited in Bowie, 2006: p. 14). This critical perspective, proposed by Evans-Pritchard, which emphasises the enduring significance of magical religious worldviews, is crucial for those examining the role of religion in secularly oriented Western societies. Only through this lens can we observe how religion permeates various aspects of human life, and intertwines with social and cultural practices.

Anthropologist Lambek (2008: p. 5) aptly emphasises this, asserting that such a lens marks a pivotal moment in social science, and arguing that understanding religion from a social scientific perspective necessitates awareness of how religious practices and meanings intersect with specific forms of sociality, power structures, historical struggles, and modes of production. However, this recognition of the significance of social and cultural reflections of religion raises another critical question: How can social scientific inquiry comprehend the role of religion if it is both deeply embedded within the sets of practices and meanings, and also inseparable from their construction?

This inquiry directly relates to the idea that any social practice or meaning should be investigated contextually and understood as part of a holistic and integrated whole (Gellner, 1999: p. 21). Additionally, if we apply this idea to the study of religion, as Lambek (2008) proposes, it becomes much more apparent that there exists an inextricable link between religion and other secularly perceived aspects of the world, such as economy, culture, or politics. Indeed, this connection can be observed in many contemporary social scientific analyses, where scholars, including sociologists and cultural and political analysts, examine religious, political, or economic phenomena as pervasive rather than bounded categories (Herzfeld, 2001: p. xi). It should also be noted that there is rarely cohesion among such categories in their analysis.

Instead, as anthropologist Gellner (1999: p. 22) aptly describes, the analyses involve "unresolved tensions, competing values, and difficult choices". In other words, a social scientific study on any issues pertaining to religion comprises a variety of arguments involving rich digressions. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the extent to which a social scientific analysis of religion considers how diverse social, cultural, or political meanings and practices vary across different places and times, in relation to their context and the web of socio-political productions.

As Keane (2008: p. 113) critically discusses, achieving both ontextual and holistic analysis simultaneously may seem paradoxical at first. Nonetheless, these are the primary objectives of a social scientist: to examine their findings both within specific contexts and across them. Yet Keane also highlights the challenge of applying this social scientific approach to the study of religion. A difficulty arises for two main reasons. Firstly, there is a perceived challenge in applying epistemological principles to religion, as it often deals with non-empirical phenomena (Lett, 1997: p. 103). Thus, prior to contextual understanding, a thorough exploration of the relationship between the materiality of religion and its underlying beliefs or ideas beyond empirical science is necessary. Secondly, a social scientific analysis of religion necessarily involves the use of conceptual categories, which are often influenced by the researcher's religious context—especially in the English literature on the Palestine conflict, where Western perspectives often rooted in Christianity prevail.

These two critical points highlight the challenges in developing a theoretical and methodological framework for a non-Western social scientific study of religion. They prompt discussions about how Western epistemology and empirical analysis can distort interpretations of religion in non-Western contexts. For example, in studying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, many Western scholars, influenced either by Christian or secular frameworks, may interpret the conflict through ideological or political lenses shaped by their own cultural and historical contexts. In other words, as Sayyid (2015) discusses in regard to the relation between Islamism and Eurocentrism, such perspectives are often informed by the continous regulation of religious thought and practices shaped by Western secular development. This can easily lead to an oversimplified view of the

relationship between religion and the conflict, overlooking critical perspectives from those directly involved, such as Palestinian Muslims or local Jewish communities.

A specific example is the frequent labelling of Palestinian Muslims' resistance as terrorism. This labelling is based on perceived religious motivations, and often focuses narrowly on the alleged extremism and religious rhetoric used by groups like Hamas, which can obscure how religion intersects with political and social grievances, like military occupation (see Section 6). This perspective simplifies the complex role of religion in shaping resistance and perpetuates a skewed image of Palestinian Muslims as driven predominantly by extremist beliefs, rather than addressing the multifaceted factors behind their actions. Similarly, the use of Western conceptual categories— shaped by particular historical and cultural contexts—can lead to misinterpretations. For instance, Western notions of terrorism or extremism may not align with local understandings and experiences. This misalignment underscores the need for a nuanced approach that incorporates diverse religious contexts, moving beyond Western epistemological biases and frameworks to achieve a more accurate and inclusive analysis of religious phenomena and conflicts. Therefore, before delving into the specific case of Palestine, it is crucial to understand what non-Western social scientific approaches to religion bring to broader socio-political analyses and to reassess how well-known Western social scientific accounts engage with the question of religion.

4. Religion and Socio-political Context: Insights from the Classics

From the outset, this article has clarified that the social scientific examination of religion almost always grapples with significant theoretical and methodological challenges. This is the reason that social scientists attempt to avoid the confinement of religion to any specific set of meanings, beliefs, or practices. Instead, they aim to capture what is often described as its 'sensory richness,' a concept that refers to the depth and variety of sensory experiences that enhance our understanding of the subject, as seen in various scholarly discussions such as Bialecki's (2016) examination of the insistence on religion. Moreover, they recognise no ethical or intellectual obligation to

adjudicate the "truth" or "falsity" of religious phenomena; rather, they approach religion with a socio-political or cultural interest, devoid of theological judgment or superficial or epiphenomenal assessment.

As a consequence, the social scientific perspective can transcend the binary opposition of theologian versus detached observer, engaging dialectically with religion across various theoretical frameworks, from evolutionism to social interactionism to structural functionalism. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that in social scientific tradition there are a variety of definitions of religion which serve as a starting point to investigate the notion of religion. Yet, briefly revisiting the most classical definitions sheds light on their evolution within social scientific inquiry, and thus helps to build the analytical foundation for investigating the role of religion in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

For instance, social anthropologist Tylor, influenced by rationalist and evolutionist perspectives, posits that humans developed the concept of spirits to interpret their experiences, such as dreams or hallucinations. Building on this notion, he introduces the term animism, often regarded as an intellectualist approach to religion (Bowie 2006: p. 20; Pals 2015: pp. 21–2), forming the basis of the narrower definition rarely found in broader social science literature: "the belief in spiritual beings" (1871 cited in Pals 2015: p. 22). This definition provides an early scholarly framework, albeit one that raises questions about what constitutes a spiritual belief and its connection to social aspects of life.

In response to such narrow and question-loaded definitions, sociologist Emile Durkheim presents a different perspective in his seminal work The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1995 [1912]). Departing from Tylor's evolutionary framework, Durkheim defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things," shaped by specific social conditions. For example, in his analysis of Australian Aboriginal religion, Durkheim highlights the significance of totemic symbols and collective rituals in fostering a sense of communal identity (Durkheim, 1995 [1912], pp.216-225). Despite criticism of his reliance on illustrative rather than empirical data, Durkheim's work remains influential for its emphasis on the social dimensions of religion, which inspired later social scientists, particularly functionalists.

Durkheim's emphasis on the significance of broader social conditions, particularly through the examination of symbols and rituals, has undergone reinterpretation by numerous scholars interested in religion, especially following the 1970s. Many social scientists have endeavoured to understand religion in terms of meaning and order, pondering over "how conditions of meaning, meaningfulness, truth, and certainty are produced, guaranteed, and underpinned" (Lambek, 2008: p. 10). One prominent figure among these scholars is Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), whose renowned essay *Religion as a Cultural System* (1973) seeks to demonstrate that human activities are deeply embedded in socially established and complex systems of meanings.

Geertz argues that these phenomena could never be fully explained but must be interpreted. Consequently, religion, as one of the most significant of these systems, could not be comprehended independently of others. From this perspective, Geertz provides one of the most influential definitions of religion:

"*(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic*" (Geertz, 1973: p. 90).

As Pals (2015: p. 315) indicates, this definition can be positioned between functional reductionist perspectives and theories seeking more universal definitions.

However, Geertz's definition and approach to understanding religion face significant criticism from Talal Asad in his renowned essay, *The Construction of Religion as An Anthropological Category*. Asad (1993: p. 29) argues against the possibility of a universal definition of religion, asserting that such efforts are hindered by the historically specific nature of its constituent elements and relationships, as well as the discursive processes that shape its definition. He contends that the endeavour to define religion as possessing a common essence reflects a modern Western or Christian norm that originated in the seventeenth century (Asad 1993: pp. 40–41). Furthermore, Asad accuses Geertz of overlooking the process through which meanings are constructed, thereby divorcing religion from the domain of power.

Asad asserts that religious subjects cannot be reduced solely to a state of mind, as they are shaped by power dynamics and disciplinary mechanisms within societal structures (Asad, 1993). This perspective, as Keane notes, aligns with a historicist approach informed by postcolonial and post-structural critiques, which rejects attempts to define religion as a "transhistorical" and "transcultural" phenomenon (2008: pp. 115–16). Instead, it underscores the methodological importance of recognising that while the nature of any given religion may be discernible, focusing exclusively on its theological aspects—such as divinity, divine meanings, or transcendental essence—might not suffice to grasp its societal position comprehensively. The crucial point here is to be aware of the risk inherent in attempting to define religion solely through certain aspects, for such an approach may privilege particular categories or classifications, whether in a phenomenological or positivist sense.

For example, in examining nationalist struggles and the influence of religion, particularly fundamentalism, Gellner (1992: p. 3) classically argues that what really matters is the practices. This argument is further expounded and expanded upon by Thomas' claim that it is not just practices, but the experiential level of religious commitments we should be looking to, in order to identify the influence of religion in shaping nationalist or political perspectives (2005, p.193). Yet, when analysing religion in conjunction with socio-political dynamics in this way, it is crucial to avoid oversimplifying definitions derived from religious studies or organisational structures involved in the analysed content.

The multifaceted impact of social, cultural, political, and historical factors in shaping these definitions is indispensable in understanding how religion manifests and its significance to various groups and communities within specific contexts. Instead of seeking a definitive answer to the essence of religion for individuals, it is more productive to view definitional accounts as pieces of a larger puzzle that can be comprehended rather than solved. Thus, in a social scientific inquiry, the pertinent question is not what religion is nor what its inherent nature may be, but rather how and why religious perceptions, practices, or actions take shape and exert influence.

5. Social Scientific Approach to Religion: Towards the analysis of Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

This article aims to establish a refreshed conceptual and theoretical foundation for the social scientific investigation of religion's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To this end, it reevaluates mainstream studies that address religion and its role in such conflicts from a Western perspective. While acknowledging the valuable contributions of these mainstream works, the paper argues that they often fall short in capturing the complexities of the conflict. However, it should be noted that the objective is not to discredit the Western social science tradition but to demonstrate how incorporating non-Western perspectives can offer a more nuanced understanding of religion's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, the primary theoretical conclusion of the paper is that integrating both Western and non-Western perspectives can enrich one's comprehension of religion in any context. Social scientists studying conflicts related to religion and religious practices should leverage these insights to better investigate the role and impact of religion in broader socio-political conflicts, particularly in Palestine. This is also a call for scholars examining the conflict from an external viewpoint to move beyond broad and often problematic conjectures, which were discussed in sections 3 and 4, toward a more precise, historical, and scientifically grounded analysis of religion in the conflict.

Building on this, it becomes clear from the earlier discussions that religion's significance extends far beyond theoretical and conceptual westernised frameworks and profoundly influences various settings, especially in conflicts involving religious issues. Recognising the multifaceted role of religion is essential, as it intertwines with beliefs, practices, discourses, languages, narratives, actions, discussions and decisions in ways the aforementioned traditional Western perspectives alone might not fully capture. Therefore, addressing many of these dimensions requires an expanded approach that includes and integrates diverse viewpoints, for engaging in international collaboration and incorporating a range of perspectives can offer a more comprehensive understanding of how religion shapes and is shaped by socio-political dynamics. This approach acknowledges that religion often drives decisions and actions with significant

influence beyond what conventional frameworks capture. The current section aims to illustrate this with the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, showing how social scientific insights into the role of religion can help scholars expand their understanding of broader socio-political issues. Yet the discussion here focuses on providing practical insights rather than offering a clear-cut analytical model or a new non-Western social science theory. Indeed, the extensive literature on religion across various social science disciplines cannot be fully covered in this brief article that does not intend to provide simplified solutions for analysing religion in broader socio-political contexts.

It is clear from the discussions so far that religion is significant in various settings, particularly when it comes to conflicts involving religious actions and debates. This makes identifying the position and role of religion much more crucial for investigating related issues such as beliefs and practices, and their surrounding discourse, languages, narratives, and actions. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that religion can inspire groups, communities, or organizations to make critical decisions more than realpolitik[2] (Johnston and Cox, 2003: p. 14). This understanding stems from social scientists' scepticism not only regarding theologically and phenomenologically informed definitions but also concerning the basis of these definitions, where experiences of spirituality or transcendence are perceived as the main sources of religion.

As illustrated by Durkheim's structuralist perspective and Asad's emphasis on a historically aware contextual approach, a social scientific framework views religion as a means for a group, or the members of a group (or society), to obtain orientation and guidance. Moreover, it also emphasises how religion can be used to decode principles, norms, or rules within a society, and thus contribute to an understanding of the perceptions and actions of individual or institutional actors in conflicts or peacebuilding situations (Frazer and Friedli, 2015: pp. 9-11). As Gopin states (2000: pp. 10-13) such a context loaded foundation allows scholars to build and apply different theories to case

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[2] Johnston defines Realpolitik as "the term of art to describe the practice of power politics based on a tough-minded, realistic view of the political, economic, and security factors that dominate any given situation." (Johnston, 2003, p. xii).

studies, providing in-depth social scientific studies of religion that can help to better understand conflict or peacebuilding factors.

Considering the multi-religious character of the primary actors in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict— including Israeli state and Jewish communities, Palestinian Rulers or active Muslim organisations (such as Hamas), and Christian-oriented international interventions— a social scientific perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exemplifies the significance of social scientific insights on the role of religion in broader socio-political matters.

6. The Case: The Role of Religion in Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The majority of experts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict— who analyse religion, politics, nationalism, conflict, and peace— argue that conflicting situations are usually characterized by a set of motivations and their interactions. Consequently, an analysis of conflicting situations and the principles of basic solutions cannot be limited to only one dimension, be it religious, political, historical, or economic (Mitchell, 2005: pp. 10-13; Toft 2007: p. 104). However, as highlighted in the brief literature review sections, when studying the role of religion in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, there is a risk that the influence of religion in escalating tension or fostering peace may be less frequently discussed, acknowledged, and appreciated, due to the predominant focus on Westernised approaches.

Social scientific analysis of religion, therefore, becomes a useful tool in understanding the extent to which religion impacts the identity and actions of actors in the conflict, the practical issues at stake, and the relevant socio-political decisions and practices—even of non-religious participants on both sides. Examining religion as integrated into these various aspects requires first identifying the tangible and concrete disputed issues directly related to religious identity and practices. Then it requires a thorough examination of the conditions under which religion may function as a catalyst for conflict and those under which it may promote peace, considering both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives.

On the Palestinian side, such an analysis focusing on the role of religion in socio-political discussions can significantly benefit from examining the radical militant organization Hamas and its Islamic discourse that underpins its members' violent actions. As discussed by Singh (2012), the majority of Hamas members perceive the violent conflict with Israel not merely as a struggle over land or a reaction to Israeli occupation for military or political reason, but as a defence of their faith and religious values against the other non-religious competitors. This perception can be analysed by examining how Hamas members fear that Israeli state control in Palestine could lead to the erosion of their religious identity and rights to practice their religion, Islam (Lawson, 2010).

The analysis can also be further extended with the hypothesis that the motivation behind Hamas' militant attacks on Israeli civilians lies in their reaction to perceived attacks on their religion, such as physical assaults on Muslim groups or communities at religious sites like the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (for a detailed account see Kansara and Nour 2024). That is to say, the cause of the conflict, from the Palestinian side, can be seen as based on their emphasis on perceived threats to Muslims practicing their religion and a broader attempt to undermine the existence and development of their religion, Islam, in the region.

However, considering the broader political and militant actions of Hamas and the relationship between these actions and the religious discourse expressed by its members, it is apparent that religion is not only related to their beliefs, faiths, rituals, or practices. Religion can also be reframed to justify their violent and forceful actions. As Skare (2023) suggests, in the case of the October 7 attacks, for instance, although there are various motivations related to religion in Hamas' militant actions, few of their actions are directly grounded in it. This ambiguity makes religion worth analysing through a social scientific lens in such a politically and violence-laden context.

Gunning's detailed work on Hamas (2009) is still one of the prime examples of this perspective, showing how Palestinians, represented partly by Hamas, mobilize and strategically articulate religion within their socio-political context. Gunning's social scientific approach to religion in the articulation of the politics of Hamas provides a clear but broad explanation: when Palestinian groups, such as Hamas, fight over national or

political claims, they often evoke religious legitimacy and in doing so transform a political or military conflict into a religious one (or in some cases, vice versa).

While the Palestinian side often showcases religion and religious motivations overtly, particularly through active groups like Hamas, religion also plays a significant but more subtle role on the Israeli side. Despite Israel's avowed state secularism, it is undeniable that religion remains deeply intertwined with political and cultural practices, especially among early Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip where the October 7 attack occurred. The Israeli settlers, similar to Palestinians, frequently draw on Jewish religious ideology to justify their actions, such as daily attacks on Arab land and communities and attempts to restrict Muslim prayers in places such as Hebron (for a detailed account of specific attacks and their impact on communitiessee Middle East Monitor, 2023). In such scenarios, a social scientific perspective reveals, as in the case of the Palestinians, the manipulation of Jewish religious identities, aiming to legitimise rights and claims over political or territorial aspirations.

For example, historical Jewish biblical battles are often recalled and inserted into current Israeli narratives against Palestinians, which demonstrate the significance of religion in building a sort of social, cultural or national assembly against the others (Issa and Yasin, 2024). Additionally, incidents such as the killing of Muslims in Hebron to secure the "Land of Israel", systematic attacks on the Al Aqsa Mosque, and attempts to alter Jewish history and symbols in towns and villages are indicative of the influence of religion in shaping broader Israeli actions and policies (Kingsley et al 2024; Tamimi and Suárez Vargas, 2024). Moreover, the connection between religion and politics is also particularly evident in the strategic deployment of such Jewish historical narratives to validate Israeli state claims over the control of Palestine and dominance over Palestinians.

That is to say, while Israel may lack major radical groups like Hamas, the influence of religion persists, albeit in different forms. Unlike Hamas, which openly champions religious motivations and religiously motivated operations, Israeli policies often cloak religious foundations under the guise of secularism (Yadgar and Hadad, 2023). However, the underlying religious identity remains a potent force shaping Israeli

attitudes and actions in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, albeit less overtly than on the Palestinian side.

This analysis, emphasises a significant number of similarities within the role of religion for Israelis and Palestinians, highlighting the multifaceted relationship between religion and politics in the region, and demonstrates the intricate interplay between religion, historical narratives, and geopolitical aspirations in the conflict. However, it should be noted that while religion often serves as a catalyst for conflict, it also almost always holds the potential to promote peace opportunities.

Despite being perceived and used mostly as a source of division, both the nature and politics of religion can easily serve as a unifying force, fostering dialogue and reconciliation. For example, Kronish (2011) advocates for initiatives such as the Interfaith Encounter Association in Israel, which brings together Jews, Muslims, and Christians for dialogue and cooperation. Such initiatives demonstrate how religion can bridge divides and promote understanding among competing or conflicting groups or institutions.

Similarly, grassroots movements like Women Wage Peace, comprising both Israeli and Palestinian women advocating for a peaceful resolution to the conflict, draw on a variety of values that specifically include the religious values of compassion and reconciliation in order to promote dialogue and nonviolence (Bartolini De Angeli, 2023). The socio-political and cultural dynamics of these grassroots initiatives underscore the value of a social scientific approach, which offers a nuanced understanding of how religion influences attitudes, actions, and identities on both sides of the conflict. However, to fully grasp the complexities of these movements and work towards a sustainable and lasting resolution, it is essential to adopt a diversified approach.

This approach should integrate mainstream Western strategies with grassroots efforts and incorporate non-Western social scientific perspectives. Such perspectives can provide alternative insights and methodologies that deepen our understanding of religion's role in conflict and peacebuilding. By recognising the potential for synergy between grassroots and mainstream approaches and embracing diverse, non-Western viewpoints, stakeholders can develop a more holistic and inclusive strategy for peace.

This integrated approach not only honors the contributions of each method but also enhances the overall effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts, ultimately leading to more robust and enduring solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

7. Conclusion: Religion in Conflict through a Social Scientific Lens

In briefly examining the multifaceted relationship between religion, conflict, and a potential basis for peacebuilding in the Israeli-Palestinian context, it becomes clear that religion acts both as a catalyst for conflict and as a potential avenue for peace. The intricate interplay between religion, politics, historical narratives, and geopolitical aspirations also underscores the intricacies of the reasons behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A critical insight emerging from this analysis is that understanding the dynamics of the conflict necessitates a well-developed non-westernised social scientific approach to religion. This approach must integrate diverse perspectives from sociology, anthropology, and political science to fully capture how religious beliefs and practices both shape and are shaped by socio-political factors. Such a comprehensive analytical framework is essential for addressing the complexities of religious dynamics in conflicts and for developing effective strategies for conflict resolution and mutual understanding in deeply entrenched socio-political disputes like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Only by adopting a social scientific lens can scholars interested in religion delve into the nuanced ways in which religion and religious issues influence the identity, perceptions and actions of individuals and communities on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For instance, on the Palestinian side, groups like Hamas draw on Islamic ideology to justify their militant actions, while on the Israeli side, religious settlers in Gaza invoke Jewish religious identity to legitimise their territorial claims. Therefore, to put it simply, it is the social scientific approach that allows for a deeper exploration of how religious beliefs, rituals, and practices intersect with political, social, and economic factors to shape the conflict along with an adverse social and political landscape.

Furthermore, the necessity for a social scientific approach also underscores the need for interdisciplinary and international collaboration in studying the role of religion in conflict and peace, particularly in the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By bringing together scholars from various social science disciplines alongside practitioners and policymakers, academic research can harness a diverse range of perspectives, conceptualisations, and methodologies to enrich our understanding of the intricate interplay between religion and conflict dynamics. The possibility of such a collaborative effort mirrors the establishment of social scientific analysis of religion, which has moved beyond theological or politically biased interpretations to provide an analytical framework with a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted role of religion in society.

Such a collaborative approach is still essential for shedding light on the strategic deployment of religious discourse and narratives by both Israeli and Palestinian communities and institutions to assert their aims and claims. While religion undoubtedly poses challenges to peace and stability in the Israeli-Palestinian context, it also holds the potential to serve as a force for reconciliation and peacebuilding if we can understand its various aspects in in the minds of the affected societies. Therefore, embracing a social scientific approach and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration are crucial steps toward navigating the complexities of religious dynamics in conflict settings and working toward sustainable solutions that address the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In light of these insights, it is evident that policymakers and future researchers should prioritize interdisciplinary collaboration to fully comprehend the multifaceted role of religion in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. By embracing diverse social science perspectives, efforts can be directed towards fostering, for instance, interfaith dialogue, promoting religious tolerance, or advancing reconciliation initiatives. This comprehensive approach is vital for achieving a lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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