Institutional Relations Rather Than Clashes of Civilizations: When and How Is Religion Compatible with Democracy?

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This study develops and examines the concept of hegemonic religion and its relationship with democracy. A religion is hegemonic not only when the state grants that religion exclusive material and political privileges and benefits, but also when the religion is a core element of national identity and citizenship. We empirically examine the link between hegemonic religion and democracy using the Religion and State round 2 (RAS2), Polity, and CIRI datasets. We specifically use religious education policy, financing of religion, and religiously based laws as measures of the extent of religious hegemony in a state. We find that the presence of these religiously hegemonic traits, especially in combination, is strongly associated with a lack of democracy. However, it is possible for democracies to have some hegemonic features but not all of them.

The academic consensus is that modernization, democratization, and secularization are inextricably linked in any process of political development, with secularization referring to the separation of Church and State and the privatization of religion. However, recent sociological data shows that democratization is not dependent on the separation of Church and State and that government involvement in religion often increases as democracy grows, especially in Christian nations (Fox 2007, 2008, 2015).

When it comes to experiences of democratization outside the West, they are most often measured and evaluated in comparison to the Western experience of political development as enshrined in the dominant concepts of political science, such as secularism. Additionally, when studies take religion into account, they address it as either the independent or dependent variable, thereby overemphasizing its importance or neglecting it. We would like to propose an alternative, investigating instead the correlation between religion and democracy from an institutional perspective in order to relativize the direct relation between the two.

In particular, we focus on a specific type of state–religion arrangement and state–society interaction that we call hegemonic, where a state gives exclusive privileges and benefits to a single religion. We further ask, if hegemonic religion is related to a lack of democracy, does it completely preclude democracy? In other words, is it possible for a state to be both democratic and religiously hegemonic?

Authors’ note: The RAS data used in this article was supported by the Israel Science Foundation (Grant 896/00), the Sara and Simha Lainer Chair in Democracy and Civility, and the John Templeton Foundation. The opinions expressed in this study are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation.
We examine this issue using data from the Religion and State round 2 (RAS2), Polity, and Cingranelli–Richards (CIRI) datasets.

The study proceeds as follows. First, we examine the literatures on religion and democratization and present our concept of hegemonic religion. We then perform a data analysis that shows that while religious hegemony is significantly related to authoritarian regimes, many democratic states, nevertheless, display some hegemonic traits, so this relationship is neither absolute nor determinative, just probabilistic. That is, while democratic states are less likely to have religiously hegemonic traits, many of them still have these traits, although not all of them. Finally, we argue that focusing on state–religion relations provides a better understanding of religious politics than focusing on the impact of religious traditions, beliefs, or religious practices. Such a focus may be a way out of the current challenges faced by scholars of politics and international relations when they investigate the influence of religion on politics.

Religion, Democracy, and Democratization

Until today, much of the literature on democratization has been reliant on, or responsive to, Lipset’s 1959 work in which he designs a model for democracy that views the rise in per capita GDP as a trigger for transition (Lipset 1959). In the 1980s, the literature focused on the conditions for transition to democracy. Most of this discussion was triggered by the second and third waves of democratization in Latin America and Eastern Europe, yet the literature from this period did not give religion any significant role in this process (Rustow 1970; Przeworski 1986, 2000; Carothers 2002).

Others argue more explicitly that democracy is only possible in secular societies or at least in those with strong separation of religion and state. They consider that stable democracy in religiously divided societies is possible only if complicated power-sharing arrangements are present (Lijphart 1997; Kalyvas 1998; Brathwaite and Bramsen 2011; Vlas and Gherghina 2012). Overall, these positions implicitly reflect the taken-for-granted privatization of religion that characterized democratization in Europe, as well as the neat religion versus political divide that is taken for granted in IR scholarship.1

More recent literature, however, has revisited the issue, examining how religion has contributed to democratization. Several studies focus on the roles played by specific churches in specific countries. For example, Stout (2008) wrote about the role the Lutheran Church and the Catholic Church played in East Germany’s and Poland’s transitions, respectively. In South Korea, Hong found that the Methodist Church was very active in organizing and issuing public statements during a critical stage of the country’s transition to democracy (Hong 2009, 92). Religious actors and groups in South Africa are credited with complementing the transition from apartheid by taking a strong stance against apartheid and supporting the secular movement against the regime (Fawcett 2000). Kunkler and Leininger (2009) argue that religion played a significant role in democratic transitions in West Germany (1945–1969), Georgia (1987–2007), Ukraine (1989–2007), Mali (1987–2007), and Indonesia (1991–2007). In all of these cases, religious actors were not unanimously supportive of democracy but contributions to democratization significantly outweighed their obstructive impact. Woodbury argues that Protestant missionaries were crucial to the development of democracy in the Third World. They were a crucial catalyst, initiating the development and spread of religious liberty, mass education, mass printing of newspapers, voluntary organizations, most major colonial reforms, and the codification of legal protections

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1For a critique of this divide, see for example Hurd-Shakman (2004, 235–62) and Hallward (2008, 1–16).
for nonwhites in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These innovations fostered conditions that made stable representative democracy more likely—regardless of whether many people converted to Protestantism (Woodbury 2012).

Other studies focus more on the general contributions of specific religious traditions and can thereby fall into the trap of overemphasizing their importance. For example, Rollin highlighted the role Protestantism played in the development of democracies where it was the dominant faith. He found that this religious tradition helped strengthen the democratic process by “ensuring that basic freedoms are preserved, that political stability is guaranteed, that civil society provides the basic infrastructure for a pluralistic society to grow, and for authoritarian forces in the government to be checked and held accountable” (Tusalem 2009, 907). Philpott noted that three-quarters of the countries of democratization’s “third wave” were Catholic. While noting that not all local Catholic churches supported democratization, Philpott (2004) attributes this tendency to the Second Vatican Council’s endorsement of human rights in 1963 and Pope Paul VI’s 1965 Dignitatis Humanae, which declared religious liberty a basic right rooted in human dignity.

In the same vein, Huntington’s (1993, 2011) clash of civilizations is one of the most discussed theories in which cultures in general, and religions in particular, are understood as the primary influence on international conflicts, and its limits have been extensively analyzed. While Huntington essentially argues that religious identity is the key variable to understanding conflict, empirical studies testing his theory generally find the variable to be either insignificant or less important than other factors. Grim and Finke (2011) and Katzenstein (2010) further argue that “civilizations” are not homogenous, monolithic players in world politics with an inclination to “clash,” but rather consist of constantly evolving pluralistic, divergent, and convergent actors and practices.

Departing from the simplistic causality between religion and democracy, some, like Anderson (2004, 2007), address the ambivalence of religion by treating religious tradition as a potential inhibitor or enabler—a factor that can support or undermine the transition, depending on the dominant voices within it. Anderson states: “Though critics are right in arguing that religious tradition is not central or determining, indeed often marginal, religion is not completely irrelevant to outcomes, and that in the short term what tradition is dominant in a country may—subconsciously or as deliberately fostered by religious and/or secular leaders—help to shape the outcome of democratization processes” (Anderson 2004, 206). While Protestantism is often cited as more suited to pluralistic politics, and countries with Orthodox Christian or Islamic traditions appear to be held back by them, Anderson finds that in many of these countries no prominent support or opposition to democratization existed.

Others argue that the relationship between religion and democracy is complicated by the continuous dialectic of religion having an impact on democracy, and democracy impacting religion. For instance, Brocker and Kunkler (2013) argue that democracy, and especially participation in electoral politics, can serve to moderate religious actors. Kalyvas (1998) and Kalyvas and van Kersbergen (2010) similarly discuss how religious institutions can evolve in democracies in order to participate in the democratic process.

Finally, there have been a small number of quantitative studies of the topic. Toft, Philpott, and Shah (2011, 82–89) found that religious actors played a democratizing role in forty-eight of seventy-eight countries that democratized between 1972 and 2009. While this role was not always decisive, religion played a leading role in thirty of these cases. Fisch (2002) and Midlarsky (1998) do not directly address democratization but link Islam to authoritarianism. However, Minkenberg (2007) shows that Islam is not incompatible with democracy and
Stepan and Robinson (2003) demonstrate that the trend to authoritarianism is specific to Arab culture rather than Islam.²

There is also a more qualitative approach, mainly coming from social movement theory, which looks at religion as the dependent variable, although this literature is less concerned by democratization as such.³

Overall, recent interest in the role of religion in democratization has not yet strongly asserted any particular trend on how, and why, religion matters in the democratization process. Jeffrey Haynes (2012) aptly sums up the current state of the debate by arguing that most religious traditions are complex. They have aspects that both support and hinder democracy and are represented by multiple actors, some of which support democracy and some of which oppose it. Also, “religious actors on their own rarely if ever determine democratization outcomes. Yet, they may in various ways, and with a range of outcomes, be significant for democratization. This may especially be the case in countries that have a long tradition of secularization” (Haynes 2012, 4). Stepan (2000) similarly argues that religious tradition per se does not have such an impact, because religious traditions are “multivocal.”

In sum, studies on religion and democratization focus on the specifics of religious traditions and tend to overemphasize either the democratic nature of some (Christianity) or the anti-democratic of others (Islam). Our study hopes to contribute to this debate by suggesting that state–religion relations, more than religious traditions, may influence democracy.

Hegemonic Religion

Our inquiry was triggered by a recent body of literature that has addressed the role of religion in global politics and highlighted the dissemination of the Western concept of religion as a significant factor in its politicization across multiple religious traditions (Brekke 2012). More specifically, the exportation of religion, conceived as separate from politics and other social spheres, has initiated multiple political resistances from religious groups and movements. What is less known and studied is that the exportation of the Western concept of religion went hand in hand with the exportation of the nation-state during the colonial period. In this regard, area studies have shown that the modern nation-state transformed Buddhism, Hinduism, or Islam into an organizational framework and an ideology of practice (Ashiwa and Wank 2009, 1–21; Agrama 2013; Cesari 2014). In this regard we depart from the dominant approaches (Juergensmeyer 1993, 2008), such as Cultural Duality Theory and State Culture Theory. These approaches envision a parallel power structure of state and religion that occurs when a religious movement is formed in reaction to state ideology and policies (Moaddel 2002, 373–74). They posit the existence of a rigid, stark opposition between the state and religious groups (as in Iran before the Islamic Revolution) or religious values (as in communist countries). Similarly, at the international

²There is also a large quantitative literature focusing on religion’s influence on political participation. See, for example, Ayers and Hofstetter (2008) and Ben-Nun Bloom and Arkian (2013). Other quantitative studies that touch on issues of religion and democracy include studies focusing on religion and coalition politics (e.g., Birnir and Satana 2013), voting (e.g., Jelen 1993; Calfino and Djupe 2009; van der Burg et al. 2009; Brathwaite and Bramsen 2011), territory issues (Zellman 2015), and support for democracy (e.g., Kim 2008; Gu and Bromhoff 2012; Norris and Inglehart 2004).

³See McAdam and Snow (2010) and Tarrow (1998). More distinctly, politicization of Islam is attributed to the combination of a strong ideology with several “opportunity structures.” See Shapiro et al. (2004), Wiktowicz (2006), and Jamal (2007). The most significant structures are the political failure of secular national projects (Kepel 2004; Hafez 2010), the deepening of economic crises, and the demographic bulge (Lawrence 1989; Kepel 2004; Zubaïda 2009). This literature is very relevant to understand the multiple mechanisms of politicization of religion but does not directly address the correlation between religion and democracy.
level, most studies frame religion as a resurgent ideology used almost exclusively as a tool for supranational political opposition (Roy 2004, 5; Bayat 2007, 10). Our article addresses instead an unexamined dimension of the politicization of religion—that is, state actions and policies vis-à-vis religion. It adopts an institutional approach to introduce state actions into the analysis of the political influence of religion on democracy.

We contend that religious tradition per se is not the key variable in understanding the link between religion and democracy, but that state religion may be. We are building on the work of scholars like Alfred Stepan, who have hinted at the levels of differentiation between state and religions as a more efficient way to measure the role of religion in democracy. Driessen and Mazie have likewise moved in this direction by discussing how states can become involved in supporting religion without undermining its democratic principles. For example, Driessen (2010) argues that as long as the government has sufficient autonomy to make decisions independent of religion—without religion being able to overrule decisions—further separation of religion and state is unnecessary for democracy to thrive. In fact, under certain circumstances, a religion with strong public relevance, institutionalized in a friendly, democratic church–state relationship, may be desirable and useful for the consolidation of newly democratizing countries. Heavy-handed ruling against religion in democracies, by contrast, not only runs the risk of provoking the counter-productive, anti-democratic forces that lie within religious fundamentalism, but also obscures the full breadth of options open for healthy relationships between religion and state and, by doing so, weakens the potential that religion possesses to help legitimize and strengthen new democratic regimes (Driessen 2010, 57).

Mazie (2004, 2006) argues along similar lines that some state/governmental forms of support for religion are more threatening to democracy than others. He explains that as long as no aspect of religion is made mandatory and religious minorities have religious freedom, it is possible to reconcile support for a single religion and democracy. Even if a number of citizens disagree with this state support for religion, this is not counter to democratic principles because there are many policies in democratic states that are counter to the wishes of a substantial portion of their citizens. That is, democracy does not require universal consent to implement a policy and this principle also applies to strong state support for religion. These works have the merit of avoiding the essentialization of religions, focusing instead on state actions vis-à-vis religions, However, they do tend to have a normative bent, hinting at what should be done to maintain or achieve democracy as far as religion is concerned.

We would like to go one step further by hypothesizing that a specific type of state–religion relationship that we call hegemonic has a negative influence on democracy. This type of relationship is defined by a state giving exclusive prominence, benefits, privileges, and status to a single religion. In other words, we consider hegemonic religion, defined as the political, social, and legal exclusivism granted to one religion by the state, as an influential factor on democratization.

It is important to note that our research question builds on the growing body of research on nation-building processes outside the West and the ensuing redefinition of religious traditions. For example, Cesari (2014) forges the concept of hegemonic religion to reflect how political modernization in Muslim countries came to be embodied in absorption and restructuration by the state of the Islamic tradition, even in countries dubbed as secular, like Turkey. Our intention is to broaden the scope of this historical and sociological literature by examining whether the hegemonic status of the religion is correlated to lack of democracy across all religions and countries. This is because religious hegemony is reflected not only in whether a state has an official religion but also in a wide range of
government policies on religion also found in many states without official religions (Fox 2008, 2015). Our goal is not to neglect the role of history and culture but rather to verify if our concept of religious hegemony, based on this literature, has some general validity.

First, it is important to note the difference between a dominant religion, an established religion, and a hegemonic religion. A religion is dominant when it is the religion of the majority of a given country. In such cases, the dominant religion continues to impart historical and cultural references considered “natural” and “legitimate.” Religious symbols and rituals become embedded in the public culture and the country. Examples of such dominant religions include Protestantism in the United States or Catholicism in France and Poland. An established religion is a church recognized by law as the religion of the country or the state and sometimes financially supported by the state, like the Church of Denmark. The existence of an established church is not incompatible with the legal protection of religious minorities and freedom of speech, and policies toward minorities in states with established religions vary widely (Fox 2008, 2015, 2016). A religion becomes hegemonic, however, when the state grants a certain religious group exclusive legal, economic, or political rights denied to other religions. The main difference between established and hegemonic religions is not only about the privileges granted to one religion but also about the repression/control of all religions. In other words, religious hegemony refers to exclusive legal and political privileges granted to a specific religious group, and the association of this religion with citizenship and national belonging, while all other religious groups are repressed.

Second, hegemonic religion and states’ regulations of religion are not the same. The latter may assume several forms, with legal neutrality at one end of the spectrum, legal privilege at the other end, and many nuances between the two. Legal neutrality, as understood and codified in most secular democracies, entails recognition and legal protection of all religions. Separation of religion and state is not a necessary prerequisite for legal neutrality, which can be implemented even when there is state cooperation with religions (e.g., many European democracies) (Fox 2008, 2015), as hinted by Driessen (2010) and Mazie (2004, 2006). It is worth noting that legal neutrality does not mean the practice of law is always neutral. Frequently, the dominant religious group serves as an implicit standard for the legal work concerning other religious groups (Beaman 2003). Most importantly, legal neutrality has been continuously challenged throughout history by discriminatory political practices. One of the most recent examples is the increased restrictions on Muslim minorities in Western European democracies since 9/11 (Fox and Akbaba 2013). Hegemonic religion is therefore not explained solely by state regulation but rather as a political project, establishing a certain religious group at the core of national identity. In this sense, hegemony is defined not only by legal and institutional practices but also by key ideological and cultural functions provided to a certain religious group. This in turn becomes a central element of the political socialization of all citizens, independent of their religious affiliation.

Preexisting research that has measured state involvement in religion (Fox 2008, 2015; Grim and Finke 2006, 2011; Chaves et al. 1994) fails to grasp the hegemonic nature of religion. Usually this research focuses on the following criteria:

- The country officially recognizes one religion;
- The state finances places of worship and clerics;
- The legal system includes provisions of religious law;
- State schools teach religious doctrines; and
- There is government-based discrimination against religious minorities.
First, however, this list does not account for the political importance of each feature. For example, the declaration of an official religion can be merely symbolic, as in the United Kingdom; or the existence of blasphemy law can be obsolete, as in Denmark. Second, each of these features can be implemented in various ways, some granting equality to all religions, others being discriminatory. For example, does the state provide funding for several religions, as in Belgium, or to one religion only, as in Greece? Are all religions for which there are a sufficient number of students taught in public schools, or only one? The responses to these questions allow us to identify different degrees of involvement, from legal neutrality on one end of the spectrum to legal privileges on the other. Consequentially, legal privilege occurs not only when one religion is implicitly or explicitly defined as the religion of the state or the nation, but when it is granted financial resources and/or legal rights denied to all other religious groups. More specifically, nationalization of religious institutions, provisions of religious law in the legal system, and inclusion of the official religion in the curriculum of public schools define a hegemonic religion. It results in religious divisions or, to put it differently, religious differences that are institutionalized by law and state policies. In fact, state actions are crucial in institutionalizing social divisions and creating hierarchies between groups that then become hostile to each other. In the case of Muslim countries, scholarly work (Nasr 2001; Cesari 2014) has shown, for example, that these social divisions among religions are the direct outcome of the policies of the post-colonial states that emerged on the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The unexpected and often unseen consequences of legal privilege are state restrictions and controls over the activities of the official religion. Legal privilege usually involves:

- A ministry of religious affairs and administration to manage the official religion;
- Government regulation of the use of religious symbols or activities;
- Limitations by state laws and policies on freedom of expression (apostasy law);
- Penalties for the defamation of the official religion (blasphemy law); and
- Government interference with worship.

The other side of legal privilege is the tacit or explicit discrimination against religious groups not recognized as the official religion. For example:

- Minority groups do not receive government funds or resources for education, religious programs, or maintenance of property or organizations;
- Domestic or foreign religious groups are forbidden to proselytize;
- Conversion from the official religious group to another, if not fully forbidden, is severely restricted; and
- The government is hostile toward religious minorities or may adhere to a policy of non-intervention in the case of harassment or persecution of these groups (Grim and Finke 2011, 208–9).

To sum up, traits that are particularly associated with the hegemonic status of religion include:

- Privileging state funding or support for one religion (nationalization of institutions, clerics, and places of worship);
- Inserting the doctrine of that religion in the public school curriculum, excluding other religions; and
- Moralization of law and public policies based on the prescriptions of the hegemonic religion. Concretely, this means that the inscription of religious prescriptions into the legal system (restrictions of freedom of
speech and expression, notably apostasy, blasphemy, prohibition of proselytism for all religions but the hegemonic one) as well as the restriction of women’s rights (marriage/divorce/abortion) based on the prescriptions of that religion.

The hegemonic status of a religion is a combination of two or more of these traits. While democracy can accommodate some forms of state involvement in religions, the hegemonic status granted to one religion can challenge democratic life or the transition to democracy.

We have transformed these dimensions into three variables that allowed us to work with the RAS2 data. We discuss these variables in the Research Design section below. Overall, we predict that these traits will be associated with lower levels of democracy. However, we do not rule out the possibility that some democratic states may possess at least some of these traits.

Research Design

This study relies primarily on the Religion and State round 2 (RAS2) dataset, focusing on the 2008 data. The RAS2 dataset includes 177 countries with data coded yearly from 1990 to 2008. The data are based on country reports using a wide range of sources, including (1) governmental and multi-government organization reports from sources such as the US State Department, the UN, and the European Union, (2) reports by human rights groups including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Forum 18, (3) media sources, primarily from the Lexis/Nexis database, and (4) academic articles and books.4

In order to operationalize the concept of hegemonic religion, we created three independent variables using the information in the RAS country reports described above, as well as from existing RAS variables. The first measures whether religious education is hegemonic. Specifically, it measures whether a country supplies religious education in public schools exclusively in the majority religion. For the purposes of this variable, religious education refers to religion being taught in approximately the same manner as clergy would teach religion to believers. This is based on a more detailed variable included in RAS2, which is coded as follows:

1. There is no religious education in public schools;
2. Religious education is available in all religions for which there is a significant number of students (in cases where population is homogeneous, code this category);
3. Religious education is available in some religions for which there is a significant number of students; and
4. Religious education is available for only one religion even though there are a significant number of students belonging to other religions.

Countries are deemed to have hegemonic religious education policies if the variable is coded as 3 or if the country is religiously homogeneous and coded as 1. The resulting variable is coded as 1 if the religious education policy is hegemonic and otherwise as 0.

The second measures whether the government finances a single religion exclusively. While RAS2 has eleven variables that measure government financing of religion, they all measure finance in general and do not address whether this finance is for multiple religions or a single religion. The RAS country reports include this information, but the RAS project created no variable measuring this aspect of

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4For a more detailed discussion of the sources for the data, data collection methodology, and data reliability, see Fox (2015).
religious financing. Accordingly, we used the RAS country reports to code a variable that measures as one if the government finances a single religion exclusively and otherwise as zero.5

The third measure focuses on the presence of religiously hegemonic laws. The RAS2 dataset has information on a number of religious laws. The variable for this study was coded based on whether the following policies were present in a country according to existing variables in the RAS2 dataset:

- Personal status defined by religion or clergy;
- Marriages performed by clergy of at least some religions are given automatic civil recognition, even in the absence of a state license;
- Restrictions on interfaith marriages;
- Restrictions on intimate interactions between unmarried heterosexual couples;
- Laws that specifically make it illegal to be a homosexual or engage in homosexual intimate interactions; and
- Prohibitive restrictions on abortion.6

The variable ranges between zero and six based on the number of these policies that are present in a country.7

This study performs two sets of tests using these variables. The first examines the frequency of these religious hegemony variables controlling for world region, majority religion, and democracy. For the purposes of this test, the laws variable is coded as zero if no laws are present and one if one or more of the six laws are present. The measure for democracy used in this study is taken from the Polity dataset. The measure ranges from ten (the most autocratic states) to zero (the most democratic). It is based on institutional factors including the regulation, openness, and competitiveness of executive recruitment, constraints on the executive, and the regulation and competitiveness of political participation.8 This is in order to establish whether hegemonic religion is present in a wide variety of types of states.

Finally, we use OLS regressions to test whether the three hegemonic religion variables impact democracy. We use three dependent variables for democracy. The first is the Polity measure, noted above, which focuses on institutional democracy. As the concept of liberal democracy also includes human rights and freedoms, we include two variables from the CIRI dataset. The physical integrity index measures torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and disappearance. It ranges from zero (no government respect for these rights) to eight (full respect). The CIRI’s empowerment index measures the following rights: foreign movement, domestic movement, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, workers’ rights, electoral self-determination, and freedom of

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5While a variable that accounts for the actual amount of funding to each religion would have been useful, this information is not available for a large number of states. This limits our measurement to this binary variable.

6While in theory blasphemy laws are also part of the concept of hegemonic religion, we did not include this concept in our “hegemonic laws” variable. This is because the concept of democracy includes freedom of speech, which blasphemy laws limit. In fact, the variables we use in this study include freedom of speech as one of their components. Thus, including blasphemy laws in the “hegemonic laws” variable would cause an issue of multicollinearity, which is methodologically unacceptable in this type of study.

7We weight each of these types of laws equally because previous studies demonstrate that (1) there is no agreement among scholars as to how these laws should be weighted and (2) weighting these items based on both scholarly opinion and factor analysis does not result in any substantial difference in the composite variable. See Fox (2015).

religion. Since this study’s independent variables measure phenomena related to religious freedom, we removed religious freedom from the CIRI’s empowerment index, so the version we use measures all of the listed freedoms except religious freedom. The resulting measure ranges from zero (no government respect for these rights) to thirteen (full respect).

The study tests five models for each dependent variable. The first three use each of the three religious hegemony variables as separate measures. The fourth uses all three of these measures in the same test. The fifth measures how many of the religious hegemony factors are present and ranges from zero to three.

We use several other control variables based on previous studies of religion and democracy using an earlier version of the RAS dataset (Fox 2007). First, the study uses the polity variable for the tests involving the CIRI measures. Second, it controls for the country’s majority religion. Specifically, dummy variables are used for whether the country has a Muslim majority or a Christian majority. Controlling for Muslim-majority states has additional utility because the religious hegemony theory was developed based on practices in Muslim-majority states. This allows us to test whether the link between religious hegemony and autocracy is present in non-Muslim-majority states. While the RAS dataset has more specific variables for religious majorities, these more general variables are used for several reasons. Among Muslim states, only three have non-Sunni majorities. The most common non-Muslim, non-Christian-majority states are Buddhist-majority states, of which there are eight, too few for meaningful results in multivariate analysis. It is possible to break Christian-majority states into separate variables for Catholic, Orthodox, and other-majority states. However, in tests not presented here, this resulted in no meaningful differences in the results for the hegemony variables. Finally, adding independent variables would create a ratio of independent variables to cases, which is low for this type of multivariate analysis.

We control for religious diversity using a Herfindahl index that runs between zero and one, with the most diverse countries scoring a one. 10 Finally, the study controls for per-capita GDP (UN Statistical Division 2010) and a country’s population size, 11 both of which are generally linked with democracy.

While all regimes, including democracies, can accommodate one hegemonic trait, the hegemonic status granted to one religion, meaning the combination of two or three of these traits, is more likely to be linked to authoritarian regimes independently of the religion.

Analysis

Table 1 shows the frequency of religious hegemony, controlling for multiple factors. Overall, while no one factor is present in a majority of countries, 58.2% of countries have at least one of the three religiously hegemonic traits included in this study. Religious hegemony is not distributed evenly among any of the control variables. Among world regions, it is least present in the former Soviet bloc and Western democracies but present in all Middle Eastern states.

Then the question is: What are the hegemonic traits more often associated with democratic regimes? The most frequent form of hegemonic trait in democracies is the inclusion of religious prescriptions in civil law, with anti-abortion laws being the most common. Looking only at the thirty-four most democratic states (where the Polity variable scores a ten, its highest score), among the six types of religious

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9The CIRI data provides yearly variables on human rights based on multiple sources, including US State Department reports and reports from human rights organizations such as Amnesty International. For more on the CIRI dataset, see Abouharb and Cingranelli (2006), and the CIRI homepage at http://www.humanrightsdata.com/.
10This variable is taken from Barro and McCleary (2003).
11The population variable was downloaded from the World Bank on April 23, 2010.
laws we track, restrictions on abortion are the most common and are present in eleven of these states. Marriages performed by clergy are automatically recognized without a state license in nine of these democracies. Personal status is determined by religious law in Greece and Israel. Israel effectively restricts interfaith marriage, as non-religious marriages are not possible in the country, though interfaith marriages performed in other countries are recognized by Israel’s interior ministry. As of 2008 only Mauritius criminalized sodomy based on an 1838 law but does not specifically ban homosexuality. None of these democracies bans premarital sex.

Thus, inclusion of religion into the legal system can exist in democracies as long as the state does not restrict the practice of minority religions. While some of these laws enact religious dogma or give preference to the majority religion, few of them significantly restrict minority religions. This means that in many of these states, the right to regulate civil law on religious grounds is granted to certain minority religions. For example, in Israel, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim clergy all have control of personal status issues that form their communities. In other words, if the equality of treatment is respected, the presence of elements of religious law within the legal system is compatible with democracy. What would make it incompatible with democracy would be the imposition on all religious groups of the legal prescription of the hegemonic religion (as in Pakistan for non-Sunni Muslim groups).

Conversely, it seems that the funding of only one religion by a state that erects this religion as hegemon is more often associated with autocratic regimes and often combined with hegemonic traits in education and laws.

Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c analyze the relationship between religious hegemony and democracy, controlling for several other factors. The results are largely consistent across dependent variables and confirm the prediction that religious hegemony is associated with autocracy. Models one through three test each of the hegemony variables individually. Education is a significant predictor for only the institutional democracy variable. Finance is a significant predictor of the empowerment index...
and institutional democracy. The laws variable is a significant predictor of the physical integrity and empowerment indexes. Thus, all of the dependent variables are influenced by at least one of the hegemony variables but none of these dependent variables are influenced by all of them.

In model four, where all three of the hegemony variables are tested together, none of them are significant predictors of any of the dependent variables. Finally, in model five, the number of hegemonic traits variable is a significant predictor of all three dependent variables. Thus, overall, there is clear evidence that hegemony has a significant negative influence on democracy.

The control variables also produce some relevant results. The dummy variable for Muslim-majority states is not significant at the 0.5 level in any of the tests. Christian states are more democratic in three of the models with the empowerment index as the dependent variable and all models with institutional democracy as the dependent variable. The other control variables are consistent with previous studies showing that institutional democracies more often respect human rights, and that more economically developed countries tend to be more democratic. The results for population size are inconsistent with more populous countries having more institutional democracy but lower respect for human rights and freedoms. The results for religious diversity are not statistically significant.

**Discussion**

In sum, while other factors remain significant predictors of the democratic level of any given country, a certain type of state–religion relationship that we call hegemonic has a negative influence on democracy.

At the same time, if democracies can have hegemonic traits, then it is not the number of hegemonic rules that matter the most but the content of the rules and how they are implemented. This introduces a contextualized and sociological approach to the role of religion in politics that cannot be apprehended solely at the institutional level (Cesari 2014). That is why the social legitimacy of religious practices, behaviors, discourses, and actors is crucial. This social legitimacy entails all forms of social visibility of religion: political debates based on religious claims (abortion, contraception, blasphemy, dress code, environment, welfare, political rights), social activism of religious groups, and presence of religious symbols in public discourses. In this aspect, it is closely related to the private/public divide specific to each political culture. In the case of hegemony, the religion associated with the state is often homothetic with the frontiers of the public space. In other

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words, the hegemonic religion is a public religion in the sense that it defines and occupies all the public space while all other religions are at best relegated to the private sphere, at worst discriminated or repressed.

Consequentially, each country is defined by a unique combination of institutional interactions and social legitimacies that cannot be captured solely through statistical analysis. For example, twenty-seven out of thirty-eight countries with two or three hegemonic traits are Muslim and non-democratic, but such a situation cannot be explained by the so-called “exceptionalism” of Islam. In fact, it is related to the hegemonic status of some trends of Islam, established during the nation-building processes, which also characterizes non-Muslim countries like Butan or Cambodia. That is why Muslim countries that do not experience hegemonic forms of Islam, like Senegal, Indonesia, or Lebanon, happen to be more democratic. Introducing these two levels of religion’s interactions with state and society sheds light on a more complex and contextualized approach to religion and politics that is more than simply the separation of religion from political institutions in public life. Rather, what is distinctive are the specific meanings and practices ascribed to religion, ethics, politics and, indeed, public, and the manner in which one’s personal identifications (and thus commitments) are meant to shift along these lines. In other words, the institutional and social dynamic between

| Table 2b. Multiple regressions predicting empowerment |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|            | Model 1     | Model 2     | Model 3     | Model 4     | Model 5     |
|            | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        |
| Christian-Majority | .146        | .045        | .138        | .056        | .132        | .065        | .141        | .051        | .143        | .046        |
| Muslim-Majority   | -.040       | .595        | -.015       | .844        | .011        | .880        | .005        | .953        | .001        | .994        |
| Religious Diversity | -.087       | .129        | -.111       | .063        | -.067       | .218        | -.113       | .061        | -.102       | .071        |
| Polity           | .543        | .000        | .542        | .000        | .555        | .000        | .526        | .000        | .530        | .000        |
| Log-Population   | -.227       | .000        | -.219       | .000        | -.223       | .000        | -.222       | .000        | -.224       | .000        |
| Log-Per-Capita GDP | .126        | .020        | .129        | .017        | .108        | .039        | .122        | .027        | .116        | .028        |
| Hegemonic: Education | -.111      | .056        | -           | -           | -           | -           | -.062       | .308        | -           | -           |
| Hegemonic: Finance | -          | -           | -.154       | .018        | -           | -           | -.115       | .094        | -           | -           |
| Hegemonic: Laws   | -           | -           | -           | -           | -.185       | .001        | -.073       | .172        | -           | -           |
| Hegemonic: # of Traits | -          | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -.073       | .172        | -           | -           |
| Degrees of freedom | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         |
| Adj R-squared    | .586        | .590        | .603        | .593        | .597        | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           |

| Table 2c. Multiple regressions predicting institutional democracy |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
|            | Model 1     | Model 2     | Model 3     | Model 4     | Model 5     |
|            | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        | Beta        | Sig.        |
| Christian-Majority | .312        | .000        | .307        | .001        | .325        | .000        | .299        | .001        | .310        | .001        |
| Muslim-Majority   | -.158       | .090        | -.137       | .154        | -.179       | .072        | -.118       | .221        | -.119       | .217        |
| Religious Diversity | -.052       | .471        | -.067       | .373        | .012        | .868        | -.090       | .232        | -.048       | .509        |
| Polity           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           |
| Log-Population   | .132        | .037        | .150        | .019        | .148        | .023        | .136        | .031        | .140        | .027        |
| Log-Per-Capita GDP | .189        | .004        | .184        | .006        | .158        | .020        | .197        | .004        | .160        | .015        |
| Hegemonic: Education | -.252      | .000        | -.240       | .003        | -           | -           | -.151       | .078        | -           | -           |
| Hegemonic: Finance | -          | -           | -           | -           | -.095       | .192        | -.010       | .884        | -           | -           |
| Hegemonic: Laws   | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           |
| Hegemonic: # of Traits | -          | -           | -           | -           | -.257       | .001        | -           | -           | -           | -           |
| Degrees of freedom | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         | 176         |
| Adj R-squared    | .351        | .337        | .308        | .356        | .345        | -           | -           | -           | -           | -           |
religion and state creates a field of struggle and competition between political and religious actors both nationally and internationally. Relevant research therefore should focus on these fields and on the distribution of symbolic and material capital between different national and international actors.

Conclusion

Overall, the empirical tests performed in this study show two important results. First, as predicted, hegemonic religious traits, especially in combination (that is, in states with multiple hegemonic traits), are strongly and statistically significantly associated with lower levels of democracy. Thus, states that give exclusive rights, privileges, status, and benefits to a single religion are significantly less likely to be democratic. Second, and in contrast, hegemonic religious traits are present in all categories of states in the world, including democracies. While non-democratic and Muslim-majority states, especially in the Middle East, are more likely to have hegemonic traits, these traits are by no means exclusive to these states.

Additionally, our research opens up new paths for the study of religion in politics by reinforcing that, as already hinted by other scholars, religious tradition is not a good predictor of, or explanation for, levels of democracy. This finding speaks to several important debates on issues of religion and politics. As mentioned above, the ongoing critique of a civilizational clash “à la Huntington” converges with our approach. For example, Grim and Finke (2011) demonstrate that religious hegemony (even though they do not use this term), not religious differences, increases conflicts and the probability of the politicization of religion. In the same vein, according to the Pew data, 33% of countries dominated by one religion have a high level of religious-based violence, compared to 20% of countries where no religion dominates (Grim and Finke 2011, 67).

Our results also open new alternatives to research that focuses exclusively on the ideological content of religious movements without systematically linking them to specific social and political contexts. This is a tendency noted throughout the whole approach to religion, in the International Relations discipline (Volpi 2010). To a certain extent, the same critique can be made for some constructivist work when it is limited to the discursive approach that views cultures as rhetorical practices and narratives (Katzenstein 2010). In order to bridge the gap between discourse and practices, it is necessary to take into account historical evolutions of narratives (and the practices they validate) and overcome the national/international divide to identify longue durée processes. In this perspective, religion becomes a global phenomenon described by different assemblages (state, national, and international non-state actors) and fields of power sharing and contesting.

In sum, our approach shifts the perspective from a polarized state–religion situation to focus on complex sets of interactions between the two entities such as adaptation, cooperation, and competition. It considers state–religion relations, particularly the construction of a hegemonic religion, an impediment to democracy. In other words, no religion is antidemocratic per se, but certain forms of state–religion interaction, such as restricting or privileging particular religious groups, are less often found in democracies.

At a more general level, our approach spotlights the influence of state institutions on the political development process, an emergent topic within the vast body of literature on democratization. This reshaping of state institutions toward more democratic structures has several aspects: building a strong and independent judiciary, protection of civil liberties, and the legal and political guarantees

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12See Andrew Linklater and Stephen Mennell’s argument in favor of Norbert Elias’s figurational sociology (2010, 348–411). See also the use of the concepts of habitus and field by scholars of security such as Michael C. Williams (2007) that could be applied to religion and politics as well.
of the rule of law. This article focuses solely on state involvement in religion. In some aspects our research echoes recent work that emphasizes that the state, especially in non-Western contexts, is a prerequisite for nation-building and remains key to the management of democratization. This is contrary to the common wisdom that a sense of national community is the key ingredient of the state-building enterprise (Stepan et al. 2011, 7–9).

Finally, our work shows that, contrary to what most theories of political development still assert, state involvement in religion is not necessarily an obstacle to democracy, but that the hegemonic status of religion may be. A worthwhile investigation, outside the scope of this article, would be to look at alternative forms of secularism beyond differentiation of state and religion and their respective compatibility with democracy.

References


