7.3: What is Religious Identity?

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Define Religious Identity and related terms including Primordialism and Constructivism
- Define Religiosity and understand the 4 B’s - believing, belonging, behaving, and bonding
- Explain how Religious Identity is important in the study of comparative politics

Introduction

As mentioned earlier, individuals can have multiple identities. A national identity is closely tied to one’s sense of nationality and/or the nation they reside in. Similarly, one’s religious identity is also connected to their level of religiosity and/or the religion they often associate with, either through their family or more likely, through their community. Given this, religious identity is defined as how a person or group of persons think of themselves as belonging to and representing the values of a particular religion and/or religious sect. This strong association with community is also what makes religious identity more difficult to study. Nationalism is naturally tied to the development of the modern nation-state. Without the development of a 'nation' in the 18th and 19th centuries, it is unlikely that there would be nationalism. The concept of a nation for some scholars is considered a priori, or deductively reasoned. In other words, the nation must be formed or conceived beforehand, before a national identity can exist. In this approach, the existence of a nation is a necessary feature of nationalism. It may however, not be sufficient for a national identity to develop, meaning that a nation can exist without a sense of nationalism or with little nationalism, but it is clear that in this view a person needs to belong to a nation in order to have a national identity: nation → identity.
However, when looking at religious identity, the a priori argument is less clear cut. One can draw an analogy with national identity - that in order to have a religious identity, or a sense of religiosity, a religion must exist beforehand. However, unlike the nation, religion as a concept is far older. Nationalism developed in part due to the printing press, which itself was introduced in Europe in the 1400s. Anderson (2006) writes that as more and more people became literate, they began to read newspapers. This ritual of buying and reading newspapers allowed people to feel connected. They no longer saw themselves as detached populations, but as one imagined community. Anderson refers to this as print capitalism, and suggests it is the causal mechanism that led to the development of nations around three hundred years ago.

How Does Religious Identity Differ from National Identity?

An argument can be made that religious identity may actually come before the development of a religion. Durkheim writes that religion is an eminently social thing. Rather than focusing on deities and/or the supernatural elements, the formation of a religion centers on the collective consciousness and community. The rituals and practices that people collectively participate in lead to a sense of unity. This development of an identity is what then leads to organized religion. (Wetherell and Mohanty, 2010) When understood in this approach, the arrows are reversed: identity → religion.

Durkheim wrote about pre-modern societies, which were mostly clan or tribe-based. However, if religious identity is indeed ascribed, or collectivity-based, then it can also be free from geographical constraints. As the clan or tribe shifts from one territory to the next, the religious identity should continue as long as the community remains cohesive. This is different from national identity, where lines drawn on a map strongly influence who develops a national identity. If a religious identity can be detached from the land it originated, then an argument can be made that religious identity could have more impact. Evidence for this could include the historical growth of universal religions, such as Christianity and Islam through proselytizing, and the persistence of religious minority groups across the centuries.

Religious Identity: Primordialism v. Constructivism

How then does religious identity affect politics? The discussion above of religious identity formation can help us in this. If religious identity is considered to precede religion itself, for many people they may consider it their **primordial identity**. Originally coined to discuss, ethnic identities, primordialism can also help us understand the salience of religious identities in politics. Primordialism means that individuals will have only one single religious identity and that this identity is fixed in the present and the future. Some contend that one’s religious identity is biologically determined, that you are born into it. Others suggest it is acquired through childhood, through socialization and education. Regardless, primordialists believe that once an identity is acquired it becomes immutable (Chandra, 2001). Regardless of its origin, religious identity is fixed in the long term and matters when one tries to understand the world around them. Mass literacy also plays a role in the hardening of an identity. Van Evera (2001) writes that “written identities also have a resilient quality that makes them almost impossible to stamp out” (pg. 20).

For many, this collective identity approach may describe the pre-modern world, but falls short in the modern context. For many in modern societies, individuals choose to join a community. Particularly in secular societies, religious identity is often a matter of choice. It is not determined by the clan, tribe, or even nation one is born into. This is the constructivist approach and it is the antithesis of primordialism. **Constructivist identity** posits that people have multiple identities and that as people change, so can either the importance of a particular identity, or the adoption of a new identity altogether.
And, given the transitory nature of people today through mass migration, there is a greater likelihood that one could acquire multiple religious identities in their lifetime. We see this with Protestant Christians in the United States, who go ‘church shopping’. This means they visit different congregations before settling down on one church that fits their needs.

**Religious Identity and Politics**

This discussion on primordialism v. constructivism can help us understand how religious identity plays a role in modern politics. When groups see their identity as primordial, as immutable, then they are less willing to compromise politically on issues that they believe violate their belief systems. For these individuals, compromise may be seen as anathema, or something that is vehemently disliked by the community. This reasoning has been used to explain why conflict may erupt between two or more religious groups. Mostly referring to ethnic identities, others argue that identity is treated as an exogenous variable, a variable that exists on its own and is not related to other variables. That identity can serve as a catalyst for violence, particularly if the group in question believes that their community cannot credibly defend itself against an external threat. However, this comparison of religious identity to ethnic identity is not a perfect one. Religious identity is more complex than ethnic identity. Ethnic identity because of primordialism, often assumes a binary sense. Either you are an American or not. Of course, constructivists would strongly disagree. Constructivists would contend that people can have multiple ethnic identities, particularly in a transnational setting, which is more common in a globalized world.

**Measuring Religious Identity**

When measuring religious identity, we can rely on what has been referred to as the four B's - believing, belonging, behaving, and bonding. These four dimensions of religion are important for understanding religion and politics as they influence how people may vote, view certain policies and support certain political parties. **Believing** is religious belief or believing in certain religious propositions. It involves the way people conceptualize their relationship with supernatural forces. Most religions are theistic, which involve belief in a god (monotheism) or gods (polytheism or henotheism), or some omnipresent force. Even among nontheistic traditions, such as Buddhism, adherents often profess a belief in a version of external transcendence, and that “there is some sort of spirit or life force” (Saroglou, 2011). **Belonging** is religious affiliation, or belonging to a religious faith, a religious tradition, or a denomination/sect within a particular religion. Denomination is a term associated with Christianity and often refers to a “religious community or (transhistorical) group with a common history and future” (Hoogendoorn, et. al., 2016). A denomination would include groups such as Catholics, Southern Baptists and Latter-Day Saints (Mormons). It does not include non-denominational Christians, which through their label indicates that they do not adhere to any denomination.

**Behaving** is religious commitment, or behaving according to values privileged by religion. It involves norms and defining what is right and what is wrong. People with high levels of religiosity often act on their religious convictions. It can also provide an individual with a sense of purpose. Religious values also shape the legal and judicial system of a country. This is true even in largely secular societies, as many of these countries were once religious. **Bonding** is religious ritual, or bonding by means of spiritual practices and rituals. These are the experiences that people go through, either individually, but more likely together as a community. It can include prayer, meditation, worship, religious ceremonies, and pilgrimages. The four dimensions of belonging, believing, bonding, and behaving represent what Hoogendoorn and Saroglou refer to as “the social, cognitive, emotional, and moral elements of religion, respectively” (Saroglou, 2011; Hoogendoorn, et. al., 2016)
Given this complexity, scholars in religion and politics prefer to use the term **religiosity** instead of religious identity. Macaluso and Wanat (1979) define religiosity as “the strength of a person’s attachment to organized religion”. The authors then attempt to try and measure religiosity, “as the frequency of attendance at the place of worship. Individuals who go to church or synagogue every week are high in religiosity, those who rarely go are low in religiosity” (pg. 160). Leege and Kellstedt (1993) contend that using church/synagogue/mosque attendance as the only measure of religiosity is too simple and may not accurately reflect the other ‘B’s explained above. Some religions and/or denominations emphasize individual devotion or noncollective traditions. This is more relevant as a higher number of Americans now identify as non-religious, but still spiritual. A recent Pew Research Center survey indicated that roughly three-in-ten Americans are religiously unaffiliated. Per the survey, these folks are referred to as religious ‘nones’, they are “people who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or ‘nothing in particular’ when asked about their religious identity” (Smith, 2021).

The authors also point to the interactions between the different dimensions in producing a stronger effect. Their discussion of how to measure these different dimensions (methods) has been important for the study of religion and politics. Using this framework then, religiosity can best be defined as ‘strength of person’s commitment to religion’.