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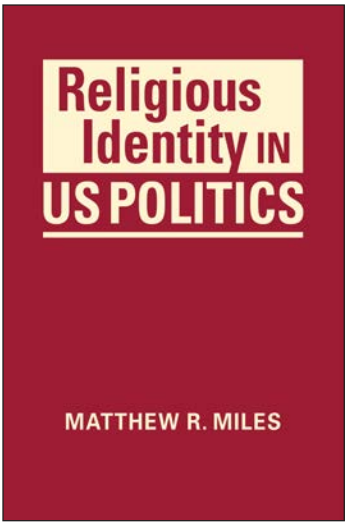
Religious Identity in US Politics



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1

The Role of Religious Identity in US Politics

By some accounts, it appears as if the United States is being pulled apart at the seams. Americans who might otherwise get along with each other are increasingly expressing hostility toward those who affiliate with an opposing political party. The alignment of religion with political identities seems to be causing Americans to distance themselves from each other even more—not just politically but socially.[1] Americans sorted into political camps not only disagree on the issues but are angry with those on the opposing side and would prefer that their children not intermarry. Tensions abound.

An alternative view is that scholars advocating this perspective and the media coverage highlighting it overstate the influence of religion on political and social polarization. The way religion is measured and conceptualized in the politics and religion literature makes it seem as if the division is larger, deeper, and more profound than it might really be. In addition, the treatment of religious social identities in the literature has led to several unresolved questions that a more complete understanding of it can begin to answer.

For example, the Pew Research Center reports that between 2007 and 2014, the percentage of Americans that identify as religiously unaffiliated increased by 6 points. Among those Americans with a low commitment to religion, 72 percent identify as religiously unaffiliated.[2] Why are Americans disaffiliating with organized religion? From a psychological social identity perspective, changes in the supply of religious denominations or one's values need not influence one's identification with a religion.[3] Other factors might have a stronger influence on the development or maintenance of group identifications.[4]

Some argue that political backlash against the Christian right is contributing to the rise of religious disaffiliation in the United States. The

reason both believing and nonbelieving Americans are much less likely to affiliate with an organized religion today than they were in previous decades can be found in two factors. First, Millennials are more individualistic and less trusting of religious, scientific, judicial, and political authorities. Second, progressives are less likely to affiliate with a religion. The unification of the religious right in US political life, combined with distrust of institutional authority among younger generations, causes people with progressive political leanings to become religious independents even when they retain their belief in God and a religiously moral worldview.[5] It might be time to reevaluate how the believing, belonging, and behaving paradigm should be adapted to the study of politics and religion in the United States. How do people connect religion with politics if they increasingly worship outside of traditional congregations and do not affiliate with religious groups that conform to the dominant model?

In addition, many categorize religious groups into broader coalitions. Some evidence suggests that religious groups espousing a more liberal theology are more likely to cooperate with each other politically than are religious groups that have a more conservative theological perspective.[6] Indeed, those who identify with Protestant denominations group themselves into broader (white evangelical, black, white mainline, etc.) denominational families.[7] Do members of non-Christian faiths do the same? Does political cooperation among religious groups cause people who identify with these religions to feel an affinity toward each other, despite considerable theological divergence? Do American Hindus have a more positive affect toward atheists who share a partisan group identification than they have toward Christian political opponents, despite a shared belief in a higher power?

A related question concerns the role of religion in the rise of self-identified political independents in the United States. Samara Klar and Yanna Krupnikov argue that Americans are leaving political parties because the labels associated with the dominant parties in the United States embarrass them.[8] Another possibility is that, as the two major political parties exploit religious divisions to build electoral coalitions, religious Americans choose not to identify with a political party that advocates political positions incongruent with their religious values. Geoffrey Layman and Christopher Weaver document the change in religious affiliation among delegates to the Democratic and Republican National Conventions from 1980 to 2012. In 1980, 40 percent of the delegates to the Republican convention were mainline Protestants; by 2012, only 18 percent of the delegates were mainline Protestant. The dominant religious affiliation at both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions in 2012 was "none"; 30 percent of the delegates to both conventions did not affiliate with any religion.[9] Have major US political parties pushed out religious Americans?

We know a lot about how religion influences politics, but we know much less about how politics influences religion. People who attend church regularly are more likely to adopt political views consistent with those of the clergy because when people are in church they receive cues about political issues from both clergy and congregants.[10] The message delivered from the pulpit and contact with others in the church help congregants connect their religious values with political attitudes.[11] Religious identity can also have an independent influence on political attitudes. People might not fully understand all of the nuances of political issues, but they can easily distinguish between people who politically side with or against them.[12] When members of people's religions support a political position and members of other religions take the competing position, people rely on social group heuristics to develop their own views.[13] To date, the religion and politics literature treats this phenomenon in a unidirectional manner. Yet, social identities are two-way streets: If religious identities influence political attitudes, do political identities influence religious attitudes?

Either way, one must ask: Is religion good for society? Robert Putnam and David Campbell report several positive associations between religious belief, behavior, and political participation. People active in church communities are more generous, more likely to volunteer in their community, and more politically involved.[14] However, these authors also note a growing political divide between those who believe in God and those who do not: the God gap in US society. James Gibson argues that religious beliefs are the primary cause of anti-atheist political intolerance.[15] From this perspective, political and social divisions are rooted in differing religious beliefs. What is the source of religious political intolerance: beliefs, values, or identities? The answer to this question is important. If anti-atheist attitudes are caused by diverging beliefs or values, it is unlikely that the God gap will be bridged in a single generation; however, if something else is causing this divide, it might be more easily overcome.

In this book, I aim for greater conceptual clarity regarding what it means to identify with a religious group. Religious social identification is more than group membership or affiliation; when someone identifies with a religious group, it becomes an extension of the self. Greater clarity on this concept helps explain why people identify with religious groups even when society has a negative view of them. Although this book does not provide a complete answer to the questions posed, it addresses each of them and provides a framework that can be used in future scholarship on these questions.

Although it is possible that religious beliefs, behaviors, or social networks are the foundation of the religious divide in the United States today, social identity theory suggests that the strength of the group identification matters more than the beliefs that underlie that identification. Beliefs might motivate stronger attachment to a religious group, but they

are not necessary for religious social identifications to persist. As I will demonstrate, many people retain a sense of religious identification even when they no longer believe the teachings of the religious group. In addition, group identifications are more malleable than beliefs and values. To the extent that divisions in US society are motivated by religious group identification, the path to greater unity might be simpler than if it required people to change their values and beliefs.

Before I explain why this is so, it is important to understand a bit about how people juggle the multiple identities that become extensions of how they view themselves. If thinking about religions in terms of social identity is a chair, the first leg of that chair is that social identities are context dependent. People who no longer believe, belong, or behave consistently with a religion can retain an identity with that religion that becomes salient depending on the context. Much of the empirical evidence for partisan and religious division in US society is based on survey data. This limits inference beyond a single point in time in which the survey is being conducted. As such, a survey measures only the influence of identities that are salient while the survey is being conducted. Furthermore, it is erroneous to conclude that attitudes expressed in a survey (even strong attitudes) last moments beyond the time in which they are registered in a survey. When the context changes, new identities become salient, and we should expect them to have their own independent influence on attitudes and behaviors. The following vignettes illustrate how context changes the relevance of various social identities.

Paul

Paul is a gay man living in urban Washington, DC, with his husband of many years.[16] They wed before *Obergefell v. Hodges* required each state to permit same-sex marriages. Their neighborhood is diverse. Some of their neighbors own condominiums worth millions of dollars, whereas others receive government housing benefits. Although Paul travels across the globe for work, he is a patriotic American and faithfully votes in virtually every election. Paul is also complex. Like most people, he does not have uniform political views.[17] His sexual identity informs his political views, but he is a different person today than when younger. Paul was born a seventh-generation member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) in Texas. Paul began elementary school in a small town in rural Ohio, where he spent the remainder of his childhood until he graduated from high school. At nineteen, he went on mission for two years in Ukraine, converting people to the faith of his youth. When he returned to the United States, his parents were again living in rural, conservative Texas. His parents raised him with very conservative religious and political views, and he spent his young adult

years choosing among Republican candidates in Texas elections. When Paul moved to Washington, DC, many years later, he realized that the real elections took place within the Democratic primary, so he decided to register as a Democrat for the first time in his life. He told me that registering as a Democrat was not easy because of his upbringing.

Paul spent eight years in England attending graduate school and preparing for his career. His work as a writer for a prominent magazine, author of several books, and a television personality has led him to 120 different countries and almost every corner of the United States. Regarding these experiences, Paul noticed that although he is the same person in every new situation, the circumstances specific to each situation tend to change the way he presents himself and how others view him. For example, when he is in Japan and Africa, this tall white man cannot hide that he is a foreigner. The biological distinction between him and the local population makes it difficult to conceal his national identity. This motivates him to represent his country well. In this context, Paul reports feeling a strong US national identity. By contrast, when Paul is in northern European countries, he finds that his biological similarity to the local population makes it easier for him to mask his national identity. When he is with Europeans who dislike some aspect of the United States, his national pride motivates him to acknowledge that he is American, but the circumstances incline him to remind his hosts how dissimilar he is to the stereotypical American.

For Paul, social situations in the United States cause his other identities to become salient. Because most people in the United States share his national identity, Paul's other group identifications take on greater meaning. Religiously, Paul is no longer a practicing member of the LDS Church, and he does not regularly attend worship services, but he strongly identifies with that church; it is an integral part of his culture, upbringing, and worldview. Although he might be openly critical of LDS Church teachings and the behavior of its leaders, he gets upset when outsiders attack his church.

Paul identifies as a gay man and supports policies that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation. This often places him at odds with the LDS Church. When he was younger, Paul was encouraged to attend workshops to help him overcome his same-gender attraction. To this day, Paul is personally offended that the LDS Church uses the word *homosexuality* as an adjective rather than as a noun. Paul is gay, but the LDS Church describes him as someone who "has same sex attraction."[18] In addition, the LDS Church has openly opposed same-sex marriage and encouraged some of its members to become politically involved in supporting legislation banning the practice. In 2013, more than 80 percent of American lesbians and gays reported that they feel like the LDS Church is "anti-gay."[19] This creates tension between two important components of Paul's identity. Yet others find comfort in both their LDS and gay identities, suggesting that the

two do not perpetually conflict. Most social situations do not create conflict between Paul's LDS and gay identities. In fact, some situations reinforce the two. The first time he saw members of the LDS Church marching in support of a gay pride parade, Paul cried because he felt unity between these two identities for the first time in his life.

The conflict between Paul's LDS and gay identities is not substantially different from that of his geographical identities. As a Midwesterner, Paul gets upset when people who live on the coasts refer to his hometown as "fly-over country." He has a strong affinity for the authenticity, work ethic, and honesty of people who live in the Midwest. He tries to reflect these traits when he associates with his friends from major metropolitan areas. Likewise, he recognizes that his time abroad has changed him relative to his peers who remained in the Midwest. His travels through small midwestern towns heighten his awareness of how different he is from those who live there. Yet, Paul places greater value on some of his identities than others. He might choose to put on the midwestern conservative hat when he is defending his family from the attacks of his urban liberal friends, but he feels a greater affinity toward his current identity than he does to some of those from his youth. There might be cause for him to defend the LDS Church, but if a situation made it impossible for him to retain both his LDS and gay identities, Paul would not be able to abandon his gay identity; it is too strong a part of how he sees himself.

Paul is not an anomaly. All people have a different combination of identities that define how they see themselves, but these identities can create either congruence or conflict in different social settings.

Martin

Martin was raised as a nonbeliever in a small rural community of devout Lutherans and Catholics in Oregon. It was sometimes hard for him to go to school as a young man because most people there were religious and he felt left out of that religious community. Martin immersed himself in a group of likeminded nonbelievers who shared common philosophical, political, and musical interests. At that time, Martin did not feel close to Christians living in his community, and he attributed differences in attitudes on political issues to the Christians' ignorance or intolerance. Not long ago, Martin converted to a new faith.

For three years after he was baptized in the LDS Church, Martin resisted becoming deeply involved in the LDS community. He wanted to figure out the answers to his questions on his own, without too much interference from people active in the LDS Church he attended. Then he decided it was time to figure out if he really wanted to be a Mormon. He decided to move to another state and transfer to the LDS-sponsored uni-

versity. In part, because he has had faith-promoting experiences and because he is now in a community where his religion is the societal in-group, he now says that he has a strong LDS religious identity. In fact, his LDS religious identity is currently at its peak, and although he was once a nonbeliever, he currently has strong negative attitudes about nonbelievers in the United States.

Susie

Susie was raised Lutheran. While she was growing up, religion was an integral part of her life. The foods she eats, how she relates to others, her culture, and her family traditions are all tied into her Lutheran identity. Being Lutheran is in her blood. However, Susie no longer attends the Lutheran Church. She started incorporating Reiki into her worldview before she ever left the Lutheran Church, but she did not begin openly practicing Reiki until a couple of years ago. Today, Susie regularly attends seminars and Reiki groups in which members discuss their experiences with Reiki. Susie considers herself spiritual but not religious, and she is active in her Reiki community. She says that today she does nothing to hide her nonreligious beliefs from others. When her only sister died suddenly several years ago, Susie realized that the number of people from her youth that are still alive is rapidly shrinking, which gave her the impetus to begin being completely open about who she is and what she believes. Here is how she describes her current religious identity: "I mean, it's like, I'm sixty years old now, and I have that I'm Reiki on my Facebook profile, and if people want to out me I'll be very happy to tell them: no, I don't believe in organized religion, and I think it's a bunch of nonsense made up by man to keep people in line, and no, I'm not going. Enjoy your church, but I won't be there."

Cody

Cody (a Democrat) was raised in rural Oklahoma. Dreaming of becoming a world traveler and author, he left his home and attended college in New Orleans and Canada. Eventually, he returned to Oklahoma to attend graduate school and met a girl from Split, Croatia. In time, they fell in love and married. When I first met Cody, he was in Kansas with his Croatian wife, learning advanced Croatian. He often told stories about teaching English in Turkey and visiting his in-laws in Croatia. After completing his studies, Cody moved with his family to Croatia and currently writes and teaches at the University of Zagreb.[20] Cody identifies as a Midwesterner, an American, an expatriate, an intellectual, an author, and at times, a Croat. Social circumstances largely determine how strongly each of these identities are manifest and Cody's response when one of these identities is threatened.

Julie

Julie (a Democrat) grew up in a small rural community in Minnesota. Her parents are lifelong Republicans. They are Protestant, evangelical Christians. She studied as an undergraduate at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, and later earned a master's degree in theological studies from there. She continued her studies in the Midwest and eventually earned a doctorate degree. Today, she is an evangelical Protestant Christian, currently attending the Nazarene Church, and pushes her evangelical friends to "work" and "think harder" when it comes to politics.

Like those described in these vignettes, everyone has multiple social groups with which he or she identifies. Some people's identities change depending on life circumstances, whereas others do not. Some people have experienced rather large shifts in their identities, whereas others' identities have not changed much. Context can largely determine both the salience of an identity and how strongly that identity influences individual responses.

Religious Social Identity

As these examples demonstrate, religious identity is an important component of how people see themselves and others. In addition, religious identities influence people's social interactions with others, how they perceive others, and their attitudes. To date, the literature on religion and politics has not ignored the importance of religious identity, but considerable conceptual confusion remains, which I hope to clarify in this book. For example, it is now common to hear about how tribalism in US politics leads to biased thinking.[21] From this perspective, much of the animosity between partisan Americans is rooted in tribal instincts that pit one group against another in the competition for scarce resources.[22]

I contend, however, that clear conceptual understanding of the mechanism motivating attitudes and behaviors is a necessary precondition to appropriately diagnosing the problems and developing recommended solutions. Much of what Amy Chua describes as antecedents to tribal instincts are actually consistent with predictions social psychologists have been making for at least sixty-five years. Since the "Robber's Cave" studies were published in the 1950s, we have known that when groups compete for scarce resources, it creates strong antipathy toward those who identify with the other group and more positive attitudes about those who belong to the same group.[23] These studies also found that when members of competing groups are forced to interact with and cooperate with those from the other group, much of the hostility dissipates.

Similarly, scholars of religion and politics have long noted the importance of religious affiliation in shaping political attitudes, but too often they conflate affiliation with religious identity. Until recently, the influence of

religious social identity on political beliefs and behaviors has been subsumed within the believing, belonging, and behaving paradigm. On the one hand, religious social identity has elements in common with each of these three Bs. As the preceding vignettes demonstrate, belief is often a precondition of developing a religious identity. Belonging to a religious community and following the prescribed code of conduct often strengthen people's religious identity. On the other hand, religious social identity is conceptually distinct from each of the three Bs. People retain strong identification with religious groups long after they stop believing in or living in accordance with the teachings of a given faith. In certain contexts, religious identity can still influence the attitudes of individuals who no longer believe, belong, or behave. Think of Susie as an example. Lutheranism is still an important part of who she is, and when she is placed in a context that makes that identity salient, it influences her attitudes.

Furthermore, appropriately conceptualizing religious identity is important for understanding the best prescriptions for resolving conflict in society. If the religious divide in the United States is rooted in beliefs, tribal instincts, or intolerant dispositions, bridging the divide seems an arduous task.[24] It is difficult to change strongly held beliefs. However, if the divide is rooted in social identities, it might be much easier to bridge the gap between religious and nonreligious Americans. After all, hundreds of studies demonstrate that increased contact between members of opposing social groups can reduce prejudice relatively quickly.[25] If so, the God gap might be bridged simply through increased contact between religious and nonreligious Americans. One of the best ways to reduce societal conflict and prejudice is to break down the psychological barriers social identities construct.[26]

Outline of the Book

In this book I argue that religious social identity is an important consideration in future scholarship on religion and politics. Appropriate conceptualization and measurement of religious social identity—distinct from affiliation—clarifies another aspect of religion's influence on the human experience. I develop and test hypotheses and report findings consistent with this argument. In Chapter 3 I affirm that religious identity has a party-independent influence on public attitudes about elected officials. People who share a religious identity with their elected officials are more likely to approve of them even if they have an opposing partisan identification. In Chapter 4 I discuss political trust in the United States. Although some worry that polarization is causing Americans to lose trust in their political leaders and institutions, in this chapter I demonstrate that shared religious identity motivated greater trust in President Barack Obama. The relationship between religious identity and trust in Obama was stronger than gender and as strong as race.

In this book, I separate religious social identification from other relevant, salient, social identities in US politics. This is not a small feat. As religious groups have aligned themselves with the two major political parties in the United States, it has become difficult for scholars to distinguish partisan effects from religious effects.[27] Jonathan Haidt describes religion as a moral exoskeleton. People who live in religious communities are enmeshed in a set of norms, relationships, and institutions that create "intuitions" that motivate subsequent reasoning and behavior.[28] People attribute intangible traits and qualities to those who profess belief in God. Religion evolved to facilitate cooperation in large groups because it deterred free-loading by informing group members that an omniscient overseer was monitoring and punishing poor behavior within the group.[29] When people believe that a punitive and moralistic god knows their thoughts and behaviors, they are more likely to behave according to the norms and traditions of the social group. In fact, even when members of the group are not in close physical proximity to each other, their shared belief in the same deity motivates people to behave impartially toward each other.[30] People are more likely to trust those who share religious beliefs because affiliation with a religion confers intangible qualities upon the adherents that are absent in nonbelievers.[31] This might be why religious people distrust atheists: people who do not profess a belief in a higher power are assumed to operate outside of this evolved system of cooperation.[32]

I think antipathy toward atheists is much simpler. Again, using partisan social identity as an analogy, I argue that what appears to be strong antipathy toward atheists is really the influence of religious social identity. Partisan antipathy motivates strong negative attitudes toward members of the opposing political party among strong partisans. People with strong partisan identities are much less likely to trust opposing partisans or think they might be qualified for a job. They are also more likely to be upset if their child were to marry an opposing partisan.[33] In Chapter 5 I demonstrate that much of what the extant literature calls religious hostility is really identity-based antipathy rooted in the makeup of current party coalitions. As the coalitions aligned with the major parties in the United States change, so will the perceived differences between evangelical Christians and atheists.

Overall, I provide clear evidence that some religious intolerance toward atheists is rooted in political competition. Isolating the influence of partisan and religious identities allows me to demonstrate that as religious and nonreligious people in the United States have aligned themselves with opposing political parties, attitudes about members of groups who affiliate with these two political parties have polarized. Party competition causes members of opposing parties to be less trusting of cross-party members and even to feel antipathy toward opposing group members. When religious groups become involved in political competition, some of that antipartisan antipathy spills

over into attitudes about religion, but it is not the only source of aversion between religious groups.[34] Individuals with strong religious but weak partisan identities are influenced more strongly by religious identities than they are by partisan identities.

In Chapter 5 I move the dialogue further by isolating religious identity from partisan identities to measure the extent to which anti-atheist bias is motivated by religious rather than partisan identities. I find that anti-atheist attitudes are motivated both by partisan identities *and* by religious identities. People with a strong religious identity demonstrate out-group antipathy toward atheists that is stronger than and separate from partisan out-group antipathy. This offers a competing explanation for the religious divide in the United States. The distinction is important. If religious Americans distrust atheists because they think nonbelievers are untrustworthy and have therefore developed intuitional caution against atheists, it could take years to bridge the divide between religious and nonreligious Americans and might not occur in a single generation. If, however, the religious divide is motivated by religious identity, the divide can be bridged more quickly through increased contact between believers and nonbelievers. Increased contact often overcomes divisions caused by competing social groups.[35] In Chapter 6 I present additional compelling evidence that the strength of religious social identity is the primary factor influencing the way religious people interact with atheists in the United States.

One of the major themes of this book is that partisan affiliations can threaten religious social identities. In Chapter 7 I demonstrate that when people with strong partisan and religious identification are informed that members of their political party have negative attitudes about people who affiliate with their religion, those with strong religious but weaker partisan identities will disidentify with their political party. In contrast, those with weak religious but strong partisan identities become stronger partisans. Consistent with theoretical expectations, the strength of one identity relative to the other determines the response.

Finally, in this book I present the first evidence of partisan identities influencing attitudes about specific religious doctrines. Identity really is a two-way street. People with strong partisan identities are more likely to think their religions should change their teachings to better align with the dominant view of fellow partisans. In Chapter 8 I look at a specific case study within the LDS Church. It is no secret that in 2008, the LDS Church took a public stance opposing same-sex marriage in California. This created dissonance for LDS Democrats who favored same-sex marriage as a political issue but also had a strong LDS religious identity. This case study demonstrates that one way members of that church resolved this attitudinal dissonance was to express a more lenient position on LDS theology. Scholars have long noted that religion influences politics, but in this chapter I

present evidence of political identities influencing religious attitudes. The causal arrow logically moves in both directions. If religious identities can influence political attitudes, political identities ought to be able to influence religious attitudes. Recent scholarship notes how political identities can influence religious behaviors; in this book I present the first evidence of political identities influencing religious beliefs.[36]

I assess the evidence supporting these arguments using several surveys of the US population collected from June 2013 to June 2016. I also include data from a two-wave, representative survey comprising a unique sample of active, less active, and former members of the LDS Church residing in Arizona, Idaho, and Utah and the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey.[37] After further developing and testing hypotheses based on these general expectations, I offer some concluding thoughts in the final chapter.

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37. The complete details of these surveys, including recruitment and demographic information, are in Appendix 1.