Introduction: A holy hand grenade?

In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail, King* Arthur and his knights meet a foe against which their martial prowess fails.[1] Instead of reaching for their swords, they turn instead to the "holy hand grenade of Antioch." After receiving instructions in its use from their cleric, King Arthur launches the holy hand grenade, defeating the enemy.

Many leaders and scholars believe religion will function similarly to this holy hand grenade in international power politics. States appeal to religious values or shared religiosity to build friendly coalitions or break apart rival ones. At the same time, observers of 21st century international relations argue that religion is replacing earlier belief systems and shaking the international system; states would thus be wise, they argue, to incorporate these religious appeals into their foreign policy toolkits.

Many others, however, find such a possibility as farcical as the Monty Python sketch. Those responsible for security policy, especially in the United States, tend to downplay and underfund religious initiatives. At the same time, security studies scholars still base their works on rationalist and materialist assumptions that leave little room for religious influences. Both policy and scholarly discussions of international security tend to view religion as a social force or an element of international cultural interactions, but see its relevance to areas such as international coalition building as limited.

As I explain in this book, the truth is somewhere in between. Many states appeal to religion to justify their policies when engaging in international power politics. That is, they justify attempts to build international coalitions by pointing to religion, or criticize and attempt to break apart rivals through similar religious references. This takes a variety of forms, including the rhetoric accompanying foreign policies, the specific targets of these rhetorical appeals, and

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the nature and definition of coalition-building initiatives. The religious elements of power politics range from formal religious arguments—referencing texts and tradition—to general appeals to the importance of faith.

These religious appeals have an unpredictable impact on power politics. They are not "cheap talk" or a window dressing for state interests. They reflect the significance of religion in a state's domestic politics as well as the nature of the international crisis. Additionally, under certain conditions the religious appeals do succeed in strengthening international coalitions or undermining opposing coalitions. That is, they matter. But too often they matter like the aforementioned holy hand grenade tossed into a crowded room.[2] States scramble to figure out what a religious appeal means, tensions rise, and—if the wielder is not careful—the religious appeals can be turned back against them. This answer may not be satisfying to either side in the above debate, but it allows us to make sense of this issue and the broader implications of religion's growing role in the international system.

<A> What this book is about

Before I proceed with my argument, I should first define what I am exploring in this book. I use Riesebrodt's approach to *religion* as "a system of practices, related to superhuman powers, that seeks to ward off misfortune, provide blessing and obtain salvation."[3] While personal religious beliefs and religious texts are important, when we discuss the impact of religion on politics—domestic or international—the way these beliefs and doctrines are put into practice is often more significant. Moreover, I focus not on the religion itself but *religious appeals:* references to religious standards and symbols by states in official pronouncements or debates they use to justify policies or critique rivals. My emphasis will thus be on the fact that a state appeals to religion more than the content of the religious argument itself.

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I follow Goddard and Nexon to define power politics as "politics based on the use of power to influence the actions and decisions of actors."[4] Specifically, they argue power politics involves attempts to organize or undermine international collective action. I discuss this in terms of building or breaking apart international coalitions intended to advance a state's interest in an international crisis. They discuss a variety of "instruments of power" states can use to do this, including conventional military and economic instruments as well as cultural and symbolic instruments of power. I argue religious appeals are one example of a cultural-symbolic instrument of power states can use to organize international action.

<A> Why do states keep turning to religious appeals? And when do they matter?

This book addresses both an empirical and a theoretical puzzle. Empirically, why do we keep seeing states use—or advocate for—religious appeals when attempting to form or break apart international coalitions during crises? Does this represent cheap talk, a principled religious stand, or something else? On the theoretical side, we have found evidence that religion is a useful political tool domestically, influences conflict, and can be a tool for states outside high-stakes security areas. Can religion serve as a tool in something like power politics?

The first part of the puzzle involves explaining the numerous cases of policymakers advocating for or actually using religious appeals in order to integrate or fragment international coalitions. Former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright focused her 2006 memoir on the crucial but under-appreciated role of religion in foreign policy. The veteran diplomat agreed with realists that "the main purpose of foreign policy is to persuade other countries to do what we want" but argued "at a time when religious passions are embroiling the globe, that cannot be done without taking religious tenets and motivations fully into account."[5] As she explained later

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in the book, "the challenge for policy-makers is to harness the unifying potential of faith, while containing its capacity to divide."[6] Unlike many who consign religion to the fringes of international relations or "feel good" stories of cultural exchanges, Albright argued that religion is an essential element of states' foreign policy that leaders must take into account.

US elites across the political spectrum shared this sentiment, often with concrete policies enacted in response. Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush met with Jordan's King Abdullah, whom he was hoping to secure as an ally in the Global War on Terrorism. Bush told Abdullah "our war is against evil, not against Islam," and noted the "thousands of Muslims who proudly call themselves Americans."[7] Senator Joseph Lieberman echoed this, writing on the "theological iron curtain" and called on America to engage with and promote the "extensive traditions of tolerant and moderate Islam" to defeat al-Qaeda.[8] During the Cold War, President Eisenhower turned to famous evangelical preacher Billy Graham as "America's pastor," a role that included a foreign policy element when Graham led a series of revivals in West Germany that mixed piety with anti-Communist messages.[9]

This occurred during the Obama and Trump administrations as well. In a 2015 column in the Jesuit magazine *America*, John Kerry—then President Obama's Secretary of State—wrote that one of the biggest challenges "in global diplomacy today is the need to fully understand and engage the great impact that a wide range of religious traditions have on foreign affairs;" he also noted religion's importance in areas ranging from economic development to counterterrorism.[10] Under his direction, the State Department established the Office of Religion and Global Affairs, which increased religious awareness within the State Department and helped build international coalitions related to religious concerns. Likewise, a few years later, Mike Pence—Vice President during the Trump Administration—pointed to the need to

defeat the Islamic State terrorist group and the spread of religious repression; Pence claimed "protecting religious freedom is a foreign-policy priority of the Trump administration."[11] This partially took the form of international coalitions among states and activists to promote international religious freedom.

This is not just a US phenomenon. In a December 2015 op-ed, Yousef al-Otaiba—the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) ambassador to the United States—argued that the UAE has "a new vision for the region" that promoted an "ideology of optimism, openness and opportunity."[12] The UAE was trying to limit the threat it faced from the Arab Spring and undermine Qatar's growing prominence and clearly hoped to gain the upper hand through appeals to Islam. In the 1990s, Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein began comparing himself to Saladin, the famous medieval Muslim warrior who fought the Crusaders.[13] Hussein even had a state newspaper call on Arabs to "learn the lesson of Saladin's liberation of Jerusalem" and battle America and Israel in support of Iraq.[14] Outside of Muslim countries, China has been sponsoring "Confucius Institutes" around the world, using religion to expand its appeal despite the government's official atheism. And under Putin, Russia has been appealing to conservative Christian values to enhance its influence in the world.

What do we make of this? It is difficult to argue that something so common and widespread is irrelevant. Policymakers would not spend so much time on these religious appeals if they thought they did not matter. Yet, we lack hard evidence that these religious appeals are a key element of states' security policies, rather than "cheap talk" that reflects little real effort or resources. We also lack evidence that they have an impact on international coalition building or fracturing. Religious appeals do seem to resonate with target leaders and audiences, but they rarely have a transformative impact on international issues. Those who believe religion is

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important need to better understand what impact these appeals have, if any. Skeptics of religion's importance need to explain their frequency.

This also presents a puzzle for the academic study of religion and international relations. This research program has demonstrated religion's huge impact on the world. Early studies pushed back against the secular biases of international relations and social sciences.[15] Modernization has not erased religion from society, even in the supposedly secularized West.[16] Moreover, this is not just a sociological or domestic political phenomenon. Many states' foreign policies are influenced by religion, either through domestic political pressure from powerful interest groups or the beliefs and perceptions of leaders.[17]

This research cannot explain whether religious appeals matter in international power politics. If religious appeals reflect deep social values, why do states sometimes act contrary to them or formulate many foreign policies that are not religious in nature? Moreover, even the most die-hard realist would admit that states sometimes act based on values like religion. What really matters is whether they stick with these values in high-stakes security situations—such as gaining allies during an international crisis—and whether policies based on these values have any impact.

Other work has found that religion can influence states' foreign policy. Numerous studies have demonstrated the way that religious organizations have worked together to resolve conflicts and advance faith-based policies in international forums.[18] Others have demonstrated that religious beliefs can inspire states to adopt substantive policies in areas such as humanitarianism.[19] Still other work, such as my own, has found that religion increases the severity of conflicts.[20]

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This research, however, is also unable to explain the nature and impact of religious appeals in power politics. Much of the work on religion's impact on international relations focuses on areas outside of conventional security issues. Indeed, some of it has framed the research as a way to "move beyond power politics" and broaden definitions of what matters in international relations.[21] This is admirable, and necessary, but can do little to explain states' religious appeals in security areas, or address broader issues in security studies that I raise in the next section. At the same time, most research on religion and conflict focuses on terrorism and civil wars, which—while important—do not tell us much about the impact of religion on power politics. Religion could very well influence non-state groups, while conventional statecraft and material concerns override religion in interstate crises. Finally, some of the research that has found religion affects interstate conflict identifies its impact *on* states, rather than as a tool *of* states. That is, it looks at whether policymakers are influenced by religious beliefs or whether states face domestic religious opposition to policies. This again is important but tells us little about whether states can use religion as a tool in power politics.

That is not to say there is no relevant research, but it has not yet been synthesized to produce a generalizable theory. As I will discuss in the next chapter, some studies in international relations have found cases of states using religion as a tool in conflicts. Comparative politics has demonstrated the way states can use religion to try and control domestic dissent. And broader work in international relations has looked at the way rhetoric and symbols are a useful tool for states to gain an edge in international tensions. In this book, I draw on each of these areas to produce my theory on religious appeals in power politics.

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<A> When and why religious appeals matter in power politics

In this book, I answer the above questions. First, religious appeals are one among many foreign policy tools states rely on when forming or breaking apart international coalitions. As Goddard argued, states' attempts to legitimize their policies are both strategic and "rule-oriented."[22] This includes religious appeals. That is, they arise from the values and beliefs that constrain and enable domestic and international political behavior. But they do not represent a principled stand by states on behalf of their religious beliefs. They also do not represent a triumph of religious motivations over material interests. States can use religious appeals to advance material interests and deploy them alongside conventional foreign policy tools like military threats and economic inducements.

Religious appeals matter because of the importance of religion in the world. Religion remains a significant—and possibly growing—part of many society's identities and values. Appeals to such significant values will resonate with people, affecting their behavior and granting influence to those deploying the appeals. The religious appeal may even persuade a leader of the rightness and utility of the policies an international coalition is meant to advance. It may also gain the attention and support of domestic publics, placing pressure on their states to join the coalition.

Yet, religion is a complex force; this can lead to several unintended effects. First, religious rhetoric and symbols often mean different things to different people. As a result, the targets of religious appeals can adopt the religious arguments for their own purposes, even turning them back against the state deploying it. Additionally, religion raises the stakes of political debates, making it harder to reach a compromise or back down from aggressive stances. This can increase the tensions surrounding an international crisis, possibly provoking a reaction from rivals of the nascent coalition. Finally, religious arguments sit uncomfortably alongside

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conventional secular statecraft. As a result, many policymakers struggle to understand the nature and impact of religious appeals, increasing uncertainty in crises and possibly resulting in wasted resources.

States are likely to use religious appeals in power politics under two conditions. The first involves the moral authority of religion in a country, or the extent to which religious actors and arguments attain a prominent place in political struggles.[23] States with a high moral authority of religion are likely to see religious appeals as an important and useful tool to both advance their goals. Second, when states face an ideologically-charged international crisis, it is not only their security but identity and values that are under threat. As a result, they are more likely to incorporate ideological appeals into international struggles. When both conditions are present, a state is likely to use religious appeals when forming international coalitions.

Religious appeals have an impact on power politics according to their wielder's credibility and the material incentives surrounding their use. Religious appeals must be credible in the eyes of their targets to have an impact; this is a function of both the credibility of the state deploying the religious appeal and the religious arguments' cultural fit with their targets. Additionally, states that have material incentives to cooperate with the international coalition are more likely to respond positively to the religious appeal; states facing material costs from joining will be hesitant to do so. Religious appeals are likely to have their biggest impact when both are present, while they will have little influence under opposition conditions. Even intermediate combinations matter, however. When a state's religious appeals are credible but the targets face material disincentives to cooperate, the unintended effects of religion cause a general increase in international tensions and hostility. Finally, when a state is less than credible on religious issues, but targets face material incentives to go along with its efforts, we are likely to see convenient

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international coalitions form, with uncertainty about how best to apply religious policies and the potential for the religious legitimation to be redirected by its targets.

I test this theory with a qualitative research design. I demonstrate the conditions under which states turn to religious appeals, the nature of these appeals, and their impact on power politics through a series of case studies. I use a combination of typical and diverse case selection to highlight the presence of religious appeals in varying international contexts, as well as within-case variation to demonstrate the impact of different values in the conditions I theorize to matter. Finally, I use a mixture of archival, interview and media data to demonstrate the validity of my theory and the limits of alternatives.

<A> Why this matters: Between triumphalism and ignorance

By addressing the gap in our understanding of why states turn to religious appeals in power politics and whether and when this matters, this book can help overcome a frustrating dichotomy in scholarly and policy discussions of religion and international relations. Rather than having to decide between religious appeals transforming or being irrelevant in international security, we can generate nuanced analyses of their various effects. This can revitalize the study of religion and international relations, while also expanding work on rhetoric and values in international relations. Finally, it can contribute to policymakers' efforts to incorporate religion into foreign policy or counter other states' use of it.

Current debates involve a broad gap between what I call religion triumphalists and religion skeptics. Religion triumphalists see religion as a broadly transformative—and often beneficial—force in international relations. This is apparent among those have argued that supporting religious freedom will enhance US security.[24] We can also find it in some scholarly arguments that religion is transforming international relations, possibly for the better.[25] Religion

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skeptics, by contrast, see religion as having minimal effects. More often, they fail to even consider religion's potential impact; numerous scholar and policy studies that pretend as if religion does not matter. By providing an explanation for states' use of religious appeals that recognizes both their importance and their strategic and unpredictable nature gives a middle course between these extremes.

This is valuable for several reasons. First, this can improve our ability to understand crucial international security issues. We can analyze Russia's appeals to traditional values just as we would its use of hacking or threats to shut off gas supplies; it is one among many power political tools the state deploys. Using this book as a guide, we can produce fine-grained analyses of these religious appeals and their impacts. Likewise, we need to understand whether Islamic appeals by states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE are effective in gaining support from other Muslim states and enhancing their power. This book can help us point to the conditions under which their efforts are likely to succeed. From the US perspective, are appeals to "moderate Islam" and religious engagement initiatives effective in countering terrorism? This book can provide a framework for how to best form international coalitions through these efforts, and connect counterterrorism studies to broader security debates.

Second, this book can revitalize the research program on religion and international relations. The research program on religion and international relations has demonstrated religion's importance and found significant religious impacts on unconventional security issues ranging from peacebuilding to terrorism. The program has had less success forcing "conventional" security discussions to include religion. Several scholars responded to 9/11 by pointing international relations' blind spot on religion.[26] Major names in international relations embraced the significance of religion, producing edited volumes with prominent publishers.[27]

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Yet, religion never became a mainstream topic in international relations, while the above efforts never produced the sort of sustained engagement seen in research into areas like the democratic peace or humanitarian interventions. Providing detailed evidence that states not only use religious appeals as a tool in power politics, but that these religious appeals have a noticeable impact, will make it harder for mainstream security studies to ignore religion. Likewise, the novel approach I take in this book can provide guidelines to move research on religion and international relations forward.

Additionally, this book can complement the research on rhetoric, values and symbols in international relations from which I develop my theory. This broad research program tends to ignore religion. Applying their research to the study of religion and international relations can demonstrate the need to better incorporate religion into their work and expand the impact of their theories. Moreover, it can suggest new avenues of research, by pointing to the significant unintended effects from values and rhetoric these studies often ignore.

Finally, the book contributes to policy discussions. Calls and efforts to incorporate religion into the foreign policy of the United States and other states, as well as the work of organizations like the United Nations, continue. There has been some progress in this area. Think tanks and foundations like the Council on Foreign Relations, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, the Pew Research Center, the Center for American Progress and the Mellon Foundation run programs on religion or reports on religion. New initiatives and outlets have emerged to discuss and advocate for religion's role in foreign policy. These include journals such as the *Review of Faith and International Affairs* and *Providence: A Journal of Christianity and American foreign policy*. They also include think thanks and advocacy groups, such as the Institute for Global Engagement, the Religious Freedom Initiative, the International Center for

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Religion and Diplomacy, and the Cambridge Institute for Religion and Global Affairs, and Georgetown University's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs. Indeed, I have been involved in several of these efforts, writing reports for the Center for American Progress and the Berkley Center, and working with the Pew Research Center.[28]

The problem, however, is integrating this work with broader policy discussions on security studies. These initiatives and arguments struggle to gain purchase, especially in high-stakes security areas as conventional military and economic discussions push religious discussions aside. Religious discussions often end up confined to "soft" areas of foreign policy. Alternately, they "preach to the choir;" projects on religion and conflict only include experts who already accept its importance, while those on conventional security issues completely ignore religion's presence. Ideally the two groups would engage in dialogue.

Several observers have lamented this situation. Jean Bethke Elshtain argued religion is often "seen in simplistic alternatives," as "either a source of sanctimonious aspirations…that are politely ignored in 'real' statecraft" or as "the source of all the terrorist extremism."[29] Thomas Farr has argued the State Department tends to downplay religious factors when approaching international issues, limiting the effectiveness of their analyses.[30] International relations scholar Ron Hassner has made a similar point about the military, calling for religious literacy to be a part of military planning.[31] By demonstrating how religious appeals can serve as a potent tool in power politics—if used carefully—this book can make it easier for advocates of religion in foreign policy to make their case. I provide specific suggestions for formulating policies based on my findings in the conclusion.

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<A> What about soft power?

Readers may wonder why this book does not focus on soft power. As Nye famously defined it, soft power is the ability to “get others to want what you want” and can be as important as “hard power,” which is based on military and economic resources.[32] Nye pointed to a vibrant culture as well as public education campaigns as ways states can build up soft power, increasing the attractiveness of their foreign policies. One could argue that the religious appeals I discuss in this book are a form of soft power, as states appeal to shared culture and values to enhance support for their international coalitions.

As I expand upon in the conclusion, I think there are a few limitations to focusing this book on soft power. First, soft power can be a rather vague term, referring to any use by states of culture or symbols in foreign policy.[33] Properly defined, soft power is a passive resource that enhances states’ other capabilities.[34] By contrast, religious appeals are an active tool states draw on in international crises. Defining religious appeals as soft power would thus confuse the issue. Religious appeals do relate to soft power, however, even if they do not completely overlap. As Mandaville and Hamid discussed, religion can serve as a form of soft power; Mandaville expanded this in an edited volume to which I contributed.[35] Religious appeals are distinct, however, as the mobilization of this soft power in the form of states’ credibility on religious issues. This has implications for the policy prescriptions I derive from my work.

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<A> Outline of the book

This book makes its case through a theoretical chapter, four case studies and a conclusion. The theoretical chapter presents the foundations for my argument. I specify what I mean by religion, religious appeals and power politics. Following that, I survey research on both legitimation and rhetoric in international relations and religion and politics to provide the

foundations for my argument. I then present my theory on why religious legitimation matters, the conditions under which states are likely to use it, and the conditions under which it is likely to have an impact. I also discuss the qualitative research design of the book.

I turn next to the case studies. The first is Saudi Arabia's efforts to form an Islamic Pact as part of its 1960s rivalry with Egypt. I discuss the high moral authority of religion in Saudi politics and the ideologically-charged nature of the rivalry with Egypt. I provide evidence that Saudi Arabia deployed religious appeals as a serious and strategic tool in its power politics. I then discuss the conditions affecting the appeals' impact; Saudi Arabia's credibility on Islamic issues and the material disincentives of target states to join its Islamic Pact. This limited the ability of Saudi Arabia to form a durable coalition, but it did disrupt regional relations, unsettling Egypt and worrying the United States.

The second case is the United States' use of religious engagement to build international coalitions as part of its Global War on Terrorism. Like Saudi Arabia, religion has a high moral authority in the United States, playing an important part in American politics even if it is officially secular. The Global War on Terrorism—the US response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks—was likewise an ideologically-charged crisis, in which al-Qaeda attempted to mobilize Muslims against US dominance and America appealed to common values—including shared "moderate" religiosity—to create a countervailing coalition. I demonstrate that these led the United States to adopt religious appeals as part of its effort to mobilize states and societies against al-Qaeda. I then discuss the conditions affecting this strategy's impact; America's credibility on "moderate Islam" and engagement with Muslims was often limited, but Muslim states and social groups faced material incentives to work with the United States. Convenient coalitions thus formed; some deeper connections emerged, but many of the interactions were stymied by America losing

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control of the religious narrative and its general unfamiliarity with the religious policies it proposed.

The third case is Russia's use of religious appeals in its attempts to undermine Western opposition to its dominance of the *Russky Mir* or "Russian world." Russia has attempted to maintain control of former Soviet states it sees as its historical sphere of influence, even as Western alliances expanded into this region. Despite the official atheism of the Soviet Union, the Orthodox Church has regained a prominent place in Russian politics. This, combined with the ideological nature of its struggle against the West, led Russia to deploy religious appeals to undermine Western influence. Russia has framed itself as a defender of traditional values, which has resonated among conservative groups in Western Europe and America. This led some of them to call for closer ties with Russia and oppose harsh Western reactions to Russian aggression. Yet, Western states have material interests in opposing Russian influence. As a result, tensions have increased between the two sides, with the former hardening is stance against the latter.

The final substantive chapter is a series of shorter case studies that provide more information on the importance of varying levels of the theorized conditions. Saudi-Iranian tensions over Bahrain's independence demonstrate religious states do not draw on religious appeals in non-ideological crises. Likewise, European CVE efforts demonstrates states do not turn to religious appeals when they have a low moral authority of religion, even in ideological crises. Saddam Hussein's failed use of religious appeals to combat Operation Desert Storm and Thailand and Cambodia's competing use of religious appeals to gain support in their border dispute demonstrates what happens in cases of low credibility and low material incentives. By contrast, the Vatican's intervention in the Syrian civil war and Iran's post-revolutionary Middle

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East mobilization demonstrate the success of religious appeals in cases of high credibility and material incentives. Finally, the backlash China has faced over its use of Confucius Institutes to gain support for its Belt and Road Initiative provides further insight into cases of low credibility and high material incentives.

In the concluding chapter I discuss the book's implications. I argue there is indisputable evidence that religious appeals can be an important part of power politics. Yet, conditions often combine in an unstable manner, producing the unexpected effects of religious legitimation I discussed above. I then extend the analysis by applying my theory to more recent cases. The concluding chapter also discusses the broader scholarly and policy implications of the book. Mainstream international relations must start accepting religion's importance in power politics, but scholars of religion and international relations must shift their approach as well. We limit the scope of our studies by emphasizing religious beliefs' hold over states or instances of religion overriding material concerns. Instead, we must focus on international religious politics as a set of interactions and practices that overlap with material factors. The book can also speak to policymakers. Considering the minimal cost of issuing religious appeals and their clear effects, it appears to be a cost-effective tool in power politics. But it is also unpredictable, and must be approached with care; I provide specific guidelines in that chapter.

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