The Systemics of Violent Religious Nationalism: A Case Study of the Yugoslav Wars

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Abstract

What universal features of the mind interact with specific ecologies to produce expressions of violent religious nationalism? To shed light on this question, we focus on a case study of the Yugoslav Wars, asking: How did different religious groups in the Balkans move from cooperative relationships to violent ones? We argue that the most prevalent theories invoked to answer this question fail to adequately explain the change, namely, both the rise and fall of violent religious nationalism in the Balkans. To that end, we employ a systemic framework of religious change to examine historical data and ethnographic interview excerpts from ex-fighters and survivors of the Yugoslav Wars. This framework takes religion as it is practiced by communities to be a complex adaptive system, and models how religions adapt to local socioecologies. In employing this framework, three questions are addressed: (1) What features of cognition contributed to religiously motivated mass violence; (2) Which constituents of the religious system triggered those features; and (3) What socioecological factors were those constituents responding to? We argue that popular support for religious violence—and eventually its rejection—involved a set of higher-order functions, which McNamara calls the centralized executive self. This decision-making system was decentered by religious specialists who raised social pressures; group rituals that sustained community engagement; and identity-markers that signaled group commitments. While support for

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violence was a response to community threats during state-level succession, the eventual rejection of violence by religious leaders and communities was due to socioecological factors, such as rising health threats and declining birth rates brought about by the wars.

Keywords

centralized executive self, complex adaptive systems, identity, religious nationalism, religious specialists, ritual, violence, Yugoslav Wars

Introduction

Violent religious nationalism (VRN) is usually assumed to result from religious involvement in politics or the politicization of religion (e.g., Juergensmeyer 1996: 1). The concept is open to a number of different interpretations, but we understand it as encompassing these characteristics:

1. a group of people who sees themselves as sharing an amalgamated national and (ethno-)religious identity and forging an imagined community, such as the reclamation of a sacred homeland, a Christian nation, a global Caliphate, etc. (e.g., Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu 2013: 197-204);
2. which becomes the basis of a social movement that escalates from restrictions on the religious marketplace to the violent separation of communities based on religious identities (see Gorski 2000: 157-58; as cited in Brubaker 2012: 6);
3. resulting in collective violence targeting a recognizable civilian population based on an aspect of their social identity—for example, religion, sexual orientation, political affiliation, etc. (e.g., Brubaker 2016; Mann 2004; Oberschall 2012).

Of course, another characteristic of VRN is that it threatens global security. While violent religious conflict has a long history, VRN has become a primary cause of armed conflict since the 1980s (Fox 2004: 715) and remains a perennial threat in critical border regions and contested sacred lands (Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu 2013: 195). Furthermore, the role of VRN in recent human rights violations (e.g., the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims from Myanmar; see Coclanis 2013) has raised the question: How do religious communities, who once lived as neighbors in relative peace, come to support VRN—and, equally as important, how can it be prevented?

This is by no means a novel question. The international community raised it during the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001), when various ethno-religious communities in the Balkans fell into a decade-long civil war

characterized by VRN. However, for at least two reasons VRN received little scholarly attention after 2001. The first is that it was overshadowed by studies of participation in religious terrorism. Granted, VRN is directly linked to fourth-wave terrorism (Juergensmeyer 1996; Rapoport 1984, 2013) and large-scale human rights violations (Rieffer 2003), but terrorism is by its nature conspicuous and arresting (Kiper and Sosis 2016a). Consequentially, the study of non-terrorist VRN fell by the wayside until the mid-2010s. Second, there is very little scholarly agreement about the causes of VRN (for a review, see Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu 2013). This lack of coherence is due to the way VRN is often analyzed. In most cases, analyses are descriptive, seldom grounded in a theory of religion, and rarely include the emic views of survivors or perpetrators (for an exception, see Oberschall 2000).

We break from these trends by drawing from historical as well as post-conflict interview data (n = 168) of ex-fighters and survivors of the Yugoslav Wars (Kiper 2018) and grounding these data in an understanding of religion as a complex adaptive system (Sosis 2016). We demonstrate that approaching the practice of religion as a complex adaptive system allows one to understand the cognitive and cultural factors that change within a local religious tradition and thereby move a community from supporting pluralism to VRN (and sometimes back again). We proceed by offering a brief overview of the Yugoslav Wars, and then show that prevalent theories of VRN cannot explain how or why religious communities change. We then draw from ethnographic interview data to identify constituents of the Serbian Orthodox religious system that contributed to VRN during the early years of the Yugoslav Wars and an antiwar movement in the latter years of the conflicts. In so doing, we identify the cognitive features that contributed to both violent and peaceful religious expressions.

The Yugoslav Wars

The Yugoslav Wars are a relevant case study for our discussion, since most extant theories of VRN are based on them (e.g., Gagnon 1997; Kaplan 1993; Oberschall 2000). Also, unlike present-day conflicts, an in-depth record of VRN during the wars has been established by over twenty-five years of 'fact-finding' by tribunals, reporters, and scholars (see International Center for Transitional Justice 2009). Moreover, the Yugoslav Wars illustrate how religious practices can change, since the ethnoreligious communities of the former Yugoslavia lived in relative peace with one another before the wars (Gagnon 2004: 36-42). To understand this final point, we begin here with a brief summary about the breakdown of Yugoslavia, focusing on four historical transitions.

From Economic Crisis to Populism

The ethnoreligious communities of the former Yugoslavian republics Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia lived peacefully from 1945 to 1980. In 1980, tensions began to surface when the life-long dictator Josip 'Tito' Broz died, and an economic crisis ensued. From 1980 to 1986, unemployment increased from 6% to 37% on average, but to over 60% for persons under 25. Hence, by 1986, over 90% of people supported significant political change (Mieczyslaw 2010: 66-67). Throughout this period, communities in Yugoslavia began to rekindle their religious traditions, which were largely restricted under Tito. For instance, until the widespread election of ultranationalists in 1990, people could not openly express their religious tradition, otherwise they were disqualified from positions in academia, media, and government (Keys 1991: 3). Nevertheless, economic hardships, social upheavals, and the prospects of a fractured Yugoslavia—and thus a shared socialist identity—prompted communities to return to their religious traditions.

This return to religion was due, in part, to the fact that a Yugoslavian identity was only decades old and imposed from the top down, while individuals' community identities remained inseparable from an ethnic and religious tradition. In particular, to be Croatian was traditionally linked to being Dalmatian and Roman Catholic; to be Serb was to be in the central Balkans and Orthodox; and to be Bosniak or Albanian was to be in former Ottoman heartlands and Muslim (Keys 1991: 2). While embracing traditional identities brought solace to some, it also reopened unresolved traumatic memories about a century of conflict, from the Serbian uprisings against Ottomans in the nineteenth century to the fascist persecution of Serbs in World War II (Judah 2000). Public grievances over these historical events had also been discouraged in favor of a shared socialist identity under Tito (White 2007: 107). Consequentially, when communities returned to ethnoreligious traditions, intercommunity distrust began to increase.

From 1986 to 1990, the societal mood therefore shifted from interethnic civility to ethnoreligious parochialism, as evidenced by the political manifestos from the era (Thompson 1992: 54). The widespread demand for change invigorated populist movements that were soon overtaken by ultranationalists. In their respective republics, ultranationalists scapegoated the ethnoreligious 'other' (e.g., Serbs blamed Muslims and Croatian Catholics) for Yugoslavia's problems (Armatta 2010), they demonized the religious rebirth of other ethnoreligious communities (Štitkovac 1997: 155), and characterized the rebirth of their own church as divinely inspired (Mann 2004: 365-66). Politicians in each

republic sided with their own re-emerging church against the current socialist system, and for the rebirth of their ethnoreligious nation (Mann 2004: 365). As a result, a self-fulfilling prophecy developed in which ethnoreligious communities saw themselves as defending what was good and morally certain, and saw other communities as threatening and morally suspect (Kiper 2018: 44-49).

From Populism to Ethnoreligious Nationalism

The 'special elections' of 1990 were meant to usher in a spirit of democracy and peace after the fall of communism throughout Eastern Europe. Instead, each republic elected ultranationalists who rode a wave of populist sentiments that transformed into a rebirth of ethnoreligious nationalism (Mann 2004: 367). As an illustration, prior to 1990, persons often identified with a *naradnost*, that is, a 'nation', which denoted an ethnoreligious identity (something akin to one's ethnicity or race in the United States; see Judah 2000: 55). However, many scholars note that by 1990, *naradnost* signified one's core self, which was an amalgamation of national and religious identity, without which one lacked strength, purpose, and meaning (e.g. Ray 2006: 147-49). It also entailed commitment to the national goals of ultranationalists (Judah 2000; Mann 2004). We focus here on the actions of Serbian ultranationalists led by Slobodan Milošević, and explain further what their actions meant for participants in the sections that follow. Serbian ultranationalists are a relevant case study because under their leadership, Serbian forces committed roughly 90% of mass violence in the Yugoslav Wars—a series of conflicts characterized by VRN (Mestrovic 1996). And though many in the Serbian Orthodox Church initially supported ultranationalists, the church strongly turned against ultranationalists and led a successful peace movement in the early 2000s (see Mojžes 2016).

With the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church, ultranationalists sought to consolidate Yugoslav power in Milošević, who would serve as a dictator, and thus fulfill the Chetnik mythic vision of reclaiming Serbia's sacred lands (Mann 2004: 374). Chetniks are far-right Serbian ultranationalists and self-proclaimed freedom fighters who, despite being outlawed under Tito, regained political ground in the late 1980s and promoted the revival of both the Serbian Orthodox Church and reclamation of Serbian lands (Tomasević 1975). These lands encompassed all of Bosnia-Herzegovina and southern Croatia, which were lost after the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans (Cigar 2001). In an attempt to secure this agenda, Milošević's ultranationalist cohort purged the Yugoslavian national army of non-Serbs, seized control of Yugoslavia's state media, and appropriated the federation's bank (see also Armatta 2010:

128). In retaliation, Croatia created paramilitaries in critical regions along Serbia's northern border, which, in turn, prompted the formation of Serbian paramilitaries, eventually leading to skirmishes between the two and the outbreak of war in June 1991 (Glenny 1996).

The Yugoslav Conflicts

From 1991 to 2001, irredentists clashed with Serbian ultranationalists, resulting in a succession of insurgencies in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Albania. The outcome was a series of conflicts underscored by war crimes and crimes against humanity, including ethnic cleansings, extensive and systemic use of rape, concentration camps, metropolitan sieges, and genocide. Altogether, over 140,000 people were killed, 50,000 women suffered rape, and over two million people became refugees (International Center for Transitional Justice 2009). Furthermore, the wars were replete with VRN. Sacred architecture was intentionally targeted on all sides, resulting in the virtual destruction of all churches, mosques, and vestiges of Ottoman culture around Croatian borders and throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina (Sells 2003). Ethnoreligious paramilitaries, such as the Mujahideen in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Kohlmann 2004) and Serbian Chetniks (Ramet 2006), targeted religious communities for annihilation (International Center for Transitional Justice 2009). Moreover, incitement propaganda, whether promoted by ultranationalist politicians or church figures, was marked by violent religious rhetoric (Sells 2003).

For example, Sabrina Ramet (2005) analyzed wartime Serbian Orthodox pronouncements, finding they discouraged inter-religious dialogue and portrayed collective violence as a religious duty. As an illustration, when the war started in Bosnia-Herzegovina, one pronouncement stated:

> Once again, the Serbian nation is on the cross… In this hour, we ask God to give us the strength to carry our cross with dignity, as we have carried it in the past. And in order to say…to the malicious and aggressive Muslims: 'Forgive us for killing you, but we cannot forgive you if you force us to kill you'. (as cited in Ramet 2005: 270-71)

Such language expressed the church's nationalist rhetoric about territorial pretensions, removal of neighboring threats, and the longstanding trope of perennial Serbian victimization—in this case, portraying Serb-on-Muslim violence as ultimately victimizing the Serbian conscience. In addition, Patriarch Pavle, the metropolitan and chief leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church, travelled across the frontline, blessing forces

and sanctifying their defense against 'satanic threats'. He told fighters they were not only defending Serbs and their sacred lands, but also fighting to stop a Vatican–Tehran conspiracy to destroy the Serbian Orthodox nation (Glenny 1996).

From War to an Anti-War Movement

In the late 1990s, when protests against Milošević peaked in Serbia, church leaders helped organize an anti-war movement (Harden and Gall 1999). To illustrate, Father Stojan Stokic, a Serbian Orthodox priest and peace activist, famously decried the wars, saying: 'I am so ashamed, and I am feeling so guilty… It isn't the job of the Orthodox Church to speak about politics. But now in this terrible time, we must speak out against this man [Milošević]' (Zivkovic 2011: 39). Stokic and most church leaders contributed to ending the wars and supporting post-conflict justice, even though some in the church continue to support ultranationalism (Mojžes 2016).

Violent Religious Nationalism

We now return to the general question at the center of this article, namely, what causes VRN? Scholars (and politicians) tend to invoke one of five theories to answer this question (for a more thorough review, see Brubaker 2012, 2013; Oberschall 2000).

1. *Ancient hatreds*, one of the most common theories of VRN, posits that 'tribal' or 'marginalized' communities who have different religious traditions and a history of intergroup conflict are more distrustful of one another than otherwise religiously similar or peaceful neighbors (Kaplan 1993). Consequentially, they are especially sensitive to community threats, and minor conflicts can quickly turn into VRN. During the Yugoslav Wars, this framework was used by many Western commentators to defend non-intervention among the warring ethnoreligious communities, whose VRN was portrayed as the expression of ancient hatreds (Sells 1996: 124-28).

2. *Rationalism* is the notion that adherents commit to actions based on expected benefits (Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu 2013: 200). So, if adherents believe that violence is necessary for protecting their way of life, they will turn from inter-religious tolerance to conflict (Cigar 1995). Many rationalist accounts of the Yugoslav Wars posit that adherents were persuaded to support violence by apparent security dilemmas and religious rhetoric (Appleby 2000:

60-67). For instance, Mestrovic (1993) claims that many Balkan communities, who maintained longstanding honor traditions, were persuaded to forsake socialist ethics and embrace violent means to protect their way of life against fanatical neighbors. For some Chetniks, this meant a return to the 'hajduk' (bandit) tradition, where a neighboring community of non-Serbs could be attacked if they posed a danger, and where 'hajduks' were granted considerable freedoms, provided they defended Serbs from legitimate threats (see Vivod 2015).

3. *Constructivism* is similar to rationalism insofar as it takes religion to vary according to the function(s) it serves in the social inter-actions of persons relative to context (e.g. Kuper 1977). In a nationalistic context, religions that would be considered 'peaceful' in other contexts are used to mobilize groups toward social actions that protect the survival and symbolic immortality of the com-munity (e.g. Juergensmeyer 1996). Constructivism was therefore invoked to explain several 'pathologies of violence' during the Yugoslav Wars, such as the use of religious symbols by warriors and the destruction of religious architecture (e.g. Anzulovic 1999: 4).

4. *The crisis frame of memory* posits that communities who have experienced intergroup violence sustain collective memories of historical traumas that result in two mindsets: a peace frame that supports coexistence, and a crisis frame that allows for violence (Oberschall 2000: 998-99). This view was invoked by expert witnesses at the International Criminal Tribunal of the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), who claimed that memories of historical traumas, ranging from the Battle of Kosovo (1389) to World War II, mixed with ultranationalist propaganda and caused VRN (Oberschall 2000: 989).

5. The *synthetic approach* combines all four of the above theories to argue that communities construct ideologies and collective identities to strengthen individuals in the course of sociopolitical struggles (e.g., Wimmer 2008). For example, Brubaker (2015) argues that societies combine religion and nationalism in critical periods because the two galvanize a community toward social action by making individuals hyper-committed to a sacred cause, which offers incentives beyond immediate gain. The synthetic approach strives to overcome the shortcomings of previous theories to provide a nuanced account of a particular instance of VRN. Nevertheless, it has revealed a common occurrence in different contexts: religious revival precedes VRN. For instance,

pietism preceded German nationalism (Lehmann 1982), Shinto revival preceded Japanese nationalism (Fukase-Indergaard and Indergaard 2008; as cited in Brubaker 2012: 6), and the rebirth of Balkan churches preceded the Yugoslav Wars (Mojžes 2016).

Despite the breadth of historical detail offered by synthetic accounts, they say little about how religious practices such as rituals change to motivate collective violence in a community at one time and peace at another. Instead, 'how' and 'why' religious practices change is glossed over as emanating from shared culture and as somehow responding to changes in the community (Gorski and Turkmen-Dervisoglu 2013: 202). More critically, all of the above theories beg the question of religious change and rarely include data concerning the emic views of perpetrators or survivors. These data are important for understanding the motivations and experiences of practitioners. To illustrate, the crisis frame neither identifies the features of cognition that shifted from peace to crisis during the breakdown of Yugoslavia nor explains how people's cognition interacted with religion and local environments. In a similar way, accounts relying on constructivism and rationalism assume that violent rhetoric by ultranationalist leaders was sufficient to persuade communities toward VRN, although such an assumption is rarely empirically validated. As for the ancient hatreds thesis, it assumes that enmity lurks below the surface of religious communities, though this core assumption has never been substantiated (Oberschall 2000). Finally, and most importantly, the above theories cannot explain why—and rarely even acknowledge the fact that—a community returns to peaceful relations after VRN.

Because VRN is the outcome of a process by which communities transition from sharing a religious identity or supporting a social movement to engaging in collective violence, a vital explanandum is religious change. If a theory cannot explain how religions change for a community, it cannot fully account for VRN. Hence, the most prevalent theories of VRN—which continue to inform discussions today (e.g., Denison and Mujanović 2015)—are incomplete.

We argue that two approaches can shed light on these issues. The first is analyzing religion as a complex adaptive system whose interrelated parts respond to local socio-environments through feedback loops and reciprocal transactions. The second is post-conflict ethnographic interviews with ex-fighters and survivors to understand violence from an emic perspective. We address these approaches, respectively, in the next two sections.

Religions as Complex Adaptive Systems

The failure of the VRN literature to explore how religious systems transition toward violence is perhaps unsurprising. Religions are often depicted as conservative social institutions that are resistant or slow to change (Sosis 2011). Scholars who have rightly challenged such depictions have noted that not only do religions evolve and adapt, especially at the local level, they are often at the forefront of social changes, such as the Civil Rights Movement (Alcorta and Sosis 2005). However, general theories of religious change remain elusive, partially because religious change is multi-causal, including economic, political, technological, and cultural factors. Understanding religious change is not only challenging for scholars of religion. There are countless examples of well-meaning religious leaders who have sought to revitalize their communities, only to implement alleged improvements that further exacerbate the initial problems (e.g., Sosis 2020). For example, Stark and Finke (2000) argued that when the Second Vatican Council in 1962 repealed many of the Catholic Church's prohibitions in an attempt to regain the commitments of wavering Catholics, it inadvertently initiated a decline in church attendance among American Catholics and reduced the overall enrollments in seminaries. Political leaders and policy makers who have sought to curb religious activities and attitudes have had equally poor success in anticipating the trajectories of religious change (see Sosis and Kiper 2017 for examples).

The reason that religious change is so difficult to predict is that religions are complex systems. That is to say, religions consist of interdependent elements—ritual, taboo, authority, meaning, supernatural agents, myth, the sacred, and moral obligations—that dynamically facilitate social functioning within a community. Religious systems are complex in the sense that they are not merely the sum of their core elements; instead, the feedback-interrelations of these elements generate emergent phenomena, including prosocial norms and naturalized social worlds (i.e., where the social construction of reality is concretized or portrayed as 'natural' for practitioners, see Kunda 1999). Religious change is also difficult to anticipate because religions are not closed systems. Rather, they adapt and respond effectively to local socioecological conditions. We suggest, then, that understanding the adaptive response mechanisms of religions offers a promising path toward explaining religious change (see Sosis 2019 for more extensive discussions of religions as complex adaptive systems).

The religious system is cybernetic in the sense that feedback is inherent to its structure (Rappaport 1999). Successful cooperation and coordination help to sustain groups, whereas unsuccessful cooperation and coordination informs the group of failure and warns them about impending socioecological challenges. In addition, information about health, mating, and reproductive effects also feed back into the group, informing them about group vitality and offering proximate cues about the value of engaging in ritual behavior (Sosis 2019). As we discuss below, the declining reproductive rate during the Yugoslav Wars was likely a reliable signal to combatants that community conditions were worsening.

When the balance of feedback is negative, proximate factors will not motivate community-wide rituals, which will drive the system down one of two possible pathways. If conditions warrant, the group will undergo a religious revitalization (Heimola 2012; Wallace 1966). This will generally require an individual (or group of individuals) who emerges as an inspirational authority that can reinvigorate the group and motivate ritual action. Without the emergence of such a figure the religious system is likely to die, which has been the fate of the majority of religious systems that have existed in human history. Obviously, most religious systems spend much of their existence fluctuating between periods of success, stasis, failure, and revitalization. But ultimately, religious systems either die or transform beyond the recognition of the old system.

It is worth emphasizing that inciting hatred can evidently revitalize communities as effectively as inspiring moral development (see Sosis, Phillips, and Alcorta 2012 for examples). We suspect that moral development is a more effective strategy for long-term stability of a community, but outgroup hatreds clearly bring communities together, as was the case during the Yugoslav Wars, even if such hatreds cannot sustain a community across many generations.

Recently, Wood and Sosis (2019) developed a system dynamics model to assess the validity of the complex adaptive system approach to religion. In many of their experimental simulations, communities maximized their population growth by overexploiting their resource base, but this in turn led to a collapse of the community. Certain communities, however, showed greater longevity when they had strong leaders (specifically, the parameter aimed at characterizing religious authority was maximized). As Wood and Sosis note, religious charisma in the simulated social systems postponed community collapse, but crashes did eventually occur, and they were often more extreme than community crashes that lacked the intervention of a religious authority. Although we cautiously interpret these findings, the boom to bust patterns of these simulations, and the role that charismatic leaders had in prolonging and accentuating

these dynamics, appear to have historical parallels to the Yugoslav Wars. We now turn to ethnographic data collected among ex-fighters and survivors of these wars.

Post-Conflict Interview Data

Here, we draw from post-conflict interview data collected by Kiper from 2012 to 2016 during 18 months of intermittent fieldwork in four former conflict regions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, four in Croatia, and three in Serbia. The primary ethnoreligious composition of central Bosnia-Herzegovina is Muslim, while its southern region is largely Roman Catholic, and its eastern region along the Serbian border is mostly Serbian Orthodox. The majority of people in Croatia are Roman Catholic, while most Serbs are Serbian Orthodox. Interviews with ex-fighters and survivors were semi-structured and covered several topics about the Yugoslav Wars. The main question in each interview was '*What caused mass violence in the wars?*' Of the 168 participants interviewed, 33% (n = 55) answered by identifying some aspect of ethnoreligious nationalism that was exploited by ultranationalist politicians, religious specialists, or combat leaders during the wars. To illustrate, a Serbian participant explained how the common identity that once united Yugoslavs fractured before the wars, and was replaced with an identity politics centering on one's ethnic background, religious tradition, and support for the nation rather than the republic. Furthermore, embracing this new identity was framed as 'a struggle for the Serbian people to preserve their nation and religious identity' (interview 7 April 2016). Ethnoreligious nationalism was categorically the most common reply across participant populations in all field sites. While these were individual responses, they nevertheless reflect a societal narrative about what people remember about the wars and believe was a cause or turning point toward mass violence, namely, the loss of an interconnected and interrelated Yugoslav identity and the emergence of an ethnoreligious identity that was reshaped to support nationalistic politics. Similar to what other post-conflict ethnographers have observed elsewhere (e.g., Hinton 2005; Mamdani 2001), ethnoreligious nationalism is remembered by some as creating difference between peoples—a difference that might lead to separation and attempts to annihilate perceived others (see Hinton 2002).

In what follows, we focus on interview excerpts that highlight the role of the religious system in moving communities toward conflict. We also consider the dynamics of cognition, culture, and environment in transforming sentiments toward ethnoreligious nationalism and eventually supporting VRN. For the sake of brevity, we limit our analysis to explanations of excerpts that describe the Serbian experience.

The Dynamics of the Religious System

Using grounded theory to code and analyze interviews (Kiper 2018: 161), six themes emerged that not only cohere with historical accounts about community transitions from ethnoreligious tolerance to VRN, but also identify the constituents of the Serbian Orthodox religious system that initially supported warfare and eventually motivated peace.

Religious Revival. In the late 1980s, Serbia experienced a religious renaissance that participants described as 'mythomania'—a public fervor for revived Orthodox doctrines and myths. One of the most important was 'symphonia', the notion that the wellbeing and spiritual progress of a Christian nation is impossible without the church's influence on politics (see Leustean 2008). This ancient Byzantine concept advocated a complimentary relationship between the church and state (Harakas 1993: 259-93). By alluding to symphonia, ultranationalists gained popular support and sacralized their political agendas, especially the reclamation of medieval Serbian homelands, which was masterfully defended as being divinely inspired (Zivković 2011: 220). The concept was also used to break from the socialist ethic of Yugoslav brotherhood, and to support new ethnoreligious claims that glorified the Serbian nation. Specifically in this case it included the notion that Serbian lands were holy, that Serbs were the first of all peoples (and spoke the original human language), and that God had chosen the Serbs to suffer in the defense of Christianity but would resurrect their nation (Ramet 2005: 149). Additionally, politicians and church leaders conveyed that the nation was, in fact, finally being reborn after subjugation by Muslims and Catholics since the Middle Ages and that rebirth was due to ultranationalists, whose political regime was divine will (Leustean 2008: 431). It is no wonder, then, that the wartime calls by ultranationalists for 'all Serbs in one state', which later justified ethnic cleansing, was understood as a 'just and holy cause' (see Donia 2014: 3). Hence, as one ex-fighter explained when looking back on the religious revival preceding the wars, 'People became very religious and that made things worse, because then people believed they were on the right side of God' (interview 6 July 2012).

Community Threat. When reflecting on what motivated violence, however, many participants centered their explanations on apparent community threats. By the late 1980s, anxieties were already running high due to economic failures, constitutional crises, and political breakdown. Ultranationalists simultaneously exacerbated anxieties by monopolizing local media after their election in 1990, and then inundated it with threat propaganda (Kiper 2015; Kiper and Sosis 2016b). The constant message

was that Croatians and Bosnian Muslims, who were advocating independence, were actually preparing a genocidal attack on Serbs to destroy the Orthodox Nation (Cigar 1995: 35). Reflecting on the era, a Croatian participant near the border with Serbia explained that such propaganda turned Serbians in nearby villages against Croatian Catholics by 'telling [Serbs] they were going to be killed by Croatians or would have to convert to Catholicism. Of course, that was a lie but Serbs in the villages believed it, because of what happened in World War II' (interview 17 February 2016). What happened during World War II was that the Croatian Ustasa, an 'independent Croatia' in name but in reality a puppet regime for Nazi Germany, carried out a genocidal campaign against Jews, Roma, and Serbs. Thus, Serbs believed the threats promoted by ultranationalists, since the last 'independent Croatia' had systematically persecuted Serbs (a similar line of promoted threats drew on the history of Turkish occupation to claim that Muslims were plotting a Caliphate to enslave Serbs; see Boljević et al. 2011).

Religious Specialists. Participants expressed an array of mixed emotions about religious specialists during the war. For instance, many proudly recalled how their local religious leaders, whether imams or priests, advocated peace and acted with great heroism in standing up for the religious other throughout the wars (Broz 2004; Kiper and Sosis 2017). Still, many others, especially ex-fighters, bitterly recall how their highest-ranking religious leaders sided with ultranationalists to justify violence. For many of these ex-fighters, church leaders inspired them to volunteer for war—or inspired their family or community who then forced them to volunteer (Kiper 2018: 276-78). It appears that religious leaders influenced ex-fighters more indirectly than directly by persuading communities that war was necessary. Leaders stressed that Serbs had already been targeted for genocide in previous wars based solely on their ethnoreligious identity, and that without defenders to protect Serbs, they would once again be victimized (see also Perica 2014). Indeed, documents of church pronouncements and speeches indicate that religious leaders justified the wars, and many justified ethnic cleansings, in religious terms: Catholic Croatians said it was to defend Christian values; the Serbian Orthodox Church said it was a fight for sacred lands; and the Bosnian Muslims said it was a defense of Europe's only Muslim community (Perica 2014: 4). For many ex-fighters, religious leaders were pivotal in drawing identities along ethnoreligious lines, and justifying the violent defense of the nation. As one Croatian ex-fighter said, 'suddenly you weren't Croatian unless you had the right name [i.e., ethnicity], were Catholic [i.e., religion], and supported the HDZ [Croatian

nationalists]' (interview 28 January 2016). This same ex-fighter explained that people felt justified by Catholic priests and politicians who side-by-side claimed that the wars were a defense of the homeland, which, he said, was symbolized by the crucifix—'a symbol that represented Catholicism and Croatian ethnicity'.

Rituals on the Homefront. Though many public and private rituals were enacted during Yugoslav succession (Mojžes 2016), we focus on the ritualization of symphonia, that is, advancing the imagined Christian nation by bringing together the church and politics. In 1989, Orthodox priests began organizing public commemorations of Serbian warrior saints, such as King Dušan, the medieval founder of the Serbian church and state, which showcased church pageantry and religious symbols (Zívković 2011). For instance, the body of Prince Lazar, the Serbian warrior who was martyred fighting the Turks at the Battle of Kosovo and, according to myths, chose a heavenly path for Serbs as opposed to an earthly kingdom (which made him somewhat Christ-like), was exhumed by the church and toured across Serbia. Pilgrims and locals flocked to see the body, engaging in rituals to honor the saint (Radic 1998: 167). Rituals incorporated aspects of the Slava, a home ritual that honors a family's patron saint; the consecration of Serbian lands; and acts of piety and self-sacrifice. At the same time, retellings of Serbian myths expressed the concept of symphonia, and inspired pilgrimages to other religious monuments (Perica 2014: 3). These acts set the stage for ultranationalists who held rallies in the same locations, including Kosovo, Serbia's sacred land, from which Milošević launched his 'rallies of truth', which made him appear to have national support and thus allowed him to dominate Serbian politics (Mann 2004: 371).

Critically, the public commemoration of warrior saints and the ritualization of symphonia had two important effects on ultranationalist supporters. First, it appears to have rendered many with a numinous experience and sense of *communitas* through the reconstruction of their ethnoreligious identity at a time when many felt they had lost their socialist-Yugoslav identity. This feeling was especially acute for ex-fighters, who saw Serbian warrior saints as possessing identities that they as would-be warriors emulated. Several participants, for instance, commented that during the war, fighters acted like they were Serbian knights, preparing for holy war against Muslim Turks or Ustasa fascists. 'I believe they felt like the Serbian heroes of old', a Serbian man said, 'as if they heard a speech from Prince Lazar before the Battle of Kosovo' (interview 12 April 2016). Likewise, a Serbian ex-fighter described his

decision to volunteer for war in ecstatic terms: 'the feeling of becoming a warrior felt like electricity running through my body' (interview 22 October 2015). Second, ritualization encoded into people's social memory a shared history, which, for Serbs, centered on the land and myths of Kosovo. In short, Serbia itself was like Kosovo, a sacred land, that, unless defended, would be eradicated by invaders and surrounding threats. Like the Serbian warrior saints who fought at the Battle of Kosovo (1389), Serbs had to struggle, and even sacrifice lives, for a heavenly reward (Kiper 2018: 367-69). As one Serbian ex-fighter said, when explaining the necessity of fighting the wars, 'Our heart, our beginning, our religion is in Kosovo' (interview 2 October 2015).

Although public commemorations provided a new cognitive framework for understanding Serbian identity and connecting individuals across Serbia, they did not motivate all Serbs. Nevertheless, many skeptics of ultranationalism still felt pressured to show their support, which complicates how widely heroic narratives were internalized. For example, one participant described how persons were expected to attend rallies. 'When [Milošević] gave speeches, we were instructed not to go to school but to go to the rallies to show our support. And that made it worse because people saw the crowds on TV and said, "he must be right"' (interview 28 September 2015). Similarly, participants in multiple locations commented that during the wars, not wearing the appropriate religious clothing, attending religious events, or participating in collective rituals was considered suspicious. Accordingly, communities became demarcated by religious symbols and developed particular greetings (or shibboleths), such as 'praise Jesus' (Kiper 2018: 300).

Rituals on the Warfront. Many participants described the frontlines as utterly chaotic because of multiple military and paramilitary units criss-crossing battle lines, and thousands of refugees fleeing collective violence. The insurgency-style fighting left many ex-fighters not knowing who was who on the frontline, doubting the commands of their leaders, and struggling to gain the trust of non-Serbs (Kiper 2018: 302-303). One of the most challenging threats on the warfront in the first months of conflict was intra-unit cooperation. Many fighting units fell apart because fighters disappeared. While these disappearances contributed to diabolic rumors about nighttime enemy attacks (Kiper 2015), most disappearances were in reality due to fighters abandoning the frontline. In fact, a total of 100,000 conscripted soldiers, many of whom were forced into combat, had abandoned their post by 1995 (Gallagher 2003). For those who stayed, cooperation was strained, and dereliction of duty was common.

For instance, a Serbian ex-fighter said that a comrade sold his unit's only tank to Croatian fighters (interview 23 October 2018), an act that reflected the degree of defection on the warfront.

It was in these circumstances that religion transformed. From 1992 to 1995, fighting intensified in the territory of Bosnia-Herzegovina, where highly organized ethnoreligious units carried out a total war. Acts of VRN escalated in a tit-for-tat fashion and culminated in July of 1995, when Serbian forces massacred 8,000 Muslims in Srebrenica, prompting the first NATO intervention in August 1995 (Judah 2000: 231-40). A critical factor during this period was the presence of religious specialists, such as priests and imams, who accompanied fighting units, performing religious rituals and preaching an ethnoreligious ideology legitimating collective violence (see also Perica 2014: 4). Rituals consisted of prayers, blessings, and the donning of religious markers before battles. As one Serbian ex-fighter explained, 'priests were blessing the arms and carrying them. Some were [even] involved in the fighting. I am saying that for all of the regions, not just the Serbian Orthodox fighters' (interview 16 September 2015). Religious markers not only consisted of sacred symbols worn on uniforms, but also flags displayed in conquered territories. Participants on all sides remarked that fighting units with religious leaders were the fiercest and contributed the most to VRN, which suggests that religious rituals or the beliefs they helped to engender increased intra-group coordination.

Rejection of Violence. Accounts of the Yugoslav Wars rarely discuss the anti-war movement that grew in Serbia and resulted in protests of hundreds of thousands known as the 'Battles of Belgrade' (Kiper 2018: 320). Indeed, many Serbs who once supported ethnoreligious nationalism turned against this ideology in the late 1990s. One Serbian ex-fighter explained why he did not support the perpetuation of war by the late 1990s, despite having fought in the early 1990s:

> [During the war] I was part of the machine—I stopped thinking about everything; stopped thinking about what I was doing, because I couldn't. I was just doing what I was told. I was 18. I thought I was doing my part. I felt as if I had to. But in the war, I just wanted to save my life… Our leaders led us into going to war. When it began again, they said we needed to fight again. I said no. (interview 12 September 2015)

For this participant, the reality of war did not mesh with the justifications he received and the saintly warriorhood he and other ex-fighters imagined for themselves before going into battle. Like many ex-fighters, he also believed his leaders had deceived him. Another Serbian

ex-fighter observed, 'the people who made these kinds of problems and conflicts…who gave their blessings for the war, were the first ones who went against the war' (interview 8 January 2016). When this particular ex-fighter was asked why people turned against the wars, he said that people were tired of sacrificing their progeny for war that only benefited elites.

The Dynamics of Cognition, Culture, and Environment
Based on the above points, we can begin to answer three important questions about VRN. First, *what features of cognition contributed to religiously motivated collective violence?* Although such motivations are difficult to assess post-hoc, rituals appear to have contributed to support for violence. Specifically, by participating in public rituals, whether the commemorations of warrior saints or the blessing of weapons before battle, it is possible to induce cognitive changes in a set of higher-order functions associated with the 'centralized executive self' (McNamara 2009). To understand why, a brief description of participants' experiences of public rituals, and an explanation about the neuroscience of decentering the executive self, are necessary.

Participants remember public rituals as vivid events. A Serbian ex-fighter, for instance, said that what motivated him to go to war was a profound sense of patriotism, which he experienced after hearing Milošević speak at a rally, that made him feel 'like we Serbs had a special destiny and that we were never going to be humiliated again' (interview 31 October 2015). Additionally, many would-be fighters, after participating in public rituals, came to see themselves as warrior saints; and some went on to name their own paramilitary groups after saintly warriors such as 'Dušan the Mighty' (a medieval prince) and 'the Knights of Serbia' (Mann 2004: 392). These points are relevant in light of what we know about the neuroscience of 'decentering'.

McNamara (2009) observes that one of the functions of ritual is to help an individual forge a coherent self, which is critical for survival and social cooperation. McNamara explains that the self is not a thing, but, instead, a collection of schemas rooted in a story shared with others (viz. our ingroup), making it flexible but vulnerable to fracturing, especially during times of intense stress or loss (2009: 147). When a core part of the self fractures, a person's centralized executive self, which is supported by higher-order decision-making systems but experienced phenomenologically as the ego, is weakened. The self alone is, after all, a constructed concept (2009: xii). Yet, a centralized executive self is a concept whose underlying schemas are more or less coherent and unified, making the

individual more capabale than otherwise in achieving goals, cooperating, surviving, engaging in combat, acquiring mates, and satisfying baseline needs (2009: 28-29). Critical here is cooperation insofar as a centralized executive self facilitates group coordination by serving as a social signaling device (2009: 30); and if shared with a group—the costs of which are relatively high—then the particular self concept can function as a costly signal (2009: 247). A weakened centralized executive self, then, is not only detrimental for the individual, but also for one's community. Hence, a primary goal of religious practice is to strengthen or resolve the problem of a fragile self-concept and thereby instill a centralized executive self; for the religious system, in colloquial terms, 'wants strong agents' to promote within group cooperation (McNamara 2009: 32-41).

Religious practice strengthens an agent's sense of self through decentering, a temporary relaxation of central neurological control during ritual that leads to greater self-control. For McNamara, decentering occurs in four stages: (1) an agent experiences a crisis (e.g., defeat, failure, loss) leading to a fractured sense of self since a divergence exists between the old self and a new reality; (2) the agent engages in a ritual process (e.g., praying, fasting, performing) that suspends the agent's executive controls; (3) an optimal self is reimagined in a 'suppositional logical space' derived from religious context, myths, stories, dreams, and so forth; and (4) the new self is integrated using narrative devices and logic (McNamara 2009: 46-53). Drawing from several neurological studies of the ritual process, McNamara shows that heightened activity in the right frontal/anterior temporal cortex, which occurs in ritual, innervates serotoninergic, noradrenergic, and dopaminergic systems. Most importantly, however, these responses regulate stress, decision-making, and a sense of self.

As an illustration, recent empirical studies show that the ritual process— especially extreme rituals (e.g., body-piercings, fire-walking, etc.), rites of passage, or intense rites following a crisis—bring about significant cognitive and emotional changes in practitioners. Practitioners not only report decreased negative affect and psychological stress, but also increased intimacy for others in the ritual (e.g., Fisher and Xygalatas 2014; Jegindo et al. 2013; Xygalatas et al. 2013). Rituals also temporarily heighten physiological arousal and decrease cortisol levels as practitioners adopt their performative role in the ritual and embody the new identity provided by the overall ritual process (Lee et al. 2016). These moments are anecdotally associated with altered states of consciousness, contact with ancestors, saints, or gods, and profound changes in one's

identity (McNamara 2009: xiii). As a result, persons who engage in ritual are often rendered with a restructured and phenomenologically coherent identity.

This account explains the experience of many participants in the early years of the Yugoslav Wars. The breakdown of Yugoslavia led to a crisis in identity, and when church leaders and ultranationalists began enacting public rituals that engaged agents in religious revival, this offered new self-images based on Serbian ethnoreligious nationalism. That such rituals diminish the effects of stress and support decision-making helps to explain why so many people expressed support for attacking neighboring communities. For ex-fighters, their sense of self was apparently weakened or strengthened in war depending on whether their unit participated in religious rituals. For instance, ex-fighters who did not engage in rituals also reported questioning their role in the war, defection among units, and even abandonment of the warfront altogether. Ex-fighters who fought against markedly religious units, such as Chetniks or the Mujahideen, reported how much they feared such units, given their tenacity (Kiper 2018). Ritual on the warfront, then, functioned to support the cooperation and coordination of fighters. Yet, when the wars led to another crisis in the late 1990s, religious specialists on the homefront enacted rituals centered on peace, which offered a different narrative logic for a sense of self dedicated to bringing the wars to an end.

Second, *which constituents of the religious system triggered a sense of crisis, participation in ritual, and narrative constructions of a new self?* Our analysis underscores the importance of authorities—ultranationalist leaders but especially religious specialists—in VRN. Such leaders functioned as mediators who helped agents understand, participate in, and find meaning in rituals and myths that evoked moral obligations. These leaders also drew upon a sense of the sacred, namely, of individuals and communities connecting to Serbia's mythic past, defending Serbia's sacred lands, partaking in earthly and heavenly conflicts, and living in a destined historical moment. Religious specialists were not only instrumental in changing aspects of the system to favor war, they also played a critical part in the anti-war movement by employing the same religious mechanisms to facilitate peace.

Third, *what in the environment were those leaders and their audiences responding to?* Religious systems constantly adapt to socioenvironmental variance so it is worth considering what prompted the religious system in Serbia to change again, this time toward peace. At the level of the centralized executive self, interview data indicate that the cognitively salient concerns were about the potential benefits gained by war prior to wartime experiences, but after several years of ongoing warfare the

concerns turned to the losses of war. Both brought about a fracturing and restructuring around warriorhood and peace-making, respectively—two concepts that were made coherent at different times by schemas and rituals in Serbian Orthodoxy. However, we suggest that the ultimate trigger in the environment toward peace, which was indirect and the agents themselves may not have realized, was a decrease in population and birthrates. From 1991 to 2001, over one million Serbians emigrated (note that the current population of Serbia is 7 million; see IOM 2008), and a quarter of a million Serbs were killed in the wars. Equally important was the stress caused by the war on birthrates. World development indicators show that the birth rate for an average Serbian decreased from 2.5 to 2.1 during the economic crisis of the 1980s. However, it reached its lowest point in the Yugoslav Wars, falling to 1.48 in 2000, a year before the wars officially came to an end (World Bank 2018). In sum, change in the religious system was punctuated by community threats brought about by economic-political crises in the 1980s, and then crises brought about by a decade's worth of detrimental conflicts in the late 1990s.

Conclusion

Because extant theories of VRN raise, but do not answer, the question of how religions change, they cannot account for religious transformations. This is a problem, since historical data and post-conflict interviews from the Yugoslav Wars indicate that people's opinions about the necessity of violence changed alongside religion over the last thirty years. However, the systems theory of religion offered here provides a framework for understanding these changes. We argued that an individual's centralized executive self—a higher-order cognitive function involving social identity and decision-making—is often decentered by changes in a religious system during group threats or conflicts that diminish cooperation, health, or reproduction. In the case of the Yugoslav Wars, changes in the behavior of religious specialists, the use of group rituals, and the meanings of religious identity markers led to dramatic expressions in support for intergroup violence in the late twentieth century. However, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, changes to these very constituents led to large-scale opposition to intergroup violence. What accounts for these changes are the very things overlooked in most analyses of VRN: expressions of violence and peace often result from dramatic changes in a community's culture or ecology during a relatively short period of time.

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