

Review of: "Religiocentric Expression, Intolerance, and Conflict between Majority and Minority Ethnic Groups in Bangladesh"

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There is no doubt that this research is well-intentioned, and seeks to address ethno-religious tensions that can, in certain circumstances, explode into violence. However, I think that this paper is conceptually, theoretically and methodologically flawed. I hope that the comments below help the authors with their future research endeavors, which I think are of utmost importance.

1) If I understand the paper correctly, the premise here is that 1) groups that claim that their worldview (or ontology) is only one that is truthful 2) are likely to say so in public. They are also 3) likely to be intolerant of other groups, who they consider to be wrong at best and threateningly hostile at worst. Typically, such intolerant groups are likely to profess monotheistic theologies.

This is simply not present in the literature on religious coexistence. Aside from the fact that polytheistic and animistic religions are just as likely to be violent (e.g. Shintoism, Hinduism), we know from the historical study of religious coexistence in the Mediterranean that "ontology" is just one factor determining political action. Even the most radical religious zealots have to also balance out the economic, social, political and cultural costs of intolerance and hostility. See the works of Brian Catlos for more on this. Moreover, we have many reports (e.g. by David Nirenberg) of how religious minorities that are held to be suspicious and wrong by majority religions (e.g. Christians - Jews) are actually co-opted into a religious teleological narrative. They have a purpose in the world, and rules are set out that govern peaceful interaction with them. In short, religio-centric views are most decidedly not inherently intolerant.

The question, of course, is why and how religion is mobilized politically, and by whom. The second question is why violence and coexistence oscillate. What processes lead our informants to act against their neighbors? This is where research on this subject is taking place.

2) The paper claims that religio-centric approaches are common in Anthropology. I have never encountered them. Anthropological approaches to ethnic and religious identity tend to be very much influenced by Fredrik Barth, who is missing in this paper.

3) Anthropologists are also likely to point out that this paper treats religions and ethnic groups as if they are homogenous and clearly bounded entities. This leads to statements such as “ Religion X is more likely to be tolerant, intolerant”.

Anthropologists are likely to point out that all cultural groups debate and negotiate identity and ideological positions. Most conflicts about coexistence, in fact, tend to happen within groups (e.g. between elites and locals, between men and women, between religious specialists and lay religionists). The result here is that identity is essentialised in a way that is really not helpful. I instead recommend the authors start with the work of Nina Glick-Shiller on methodological ethno-nationalism, which offers a way out of these conceptual problems.

4) The paper constantly slips between ethnicity and religiosity. They are very different things, although they sometimes overlap.

5) The paper lacks an effective definition of conflict. Here it is simply an expression of intolerance. But conflict is infinitely richer than that. Tensions can occur over a multitude of resources. Some are physical (e.g. economic opportunities). Some are political (e.g. political office, freedoms). Some are symbolic (e.g. representation). In cases where conflict involves actual harm, again we have a range of definition of violence. Of these, actual physical displacement is just the extreme form. Most form of violence, harm and conflict occurs structurally - i.e. by arranging society in a way that disadvantages some groups. In this respect, it is likely to be missed as conflict. But it is crucial.

6) This leads me to methodology. There is a real problem with relying on questionnaires and surveys for this sort of project. The main issue of course is that what people say and what they actually do is different. As the ample literature on shared religious spaces indicate, most people say they do not the situation (why?) but in practice find ways of sharing, cooperating and even forming very meaningful interactions across religious boundaries. Likewise, this sort of research leads us to take our informants' statements as for-granted. E.g. we say that religion is correlated with conflict. For our informants perhaps. But the question here is to determine how and why our informants have come to equate religion with hostility, and how they come to find religious talk as dangerous.