

# “By the Sword of God”: Explaining Forced Religious Conversion

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## Abstract

The choice between religious conversion and violence has been forced upon many people throughout history. In this paper I explore why this is the case. Drawing on scholarship from political science and the sociology of religion, I argue that states turn to a strategy of forced conversion when it fulfills a logic of consequences *and* a logic of appropriateness. I then test this argument with a quantitative analysis of the determinants of forced conversion in the contemporary world and three historical case studies: Ancient Rome, the Carolingian Empire, and the Soviet Union. Both types of evidence lend support to the plausibility of the argument.

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## **Introduction: “Your God or Your Life”**

Throughout history, people around the world have been confronted with the choice of religious conversion or death. The choice is, of course, a painful one, but this paper does not focus on the men and women forced to decide between their beliefs or their lives. Rather, I scrutinize the men and women who give the order “convert or die.” This paper is a preliminary exploration of why so many people have forced so many others to make that awful decision. More specifically, I seek to understand why states coerce their citizens to change their religion. In other words, when and why do states wield the sword of God?

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. I begin by situating my research in the literatures on religious conversion and state regulation of religion. In section 3, I give a precise definition of “forced conversion.” Next, I present a theory of why states carry out policies of forced religious conversion. Briefly, I argue that leaders forcibly convert their populations when they are motivated by both a logic consequences and a logic of appropriateness. Explanations for forced conversion, I argue, cannot be reduced to strictly material or strictly ideational interest. Rather, both classes of explanations are needed to understand forced conversion. From these general theoretical points, I then posit ten testable hypotheses. Sections 5 and 6 test the plausibility of the theory with quantitative and qualitative data. First, I use large-N statistical analysis to find of the determinants of forced conversion in the contemporary world. Although the results are inconclusive, they point towards support for the theory. Second, I examine three cases in more depth: Ancient Rome, the Carolingian Empire, and the Soviet Union. These historical cases also lend support for the theory’s plausibility. I conclude in section 7.

## **Literature Review**

This study is at the intersection of two growing literatures in the social sciences. The first is that of religious conversion. The study of religious conversion is a multidisciplinary effort covering both its causes and its effects (e.g., Barro, Hwang, and McCleary 2010; Nunn 2010; Smilde 2007; Woodberry 2004; Loveland 2003; Buckser and Glazier 2003; Rambo 1993; Lofland and Stark 1965; James 1902 [esp. lectures 9 and 10]). A majority of these studies, however, focus on the motivations of the convert. This paper reverses the lens and focuses instead on the motivations of the “convert maker” (Baer 2008).

The converter of interest in this paper is the government, which brings me to the second literature: religion and politics. The study of religion and politics has gained considerable currency in recent years (for reviews that focus on the political science literature, see Gill 2001 and Bellin 2008). Scholars have investigated a range of topics, such the relationship between religion and political parties (Kalyvas 1996), violence (Hassner 2009b), and the origins of the international system (Philpott 2000). Some studies have specifically examined the relationship between religious

conversion and politics. For example, Gill (1998) argues that in Latin American countries where many people converted to Protestantism, the Catholic Church vocally opposed the authoritarian regime as a strategy to retain members. Similarly, Trejo (2009) shows that in municipalities in Mexico with many Protestant converts, the local Catholic Church supported a secular, indigenous identity and mobilization.

But, the relationship also runs from politics to conversion. A number of scholars have studied how state policies affect religious matters, including conversion. Prominent among them are Rodney Stark and his collaborators. In many studies, they argue that government deregulation of the religious market leads to increased religious competition which leads to religious participation and vitality (e.g., Finke and Stark 1992). To use the economic language that they employ, when religious consumers can choose from a variety of religious products in the market (i.e., convert), religious producers will sell a better product. Furthering this reasoning is the work of Anthony Gill. For example, Gill (1999) explains the variation in Protestant conversion rates in Latin America is caused by the degree of government interference in the religious market. And Gill (2008) argues that religious liberty is a “matter of government regulation” which leaders implement when it is to their economic and political interest. Beyond affecting conversion and vitality, religious regulation is also found to increase the level of religious persecution (Grim and Finke 2007), discrimination against ethnic minorities, including those adhering to the majority religion (Fox, James, and Li 2009), and overall human rights abuse (Fox 2008a). Yet despite the proliferation of studies on official religious regulation, to my knowledge there is no systematic study on government policies of forced conversion.<sup>1</sup>

## Definitions

The topic I explore in this paper can be ambiguous, so in this section I define “forced conversion.” First, by “force” I mean the application of coercion or threats of coercion to get someone to do something they otherwise would not do. This definition focuses on causal aspects and is in line with the “first face of power” (Dahl 1968). While a complete study of the effects government policy of on religious conversion must also include the governments’ use of less direct or coercive forms of power (Bachrach and Baratz’s [1962] “second face of power” and Lukes’ [1974] “third face of power”), I limit the scope of this paper to this narrow, conflictual, and coercive notion of force and power.

The second concept, “conversion,” is even more contested. Stark and Bainbridge (1987, 195-6) go so far as to call the notion of conversion “unscientific” because it “assumes that an individual really changes in some basic sense when he joins a new religious group, and it typically hints that this change is accomplished rapidly through either divine intervention or an autogenic

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<sup>1</sup>Deringil (2000) provides an interesting comparative analysis of forced conversion in the Ottoman, Russian, and Spanish empires but does not draw generalized conclusions.

spiritual metamorphosis." Instead, they propose the more neutral term "affiliate" and its derivatives to describe religious transformation, but I follow most other scholars in keeping the term "conversion."<sup>2</sup>

Specifically, at least two difficulties confront the social scientist in search of a precise definition of religious conversion. First, definitions of conversion vary among religious traditions. For example, a potential convert to Judaism must agree to observe Jewish law, while a potential convert to Christianity must confess the sin of their previous life and accept the divinity of Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit (Rambo 1993, 6). These differing conceptions of conversion reflect Judaism's emphasis on practice and Christianity's emphasis on belief. Rambo (1993, 6) proposes that we can avoid these problems by approaching conversion "descriptively" rather than "normatively." He writes: "According to the normative approach, a genuine conversion is formulated according to the theological convictions of a particular tradition. . . . Descriptive approaches, on the other hand, seek to delineate the contours of the phenomenon, with little concern for what the ideology of the group says is happening. The descriptive approach observes the nature of the process." Therefore, a descriptive approach allows us to be more general and study the concept across time and space.

Second, who decides what counts as a true conversion? Often converts see their conversion to be genuine, but missionaries or other members of the religion see the conversion as incomplete (Ibid., 5). Can we count an act as conversion if an individual outwardly practices the religion but does not fully believe in it? Can we measure conversion if they genuinely believe, but do not outwardly display it? Since this current research is about government conversion policies, I say that conversion is in the eyes of the converter, not the converted. Therefore, I answer the previous two questions with a "yes" and a "no," respectively. Since no one, from social scientists to grand inquisitors, can really know another individual's true beliefs, we all must rely on outward signals, such as dress, observance of holidays, or participation in religious services.

I, therefore, arrive at a broad and undemanding definition of religious conversion. Conversion refers simply to a change in an individual's public religious affiliation. This change could include apostasy, intensification of a previously held religion, moving from no religious affiliation to religious affiliation, switching denominations within a religious tradition, or changing from one religious tradition to another (Rambo 1993, 13-14).

Finally, we can define "forced conversion" as change in religious affiliation caused by physical harm or threats of physical harm. Using this definition, we can say that there have been many instances

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<sup>2</sup>I agree with Smilde (2007, 4n1), who writes: "I agree with the criticism that the term *conversion* denotes a rapid and radical transformation that rarely occurs in individual religious change. . . . However, alternatives also stack the conceptual deck. *Affiliation* directs our attention away from belief and personal experience and toward the organizational dimension of experience. *Recruitment* places agency with the organization or movement rather than with the person who joins. The term *commitment* means personal assent to the meaning system. Here I simply use the term *conversion* and rely on my substantive descriptions to make clear that I consider the extent and rhythm of change empirical questions."

of forced conversion in world history, but the phenomenon is far less prominent than one might believe. Even cases that popular memory has come to associate with forced conversion did not actually involve coercion. For example, the early spread of Islam, though not entirely free of conversion at the point of a sword, was largely free of the violence often associated with it (Arnold 1913). And, of the 18th and 19th century Spanish missions in California, historian James Sandos (2004, 103) concludes: “charges of ‘forced conversion’ of Indians made against the Franciscans in California . . . are nonsensical within the framework of Franciscan theology; they are also without historical proof and should be dismissed as yet another mission myth.” In the section to come I generate a theory which predicts the limited circumstances under which states try to forcibly convert their population. These narrow conditions explain why we observe forced conversion far less often than we might expect.

## **A Theory of Forced Conversion**

In this section, I introduce a theory to explain why states undertake policies of forced religious conversion. In brief, I argue that the decision to forcibly convert a population is influenced both by the government’s ideas and identities and a more rationalist cost-benefit calculation.

I begin with the observation that human (and state) behavior is influenced by both material and ideational interests. Action can be motivated or constrained by either class of interest. When explaining state behavior, one approach to the problem is to analyze action as the result of either “logic of consequences” or the “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen 1989, 1998). These two logics provide a useful framework to understand when states carry out forced conversions. Together they can explain when states have both the motive and the opportunity to force religious conversion.

The logic of consequences is the standard economic or rational choice model of human behavior. Actors assess their options for action and then choose the action that will maximize the likelihood of their preferred consequence. Following a logic of appropriateness, conversely, leads actors not to be calculating maximizers but habit-bound rule-followers. March and Olsen (1989, 160–1) write: “a logic of appropriateness . . . involve[s] fulfilling the obligations of a role in a situation, and so trying to determine the imperatives of holding a position. Action stems from a conception of necessity, rather than preference.” The proper behavior is seen as obligatory for someone of their role or identity.

The sources of consequentialist thinking are clear—actors force conversion when the benefits outweigh the costs<sup>3</sup>—but what are the sources that dictate a logic of appropriateness in the case of forced conversion? For an answer I turn to the sociology and anthropology of religion.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>For strictly consequentialist explanations of related topics, see Valentino (2004) on ethnic mass killing, Byman (2000) on forced ethnic assimilation, and Gill (2008) on the granting of religious liberty.

<sup>4</sup>This section draws on Hassner’s (2009a) analysis of blasphemy and the 2006 Danish cartoon riots.

Émile Durkheim (2001 [1912]) famously argued that the fundamental feature of all religions was the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Thus the goal of religious institutions and religious adherents is to maintain the separation between the two mutually exclusive categories: to keep the sacred from the profane and the profane from the sacred. Muddling or crossing the line between sacred and profane is the basis of desecration. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) builds on Durkheim and takes his argument a step further. She argues that desecration pollutes and threatens not only the “symbolic system” which demarcates the lines, but the very society that supports the system.

Some religious traditions may conceive of their community of believers as sacred or distinct. For example, on four occasions in the Book of Leviticus (11:44, 11:45, 19:2, 20:7; also quoted in 1 Peter 1:16), God commands the people of Israel “ye shall be holy; for I am holy.”<sup>5</sup> If the community is sacred, it must be protected from pollution, such as nonbelievers. As such, the presence of nonbelievers in the community means that the line between sacred and profane has been crossed—the very definition of desecration. To deal with this deep threat, believers must cleanse the society of pollution. One way to do this is to rid the society of non-believing bodies, either through expulsion or death.<sup>6</sup> Another option, however, is to rid society of non-believing souls through conversion. This leads me to expect that we observe forced conversion whenever an exclusive religion lives together with people who do not adhere to that faith.<sup>7</sup> Leaders, following a logic of appropriateness, act from disgust of the defilement and to restore the sacred boundaries of the community.

Nevertheless, neither logic alone can fully explain the conditions ripe for forced conversion. Forced conversion is a rare phenomenon in world history, and if either logic was solely sufficient to motivate forced conversion we would see it far more often than we do. I argue that for forced

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<sup>5</sup>All Biblical quotations in the paper are from the King James Version. The exact quote is Lev. 11:44; the other verses have minor variations in the language, but the commandment remains the same. Interestingly, the Hebrew root for the word “holy,” *q-d-sh*, also means “separate.” Therefore, God’s commandment could also be translated as “you shall be separate, for I am separate.” This nicely illustrates Durkheim’s point.

<sup>6</sup>In a well known article, historian Natalie Zemon Davis argues that this was a major motivation of the Catholic-Protestant religious riots in sixteenth-century France: “A more frequent goal of these riots,” she writes, “is that of ridding the community of dreaded pollution. The word ‘pollution’ is often on the lips of the violent, and the concept serves well to sum up the dangers which rioters saw in the dirty and diabolical enemy” (Davis 1973, 57). For both Catholics and Protestants, the goal of the violence was to cleanse the “body of believers” rather than the “body of beliefs” (“Thus,” writes Holt, “the emphasis here is on the social rather than the theological”; Holt 2005, 2) in order to prevent, among other problems, the wrath of God. As Davis (1973, 60) notes: “For Catholic zealots, the extermination of the heretical ‘vermin’ promised the restoration of unity to the body social and the guarantee of its traditional boundaries . . . For Protestant zealots, the purging of the priestly ‘vermin’ promised the creation of a new kind of unity within the body social, all the tighter because false gods and monkish sects would no longer divide it.”

<sup>7</sup>This paper is only a preliminary analysis of the topic of forced conversion. A more thorough investigation would have to provide a more precise analysis based on how specific religions view nonbelievers. Some religions may see nonbelievers as “salvageable” through conversion, while others may see nonbelievers as beyond salvation and that they must be killed. To complicate matters, religious traditions may view certain groups of nonbelievers differently than others. For example, Deuteronomy (23:3) specifically bans Ammonites and Moabites from “enter[ing] into the congregation of the Lord,” but no other group is Biblically prevented from converting to Judaism. Also, Islam views the “People of the Book,” primarily Jews and Christians, differently than other religions (e.g., Qur’an 2:62, 29:46).

conversion to be attempted the leader must see such a policy as congruent with both the logic of appropriateness and of consequences. The logic of appropriateness provides a motive. If a leader asks himself or herself “what is someone with my identity supposed to do when confronted with people from another religion?” and the answer is “convert them to my religion,” then the leader has a motivation for action. The logic of consequences provides an opportunity. If the expected benefits from forced conversion outweigh the expected costs (from material costs, institutional constraints, armed resistance, etc.), the leader has an opportunity for action. But, as mentioned earlier, neither motivation or opportunity alone is sufficient to incite forced conversion. Motivation without opportunity leaves a leader unable to act; opportunity without motivation leaves a leader unwilling to act. Therefore, I expect forced conversion when a leader believes it to be the appropriate course of action for a someone of her identity *and* when the benefits are expected to exceed the costs. Conditions that fulfill both logics are jointly necessary for forced conversion.

### **Observable Implications**

The “logic of appropriateness” and the “logic of consequences,” however, do not provide clear empirical implications. How do we know “appropriateness” when we see it? What does a consequentialist logic look like? In this section, I translate these abstract theoretical notions in to specific testable hypotheses. My operationalizations of each logic are not comprehensive—in fact I do not expect that these are the only variables that affect conversion or that all of these variables will always matter—but I believe they capture a strong flavor of the theory.

There are six independent variables which affect appropriateness-based decision-making. The first is monotheism. Monotheism’s exclusive doctrine precludes the existence of other deities, so the worship of “false gods” in a monotheistic community threatens core beliefs. Stark (2003, 32) notes: “Those who believe there is only One True God are offended by worship directed toward other Gods.” Polytheism does not have this problem since new gods can be added to the pantheon without harm.<sup>8</sup> Monotheists may, therefore, see that their proper or even obligatory action is to purge the community of infidels. For these reasons, we might expect that monotheistic states are more likely to impose forced conversion.

The second variable is Islam. Some commentators currently single out Islam as particularly prone to violence. For example, Huntington’s (1993, 35) well-known pronouncement that “Islam has bloody borders.” More specifically, many pundits, particularly on the American right, argue that Muslims engage in forced conversion to Islam (e.g., Malkin 2006). So I test if Islamic states are more likely to impose forced conversion.

The third variable is differentiation between the authority of the state and the authority of re-

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<sup>8</sup>This is an incredibly crude characterization for at least two reasons. First, most polytheistic belief systems are not infinitely malleable, they do have limits to the pantheon. And second, it slights the syncretism widespread in all religions, monotheistic ones included. I thank Ron Hassner for pointing this out to me.

ligion. Philpott (2007, 506–7) defines differentiation as “the degree of mutual autonomy between religious bodies and state institutions in their foundational legal authority, that is the extent of each entity’s authority over the other’s basic prerogatives to hold offices, choose its officials, set its distinctive policies, carry out its activities, in short, to govern itself.” When secular and religious authority are more closely integrated, political leaders are also religious leaders. As a result, the state views religious matters as part of its proper jurisdiction. In states with high politico–religious differentiation, political leaders are less likely to view religious matters, including religious conversion, as appropriate behavior. Differentiated states are therefore less likely to impose forced conversion.

The fourth variable is liberalism. A central tenet of liberal ideology is individual freedom, including freedom of thought and belief. Interference with the religious beliefs of others is antithetical to liberal principles. A liberal actor would certainly not understand forcible religious conversion as a proper course of action. Consequently, liberal states are less likely to impose forced conversion.

The fifth variable is Marxism. Marx was famously critical of religion. Likewise, those who attempted to put Marx into practice, such as Lenin and Mao, were strongly anti-religious. Marxist theory sees religion as exploitative, anti-modern, and anti-progressive, and, thus, a phenomenon which must be purged from society. As an impediment to proletarian mobilization, religion must be eradicated as history marches forward. Consequently, communist states tend to be atheist and are often openly hostile towards religion and religious individuals. I expect this hostility to manifest in policies of forced atheism. Recall that my definition of conversion as any change in religious affiliation, so I consider forced atheism as a form of forced conversion.

The sixth variable is a global norm against forced conversion. Over time a norm has developed against forcibly converting one’s citizens. It is undoubtedly connected to the rise of norms of respect for individual liberties generally. Whereas the 1555 Peace of Augsburg explicitly established the principle of *cuius regio eius religio*, which permitted rulers to choose the religion of their subjects (see Nexon 2009, 181-2), by 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 18) enshrined the right for all people to practice the religion of their choice. Individuals’ religious beliefs are simply no longer seen as within the purview of the state. In other words, it is less appropriate today for a state to compel religion and religious conversion than it once was.

There are four independent variables which affect consequentialist decision–making. They all impact the expected benefits or costs from enforcing conversion. The first hypotheses relate to the desire for religious homogeneity in a state. Leaders may see heterogeneous societies as more difficult to govern. Religious cleavages may undermine the provision of public goods (see Hab-yarimana et al. 2007 on ethnic cleavages), foment inter-religious violence (e.g., Hassner 2009b), or fuel anti-government mobilization (Philpott 2007). Therefore, when faced with religious heterogeneity, leaders may wish to prevent future problems by converting minorities to the majority

religion. Byman (2000, 151) finds that by presenting individuals the opportunity for successful assimilation to the majority identity, diminishing the potential for ethnic organization, and reducing mutual security fears, “government manipulation of identities can indeed contribute to ethnic peace.” He argues that the most important variable affecting the success of government led identity manipulation is the strength of the government relative to the strength of the minority group. Accordingly, relative strength of the government can both increase expected gains and lower costs of forced conversion.

I operationalize the relative strength of a government and religious group two ways: the minority group’s size and its degree of internal cohesion and organization. If a minority group is very small, governments are unlikely to see it as a potential threat. The government, then, can expect little benefit from forcibly converting the group so it is unlikely to try. If a minority group is very large, it will likely be exceedingly costly to force them to convert. The coercion required will be economically and politically expensive, and widespread violent resistance is a probable outcome. As a result, governments are unlikely to attempt to convert large groups as well. This leaves mid-sized religious minorities (perhaps 10–30% of the population) as the likely target of conversion campaigns. Groups of this size can pose potential threats to the government, so converting them would bring an expected gain, and the expected cost is not too heavy. So I expect that states with mid-sized religious minorities are more likely to impose forced conversion.

Secondly, the minority’s internal cohesion impacts the calculations of the costs and benefits of conversion, however the prediction is indeterminate. On the one hand, religious groups with established hierarchies, codified laws, and charismatic leaders can constitute a bigger threat to a government than a loose collection of people with similar beliefs.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, organized religions are much more costly to forcibly convert. Ex ante it is difficult to know whether governments will perceive the expected gains as greater than the expected costs. However, a factor that would increase the cost of conversion is if the minority has coreligionists in other countries who could penalize the state or even intervene militarily to defend the persecuted minority. The minority is likely to have powerful coreligionists if they belong to a major world religion, such as Christianity, Islam, or Hinduism. For example, the Christian states of Europe intervened in the Ottoman Empire to stop mistreatment of Christian communities on numerous occasions (see Finnemore 2003, chap. 3). As a result, states are less likely to impose forced conversion on minorities that adhere to a major world religion.

Newly acquired minority groups can present potential threats to a state. They can upset a delicately balanced religious demography and be particularly prone to armed uprisings. Also the violence already associated with territorial acquisition makes it easier to go forward with forced conversion. Consequently, states are more likely to impose forced conversion after territorial conquest.

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. Mann’s (1986) argument about the effects of literacy on the spread and cohesion of religions.

## A Quantitative Test

As a preliminary test for the plausibility of my theory I use large-N analysis. This test is quite limited because I only analyze one year (2002), but it gives us a snapshot of the determinants of contemporary forced conversion.

### Data and Method

I begin this section by discussing the data I use in the analysis. The universe of cases is 175 countries included in the Religion and State (RAS) database (Fox 2008b). I only analyze the most recent year in the dataset, 2002. This is because there is almost no variation in the dependent variable (only one country changes from 1990 to 2002), so time-series analysis would not add much to the analysis. The dependent variable, *forced conversion*, comes from the RAS.<sup>10</sup> I have recoded it as a dichotomous variable, where 1 indicates that the government is engaged in forced religious conversion and 0 indicates that it is not. In 2002 only six countries are coded with 1: Burma, Comoros, China, Laos, Sudan, and Vietnam.

There are seven independent variables. First, *monotheistic* is coded 1 if RAS codes a country's majority religion as Christianity, Islam, or Judaism and 0 otherwise. Second, *Muslim* is coded 1 if RAS codes a country's majority religion as Islam. Third, to measure the level of differentiation between religion and the state I use a dummy variable which indicates whether a state has an *official state religion* or not (Fox 2008b). To measure liberalism I use a country's Polity IV score from 2002 (Marshall and Jaggers 2007). While Polity scores measure democracy more than liberalism, I still consider it a reasonable proxy. I coded five states as *Marxist* (China, Cuba, Laos, Vietnam, and North Korea) based on the ruling party's official allegiance to Marxism-Leninism. To capture the relative strength of religious minorities I use the *majority religion's* percentage of the population. To measure the non-linear prediction of the size of minority religions I also use the variable's square. Finally, *conquest* is from the Correlates of War Territorial Change database version 4.01 (Tir et al. 1998). It is coded 1 if the country gained any territory by conquest from 1992 to 2002. Only Botswana and Egypt conquered territory in those years. I am unable to quantitatively test the effect of a norm against forced conversion because I am only using data from one year. Lastly, it does not make sense to test the "world religion" hypothesis because it really needs to be tested on a state-minority dyadic level which I do not have.

To analyze the data I use logistic regression, since the dependent variable is dichotomous. The dependent variable, however, is very rare. Only 3.4% of cases engaged in forced conversion in 2002. Therefore, I also estimate a rare events logistic regression recommended by King and Zeng (2001) for data with "events" in less than 5% of cases.

Recall that my theory is conditional in nature. My central argument is that forced conversion

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<sup>10</sup>Regrettably, Fox (2008b) does not give his definition of forced conversion.

is most likely under conditions which favor the logic of appropriateness and the logic of consequences. An argument of this form is best tested with interaction terms, which can capture the conditionality. However, in this case it is impractical to use interaction terms. The two logics cannot be measured directly and are thus proxied with the variables listed above. Creating variables which interacted each “appropriateness” variable with each “consequence” variable, however, would be unwieldy. There would be too many variables, particularly for  $N = 175$ . As a result, each variable is entered into the equation unconditionally. This is not the ideal test, but it gives us a taste of which variables may affect the probability of forced conversion.

## Results and Analysis

Table 1: The Determinants of Forced Conversion, 2002

	Model 1 (Logit)	Model 2 (Logit)	Model 3 (RE Logit)	Model 4 (RE Logit)
Monotheist	-1.57 (1.41)		-1.55 (1.47)	
Muslim		0.22 (1.63)		-0.09 (1.97)
Official religion	1.21 (1.46)	1.08 (1.54)	0.92 (1.70)	0.92 (1.57)
Polity IV	-0.10 (0.09)	-0.10 (0.11)	-0.08 (0.09)	-0.09 (0.15)
Marxist	3.65* (1.87)	4.68** (2.00)	2.05 (2.08)	2.86 (2.63)
Majority religion	0.11 (0.24)	0.14 (0.24)	0.03 (0.26)	0.06 (0.24)
Majority religion <sup>2</sup>	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Constant	-8.30 (8.41)	-10.21 (8.39)	-3.80 (8.52)	-5.38 (8.06)
pseudo $R^2$	0.41	0.39		
$N$	156	156	156	156

Standard errors in parentheses

\*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

The results are displayed in Table 1. The only variable that is statistically significant in any of the models is *Marxist*.<sup>11</sup> As predicted communist states are more likely to forcibly convert their population. A casual look at the data confirms the regression analysis. Of the six countries with forced conversion and five Marxist countries, three countries (China, Laos, and Vietnam) overlap in both categories. In fact, the predicted probability of forced conversion in Marxist states is 27% versus 1% in non-Marxist states, a statistically significant difference.<sup>12</sup> However, in the corrected models (3 and 4), the coefficients decrease and the standard errors increase so that the variable is no longer significant.

While none of the other coefficients are statistically significant, we can still look at whether they suggest a positive or negative association with forced conversion. *Official religion*, *majority religion*, *majority religion*<sup>2</sup>, and *Polity* all have the predicted sign. The sign on *monotheist* is the opposite of its prediction. And the sign on *Muslim* flips between models.

Overall, the results of the quantitative tests do not support the theory. None of the variables are robustly significant. However, that most variables are in the right direction is promising. As noted before, these test are far from ideal so the lack of significant findings is less problematic than it otherwise might be. To continue exploring the plausibility of the theory, I now turn to qualitative data.

## Historical Illustrations

In this section I turn to three historical cases: pre-Christian Ancient Rome, Charlemagne's conquest of the Saxons, and the Soviet Union. These are not intended to be full case studies, but merely brief illustrations of the theory's mechanisms at work in the real world. Consider them "stylized histories." It is particularly important to turn to historical data since the contemporary data show that forced conversion is a rare phenomenon in the early twenty-first century. Nevertheless, states have enforced religious conversion throughout history and those past actions still affect the world's religious demography.

The cases were not chosen systematically, but they do explore a range of historical situations and vary on the dependent variable and key independent variables. I provide one "negative" case where forced conversion did not take places and two "positive" cases where it did. In Rome, the logic of consequences might have pointed to forced conversion, but such action was not appropriate to the Romans. Other religious persecution occurred, but it never took the form of forced conversion because of lack of appropriate motivation. Conversely, in Saxony and the Soviet Union the two logics aligned and the political leadership undertook policies of forced conversion—to Christianity under Charlemagne and to scientific atheism under the Soviets.

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<sup>11</sup>*Conquest* had to be excluded from the analysis since it perfectly predicted no forced conversion.

<sup>12</sup>Calculated with Model 1 holding all other variables at their medians with Clarify in Stata 10.0 (King, Tomz and Wittenberg 2000).

## Ancient Rome

As far as we know, forcible religious conversion was never a policy of the Roman state during either the republican or imperial eras. I hope to show that this is because although forced conversion may have made sense from a consequentialist perspective, Roman understanding of religion precluded the leaders of Rome from understanding forced conversion as appropriate. The Roman government certainly persecuted religious minorities on occasion, but that persecution took the form of expulsion or death, not forced conversion. This is because the Romans used religious persecution to quell political unrest or punish scapegoats for problems. The threat from religious minorities was socio-political in nature, not theological: it emanated from their bodies, not their souls. Conversion, therefore, was not a suitable solution.

For two reasons we actually might expect the Romans to have forcibly converted parts of their population. First, religion and the state were closely linked in ancient Rome, meaning very low differentiation. Feldman (1993, 288) notes that “public religion in antiquity was always part of the state.” Beard, North, and Price (1998, 134) elaborate: “As part of Roman public life, religion was (and always had been) a part of the political struggles and disagreements in the city. Disputes that were, in our terms, concerned with political power and control, were in Rome necessarily associated with rival claims to religious expertise and with rival claims to privileged access to gods.” In fact, the political fate of Rome was explicitly conceived as religious. *Pax Romana* rested on *pax deorum* (“peace of the gods”). As long as people made sacrifices to the official cult, the gods remained content and Rome’s success was assured.

Second, Rome was continuously expanding its territorial boundaries and bringing new peoples with new religious beliefs into their control. But, in general this did not cause political or theological problems. New gods were simply incorporated into the pantheon.<sup>13</sup> This inclusionary policy meant the Romans got the divine support they wanted and the religious minorities could continue their religious practices largely undisturbed. On occasion, however, religion motivated rebellion against Roman authority. Among the most remembered uprisings were the three Jewish revolts of the first and second centuries. The rebellions were suppressed violently (including destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, expulsion from Judea, and enslavement), but the Jews were never forced to convert.

Despite these reasons why a policy of conversion might have made sense for the government, it never tried to do so. This, I argue, is because Roman leaders did not see forced coercion as appropriate to do. Romans understood religion as more fluid than rigid (with the caveat in the footnote above). As a result, they did not conceive of religious conversion the way we do today. A.D. Nock (1933) usefully distinguishes between the old form of religious change, “adhesion,”

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<sup>13</sup>Note, however, that “traditional Roman paganism was not, as has been claimed, ‘completely tolerant, in heaven as on earth.’ The fact that there was a plurality of gods did not necessarily mean that religion had no limits, or that (apart, of course, from Christianity) ‘anything went.’ . . . Rome was never a religious ‘free for all’ ” (Beard, North, and Price 1998, 212; also North 2000, chap. 7).

and what we today think of as “conversion.” Whereas conversion is the “reorientation of the soul,” adhesion is “an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes, and [does] not involve the taking of a new way of life in place of the old” (Ibid., 7). Forced conversion, therefore, did not fit with their conception of religion.

When religious minorities caused problems for the empire they were political problems and not religious ones.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the punishment was physical (e.g., expulsion, enslavement, or death), not spiritual (e.g., conversion). Prominent persecutions of religious minorities occurred because they threatened Roman political stability, not Roman religious order. On the suppression of the Bacchic cult in 186 B.C.E., Takacs (2000, 310) concludes that they “were executed not for their participation in a cult but so that a political order could prevail.” Rutgers (1994, 67) has a similar view on the expulsion of Jews from the city of Rome by Emperors Tiberius and Claudius. “[T]here is very little ancient evidence,” he writes, “to suggest that in the first century C.E. Roman Jews were persecuted because of their religious practices and beliefs. . . . [the sources] all suggest that the main motive was the wish to suppress unrest.” The cult of Isis was repressed for the same reasons (Ibid., 69).

A final point is that Roman rulers did not steer away from forced conversion out of a commitment to religious toleration as a principle. Tolerance of minorities, when it happened, resulted more from pragmatism than conviction (Ibid., 70–3). As long as people did not provoke political problems, they were left alone by the state.

From today’s perspective on religion, forced conversion seems like it could have been a rational policy for the Romans. Rome was a multi-confessional empire with religious underpinnings that was often under threat of rebellion by religious minorities. Enforcing religious homogeneity could have promoted the political, economic, and military goals of the empire. But, the Romans were simply not motivated by religious notions of appropriateness to convert minorities. As a result, the Roman state never imposed forced conversion on their population.

## **Charlemagne and the Saxons**

During the latter decades of the eighth century, Charlemagne led the Carolingians on a brutal military campaign against the Saxons. The Saxons were a group of Germanic tribes who lived in northern Europe, in what is today northern Germany. They practiced pagan religion, worshipping objects like forest spirits and sacred trees. A central part of Charlemagne’s offensive was the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity. Most Saxons, however, were not receptive to the new religion brought by the Carolingians, so Charlemagne resorted to the use of force. In the laws known as the *Capitulare de partibus Saxonie* (782), the punishment for not accepting baptism and practicing Christianity was death. Even relatively minor offenses against the Church, such as eating meat during Lent, were met with the death penalty. These draconian laws were harsh

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<sup>14</sup>This is not entirely true for Christians, a topic which I ignore here.

even by the standards of the eighth century (Collins 1998, 52–3). In fact, forced conversion was not a regular aspect of Carolingian warfare (Ibid., 43), but the confluence of the logics of appropriateness and consequences can help explain why Charlemagne gave the Saxons the choice of conversion or death.

The logic of appropriateness provided a motivation for Charlemagne's conversion policy. First, from its earliest days, Christianity was a proselytizing religion. Christians have always taken seriously Jesus' mandate to: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matthew 28:19). The Christian kings of the early middle ages were no exceptions. They saw spreading the gospel as part of their duty. Wallace-Hadrill (1983, 143) writes: "The concept of a barbaric hinterland, so essential to the thinking of the Later [Roman] Empire, was gone; and in its place was born the conviction that those outside should be inside. The Christian world should be one, its frontiers bounded only by the reach of its missionaries."

Second, there was very little differentiation between sacred and secular authority. Charlemagne was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III himself on Christmas of 800 with the words "To Charles Augustus, *crowned by God*, great and peace giving emperor of the Romans, life and victory (Spruyt 1994, 43; emphasis is mine). As Spruyt (Ibid.) notes, "Secular power was to be, in the spiritual perception, the sword of God on earth." Charlemagne, as the defender of Christianity, saw augmenting the flock of God as his own mission, and not just the mission of the Church.

Finally, the Franks viewed themselves as a sacred community. The political boundaries of the kingdom were the boundaries of true faith (de Jong 2005, 126). The Franks were the New Israel, God's chosen people. As such, Charlemagne thought of himself as a king of Israel, following in the tradition of Saul, David, and Solomon (Barbero 2004, 47 and 16–7). In Frankish eyes, the Saxons' pagan beliefs and practices were an affront to God, a pollutant which must be vanquished. And so Charlemagne viciously brought Christianity to the Saxons.

The forced conversion policy also followed a consequentialist logic. For the Carolingians, the expected political benefits of fully integrated, Christian Saxony outweighed the expected costs. The chief political gain from converting the Saxons was the expectation of peace. Christianization was seen as a method of subduing a population that were hostile to the Franks' recent conquest. James Muldoon (1997, 5) argues that "[t]his was clearly not simply an effort to bring Christianity to a benighted people; it was also party of an long-term effort to pacify a threatened border. To convert the Saxons was, presumably, to bring peace to the frontier." And Alessandro Barbero (2004, 47) even considers Charlemagne's policies a terror campaign intended to "break" the Saxon resistance to his rule. For Charlemagne, therefore, Christian conversion was important because it signaled Saxon submission to Frankish political power (Goldberg 1995, 475; Karras 1986, 555).

Beyond heralding submission, baptism also made the job of ruling the Saxons easier. Oaths of fealty were vital feature of medieval politics because they established the feudal relationship be-

tween vassal and lord (Stephenson 1941, 804). Typically oaths were taken on a relic, emphasizing the sacred nature of the oath (Geary 1978, 43–4). However, when the Saxons were not Christian, the Franks could not trust the credibility of the oaths (Collins 1998, 49). By bringing the Saxons into the Church, oath-making, and therefore politics, between Saxons and Franks could become normalized.

Thirdly, replacing paganism with Christianity was important because paganism had become a “badge of independence and resistance” against Frankish dominion (de Jong 2005, 126; also, Reuter 2005, 188). Saxons mobilized along their collective identity to rebel against the Franks whenever possible. Every rebellion began with attacks on churches and the mass execution of priests (Barbero 2004, 243). Clearly it was political expedient to eliminate the religious cleavage that provoked such consistent insurrection in the northern reaches of the empire.

Finally, the Saxons did not practice an organized salvation religion. Presumably, resistance by the Saxons could have been far more costly to the Frank had the Saxons belonged to some organized religious tradition, rather than the diffuse pagan beliefs they held.

Charlemagne’s policy of forcible conversion during the Saxon Wars of 772–804 illustrates the two logics at work. He saw conversion as the proper course of action for a Christian king and the expected benefits of quelling Saxon rebellion outweighed the cost. Without the logic of appropriateness, we cannot explain why Charlemagne converted the Saxons, rather than, say, extending religious toleration or exterminating them. Without the logic of consequences, we cannot explain why the Franks did not forcibly convert all of the peoples they conquered. But by combining the two approaches to human action, we can see why Charlemagne expended such effort convert the Saxons to Christianity.

## **The Soviet Union**

Over the course of its existence, the Soviet Union sought numerous radical changes in the economic, political, and social lives of mankind. Among these revolutionary transformations was the quest to erase religion. The Soviets hoped for a complete break from past superstitious beliefs about the workings of the universe, which they believed were a “fraud that had been discredited by modern science” (Fitzpatrick 1999, 128). Even in the long history of forced conversion the Soviet “Secularization Experiment” (Froese 2008) was extreme in scope and brutality. Froese (2008, 1) asserts: “Communist leaders in the Soviet Union attempted something never considered by earlier leaders, be they emancipators or tyrants. For the first time in history, rulers of a modern state hoped to expunge not only the existence of religious institutions but also daily expressions of spirituality and, most dauntingly, belief in a supernatural realm.”

God, however, did not simply vanish after the Bolshevik revolution. Soviet authorities relied heavily on coercion to spread their idea of scientific atheism. This included confiscating church goods and property (Yakovlev 2002, 160), forcibly closing religious institutions (Froese 2008, 11),

and executing religious leaders and believers or sending them to the gulag (Yakovlev 2002, 153–168; Froese 2008, 48–55; Applebaum 2003). These coercive tactics were also complemented with peaceful advocacy in the form of atheist curriculum in schools and mass propaganda (Froese 2008). The Soviet state forcibly converted the physical religious landscape as well. The most famous example was the detonation of Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior in 1931 in order to build the Palace of the Soviets, a monument to the revolution and Lenin (Haskins 2009).<sup>15</sup>

To explain why the Soviet Union worked so vigorously to convert people away from religion I look to the two logics of action. The logic of appropriateness guides us to search of the motivations for behavior in people’s understand of what is proper. In the case of the Soviet Union, Marxism-Leninism steered officials’ understanding of appropriateness in two ways. First, as Walters (1993, 4) states a “fundamental tenet of Marxism-Leninism is that religion will ultimately disappear.” Evidence to the contrary was a challenge to the state’s ideology. Such a challenge was extremely problematic since Marxism was to be infallible. Contradicting the Soviet Union’s infallible (or, sacred) doctrine was akin to desecration. Two actions could be taken to protect the ideology: admit the doctrine was incorrect and change it or purge society of the contradiction. To an uncompromising ideologue, the second option is the right one.

The second way Marxism-Leninism shaped Soviet beliefs about the appropriate stance towards religion are its basic teachings about religion. For Marx, religion was an obstacle to progress. Famously, he referred to religion as the “opiate of the masses.” Religion defended the backwards and immoral socio-political status quo, and, consequently, it was imperative to eradicate it.

Forced atheism also fit with the logic of consequences. First, the Soviet Union was a totalitarian state which sought to dominate all aspects of the lives of all its citizens (Arendt 1976 [1951]). Religious institutions were in the way of that goal, so eliminating religion would increase the power of the state to control its citizens. By replacing religion with scientific atheism, the state could command another part of Soviets’ lives. Second, the Soviet Union was vast country with people from many religious traditions. Governing such a diverse country has its difficulties; one way to reduce the costs of rule is to reduce religious pluralism. Converting everyone to atheism could be expected to increase national unity. Finally, the Soviet Union was strong state with powerful coercive infrastructure. This coercive strength in place would decrease the cost of forcible conversion.

One variable that could have increased the costs of conversion was that the Soviet Union was home to many people that belonged to world religions, such as Roman Catholicism, Islam, and Judaism. For example, ties to Roman Catholicism abroad helped the Lithuanian Roman Catholic Church resist Soviet domination. Conversely, the Russian Orthodox Church, which was controlled by the czarist state in the pre-Soviet era, had no external support and had no

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<sup>15</sup>The Palace was never built and instead the world’s largest heated outdoor swimming pool was constructed in its unfinished foundation. The Cathedral was rebuilt and consecrated in 2000.

choice but to submit to the Soviet state (Froese 2008, 78–89). Later, the United States passed the Jackson-Vanik amendment which harmed US-Soviet trade relations until the USSR permitted the emigration of religious minorities, primarily Jews. Despite the threat from coreligionists abroad, however, the Soviet Union engaged in forced atheism from its earliest days.

## **Conclusion: Religion, Violence, and the State**

Debates about the violent side of religion moved to center stage on September 11, 2001. Since that morning, academics, policymakers, the media, and the general public have sought to understand and explain the connection between religion and violence. Most have concentrated their attention on religious non-state actors: Who are they? What do they want? How do we stop them? In contrast, this paper shifts the focus from non-state actors to the state. I have tried to shed light on the awesome capacity of the state to do violence in the name of religion. Long before al-Qaeda attacked New York and Washington, D.C., Isabella and Ferdinand expelled the Jews of Spain who would not convert to Catholicism. And long before them the 1st century B.C.E. Hasmonean king of Israel, Alexander Jannaeus, sacked the city of Pella “because the inhabitants would not agree to adopt the national customs of the Jews” (Josephus, quoted in Feldman 1993, 326). By “bringing the state back in” to the study of religious violence I hope to remind readers that killing (or expelling or torturing or forcibly converting) in the name of God is not only part of the repertoire of bearded fanatics living in caves. States play that part too—and, given the resources at their disposal, many can give a more forceful performance.

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