Conflict, Consensus, and the Cross: Christianity and its Role in State Politics

Gregory Goalwin¹ ², John C. Laursen¹, Michele R. Salzman²
¹Department of Political Science, ²Department of History
University of California Riverside

A B S T R A C T

Christianity has long been a powerful force that state and societal leaders from the first century onward have been able to use and maneuver to serve their own political purposes. Constantine I, the first Christian emperor, was able to use the rising power of the Christian movement to unify an empire fractured by the violence of civil war. Conversely, the power of Christianity has been harnessed to fracture and divide, leading, among other things, to the bloody violence in Northern Ireland. These disparate reactions to Christianity engender many questions: Why has Christianity been used politically by state powers throughout the ages? How has Christianity been used to affect political events? Finally and most important to this particular study, what determines whether Christianity will serve as a unifying or dividing power? I argue that the actions of the state leader and his political use of the religion have a powerful, though not exclusive, effect on the ways in which Christianity affects society. The cultural and religious tolerance of the respective states, and the international system within which they operate, both have an important influence on a state’s response to Christianity and the ways in which Christianity’s political power is used to either unite or divide the state. I use a historical analysis of two case studies: the Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine, and the situation of Northern Ireland in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century to illustrate and support this hypothesis.

F A C U L T Y M E N T O R

John C. Laursen
Department of Political Science
Greg Goalwin is a true "self-starter". He was fascinated by the influence of Christianity in two different times and places: imperial Rome and the last hundred years in Northern Ireland. This overlapped nicely with my interests in toleration and persecution, as expressed in "Religious Toleration" (1999) and "Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe" (2002). But I did not have to push him: he explored his cases and their implications with the drive of a born scholar! I am looking forward to his future work.

Michele R. Salzman
Department of History
In the course of researching and analyzing these two distinctly different states, this paper has shown one way to successfully do comparative history and politics. Greg’s paper isolates three salient features relevant to understanding why Christianity can be either a unifying or fracturing political force. In his first case, Greg analyzed the sources for the Emperor Constantine’s (306-337 CE) to explain how this emperor used Christianity to unify the Roman Empire after a turbulent century of civil warfare. In the second case, Greg analyzed the divisive role that religion played in Northern Ireland. The nature of political leadership, the tradition of religious tolerance or its absence, and the status of the state, be it Rome or Northern Ireland, on the international stage emerged as similar and key factors to understanding the very different impact of Christianity on these two states. Since I am a late Roman historian, it was interesting to work with Greg on the modern material and to have him pursue its contemporary implications.

Greg Goalwin is a third year student with a double major in Political Science/International Affairs and History. His research interests include the study of religion and politics in Europe, ancient and modern, and he is currently completing an Honors thesis for both the University and the Political Science Department Honors Programs. His thesis focuses on Christianity’s influence on politics, primarily its ability to unite or divide a state, and examines Constantine’s Empire and the conflict in Northern Ireland as important case studies. Greg would like to thank his family for their support, and his two faculty mentors for their guidance and advice throughout this project. After completing his undergraduate degree, he plans to continue his studies in graduate school.

AUTHOR

Gregory Goalwin
Political Science/International Affairs and History
Christianity has long been a powerful force religiously, socially, and politically, that state and societal leaders from the first century onward have tried to manipulate to serve their own political purposes. From its inception during the Roman Empire, through the crusades, the Spanish inquisition, expansion into the new world, the reformation, and into the 21st century, Christianity has played an immense and influential role in world history. In some instances, the Roman Empire under Constantine I, for example, Christianity has served as a unifying force, helping to create a consensus and heal the rifts in a war torn empire. On other occasions, Christianity has served as a divisive force, shattering a society with internal sectarian violence, as in Northern Ireland. The different effects that Christianity has had on societies throughout history provoke questions about the nature of religion's political role. What are the political factors that determine Christianity's effect on the politics of a state, and why has it served to unify some states while dividing others with sectarian conflict and violence? I argue that the actions of a state's individual leaders interact with other key social and political factors, especially religious tolerance and a state's role in the international system, to determine whether Christianity will unite or divide. I analyze the first incidence of state-sponsored Christianity, in Rome under Emperor Constantine I, as well as one of the most recent and violent, in the contested state of Northern Ireland.

Constantine and Christianity

Constantine the Great, as he is sometimes called, was able to use Christianity to powerful political and social effect throughout his career. Support of divine deities was crucial for generals in the ancient world. In a time when there was no separation of church and state, generals and political leaders often called upon personal deities for protection and support in their public campaigns. The surest measure of divine favor was military and political victory, as Romans believed that it showed the endorsement of a powerful god. Divine support was used to not only give a psychological advantage to troops in combat, but also to legitimize the reign of an Emperor, who could claim that his policies and decisions were manifestations of the "will of the gods."

Constantine received what he believed to be tangible proof of divine support from a vision he received in 312 C.E. while marching to battle in a civil war waged for control of the Western Roman Empire. The Roman Empire had been split during Constantine's time, divided into two portions that were each ruled by a senior Augustus and subordinate Caesar, a power structure that a usurper, Maxentius, hoped to circumvent. Maxentius had already proven to be a powerful foe, defeating Severus and Galerius, two of the four legitimate emperors. Constantine had a numerically inferior force, and Maxentius held Rome, a strategically powerful position. All was not lost, however, as the story was later told:

"About the time of the midday sun, when day was just turning, he [Constantine] said he saw with his own eyes, up in the sky and resting over the sun, a cross-shaped trophy formed from light, and a text attached to it which said, 'By this conquer.'” He continues... that night “as he slept, the Christ of God appeared to him with the sign which had appeared in the sky, and urged him to make himself a copy of the sign which had appeared in the sky, and to use this as protection against the attacks of the enemy.” (Eusebius 1999)

Constantine did indeed conquer, attributing his victory to the Christian God and leading his men in a rout of the rebellious troops.

Constantine proclaimed the support of this new deity to help consolidate his control of the Western Empire and, eventually, to assume control of the East as well. Scholars have debated whether Constantine was a true and devout Christian or simply a manipulative politician using religion to his advantage. Constantine's own faith is not the issue, however; it is Constantine's actions and policies that are most germane to the present discussion. From a political standpoint, Constantine's usage of Christianity was superb, his new religion giving him victory in the West, and then serving as an explanation for an invasion of the East.
Constantine’s co-emperor, Licinius, who ruled in the East, had allegedly broken a pledge (signed in Milan in 313 C.E.) to tolerate all religions in his territory (Lactantius 1984) and had begun persecuting Christians. This policy of religious persecution was a direct challenge to Constantine’s authority as Licinius had chosen to harass his co-emperor’s adopted religion. Constantine wasted no time coming to the defense of Christians in the Eastern Empire and launched a civil war in 324 C.E., a war seen, or at least advertised, as a religious war as Constantine led his forces in the name of Christ against the established paganism of Licinius. (Jones 1978) Eventually Constantine, with the sign of Christ on the shields of his men, succeeded in defeating Licinius and uniting the entire empire under his own personal control. (Lieu 1996)

Though Constantine’s efforts seemed to divide the empire through civil war, they actually made it stronger, uniting the entire empire under the rule of a single man. Constantine sought to use his newfound religion in such a way as to legitimize his rule over the empire and increase his power at the same time. His impact was aided by efforts that Constantine took to promote Christianity throughout society and form a consensus among all Romans, Christian and Pagan alike. Constantine took steps to win over the elites of Roman society to his new religion, (Salzman 2002) as well as donating money and property to the Christian Church (Eusebius 1999) and returning property to Christians that had been seized under previous emperors. (Eusebius 1999) Christians strongly supported Constantine; as the religion grew, so did Constantine’s social pull and strength as more and more powerful Romans converted to a religion that owed its legitimacy and standing to Constantine himself. Christianity had recently been a persecuted religion in the Roman Empire with Constantine’s predecessors, like Diocletian, trying and failing to destroy the movement. The shift under Constantine to state-supported Christianity, and Constantine’s insistence on playing a powerful role within the Church itself, gave Constantine the power to use Christianity and helped him form a consensus between Christianity and traditional Paganism.

Constantine himself claimed to be acting out of a heartfelt desire for political and social unity throughout an empire that had been torn by the strife of civil wars for decades. He said:

“My first concern was that the attitude towards the Divinity in all the provinces should be united in one consistent view, and my second that I might restore and heal the body of the republic which lay severely wounded. In making provisions for these objects, I began to think out the former with the hidden eye of reason, and I tried to rectify the latter by the power of the military arm. I knew that if I were to establish a general concord among the servants of God in accordance with my prayers, the course of public affairs would also enjoy the change consonant with the pious desires of all.” (Eusebius 1999)

Constantine had good reason to desire a unified and harmonious state, as a stable empire was essential for the continuation of his reign. By using Christianity as an explanation to end the divisions within the Roman political structure, Constantine hoped to not only benefit his adopted religion, but also ensure his continued longevity. The unification of the Roman Empire was thus of paramount importance to Constantine, and Christianity was one of his most powerful tools in his quest to attain that unity.

Constantine’s actions, however, were not the only factor that helped Christianity serve as a unifying force. The willingness of Rome, and Roman citizens, to accept religious and ethnic diversity was key to the spread of Christianity as it grew to encompass much of the empire. Throughout its history, Rome was traditionally very receptive to new religions and ethnic groups. (Mattingly 1967) Rome tended to incorporate the religions of the people it conquered, and many of its wide-ranging territories were allowed to keep their religions intact, despite being subjugated under the empire. As Constantine began to support the Christian Church, Romans were willing to look past their previously adversarial relationship with Christianity and return to the religious toleration with which they approached most other religions. Diocletian’s policy of
religious persecution had failed; Christianity had survived and had won the respect of many Romans. This toleration allowed Romans to embrace Christianity in a way that would have been impossible before; Christianity was able to grow and gain new converts throughout all strata of Roman society, growing in power and helping to unite the Roman state.

Rome’s role in the international system of the time was also a very important factor in Christianity’s ability to unify the empire. As the unquestioned power in Europe, ruling most of the Mediterranean World, Rome was safe from major encroachments by foreign powers. Though Rome continually struggled to suppress barbarian tribes on the empire’s borders and faced a powerful Persia in the East, there was little threat to the stability and power of the empire as a whole. The Roman way of life was secure and, unlike modern Ireland, Romans had little fear of domination by a foreign power. Rome’s power in the Mediterranean made its policy of religious tolerance possible. A state threatened with a major war against an opponent of comparable or greater power would have been less tolerant of new religious movements that could have destabilized its support at home. The ancient Mediterranean was a world where military victory and defeat was blamed on the actions of the gods. Roman leaders would have been unwilling to allow a religion like Christianity to spread throughout the empire for fear of angering the gods upon whose grace Rome’s military fortunes depended. Secure in its own power, Rome was able to tolerate other religions. Persecution as a state policy had failed, and as Christianity’s size and power grew, it was eventually able to gain acceptance throughout the empire.

Christianity in Northern Ireland

As in Rome, religion is a key political factor for understanding how Ireland developed and why the conflict in Northern Ireland has been prolonged for decades. Though religion is not necessarily the primary causal factor in the violence that has plagued Northern Ireland, Christianity, in both its Catholic and Protestant forms, has contributed to the continuing conflict. The actions of leaders in all three involved states: Britain, the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland, have added to the polarization of the relationship between the two groups in Northern Ireland. When combined with the structural and social differences, the actions of state and social leaders have helped Christianity become a divisive force in Northern Ireland.

Unlike Rome under Constantine, there is no one, singularly powerful figure in 20th century Ireland with the means to control the state. There are, however, many powerful political and religious figures on all sides of the conflict. Many of the men who rise to power in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are devoutly religious, and their personal faith helps influence their political actions. Three such leaders, Eamon de Valera, Gerry Adams, and Ian Paisley, acting in response to the actions and policies of a series of British Prime Ministers, have used religion in Northern Ireland to divide segments of Irish society.

Éamonn de Valera was one of the most prominent republicans fighting for an independent and unified Irish state during the early and mid 20th century. After narrowly avoiding a death sentence from the British for his role in a rebellion, de Valera was elected a Member of Parliament (MP) in 1919 and led other Irish MPs in boycotting the British Parliament and creating one of their own. (Killeen 2003) De Valera opposed the treaty with the British that his own Parliament eventually signed and launched a civil war hoping to secure independence for a united Ireland, rather than one partitioned into Northern and Southern states. Although De Valera lost, he was able to regain power and write a new constitution for Ireland that would guarantee more self government for Ireland. It was here that de Valera’s religion entered into his political policies. The new constitution he sponsored gave the Catholic Church a special status in Ireland (Cronin 2001) and recognized a Catholic concept of marriage and family that banned divorce, a policy that was accepted by Protestants. (Pašeta 2003)

“From de Valera’s point of view – and the majority of the nation and its politicians would have concurred—the fact that the Free State was over 90 percent catholic meant that its moral and social outlook would reflect catholic beliefs.”(Fulton 1991)
Though his political actions were largely based upon the concept of nationalism, de Valera’s religious beliefs played an important role as he shaped the new Irish state.

The actions of the heads of the British state also proved instrumental in intensifying Christianity’s influence in Irish politics. Harold Wilson was the Prime Minister of Great Britain when “The Troubles” broke out in 1969. British troops were responsible for several shootings against demonstrators campaigning during the Catholic civil rights movement, most famously the events of Bloody Sunday in 1972. To Catholics, who made up the vast majority of nationalists and the IRA, the imposition of troops by Britain, a manifestly Protestant nation, fueled fears of continued suppression of Catholic beliefs and political franchise, the very things that the demonstrators had been protesting against from the beginning. (Whyte 2003) The decisions to impose direct British rule and to impose internment without trial for suspected IRA members (Mulholland 2003) were made under Wilson’s successor, Edward Heath, further exacerbating the conflict. (Pašeta 2003) Between 1971 and 1975, nearly 2000 people were arrested and held under this provision, although few were actually nationalist activists. (Mulholland 2003) The vast majority of the detainees were Catholic, and the policy contributed to sectarian distrust, actually helping the IRA and other nationalist groups gain members as they protested against yet more unfair treatment of Catholics by dominant Protestant forces.

One of the most dominant political actors in modern Irish politics is Ian Paisley, leader of the heavily Protestant Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Paisley is a Protestant minister, founder of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster, and is fiercely anti-Catholic. (Cooke 1996) Paisley opposed the Catholic civil rights campaign, and argued for the continuation of the system of gerrymandering that helped limit the political influence of Catholics by reducing their political representation. (Moloney 1986) Paisley’s antagonistic and passionate speeches have inflamed the antipathy between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland and have helped prolong the conflict between the two sects. Paisley initially agreed to participate in negotiations for a power sharing agreement in 1998, but withdrew in protest when members of Sinn Féin were allowed to participate in the talks. (Mulholland 2003) The talks resulted in The Good Friday Agreement, which made a strong attempt at peace. Paisley and the DUP, however, refused to acknowledge the agreement and campaigned against it. (Mulholland 2003)

Though the most powerful leaders in Irish politics have been influential, they are by no means the only offenders. Sectarianism exists on both sides of the conflict and permeates all levels of government and private society. (Hickey 1984) Religious discrimination exists in business and government in both Irelands, with Protestants finding few jobs in the Republic of Ireland and Catholics suffering a similar plight in Northern Ireland. The Catholic and Protestant populations of Northern Ireland remain segregated with little interaction between them, fostering the deepening divide between the two sects and contributing to the lack of cultural and religious tolerance inherent in the Northern Ireland conflict. In addition, both sects have radicalized, using religion as a further excuse to add further legitimacy to their continued struggle for national identity.

The historical positions of both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, within the international system, further contribute to the conflict. Having been dominated by the British, both states lack significant international power and their respective histories lead to a deep national insecurity. Ireland’s subjugation under the British deeply scarred its society, and much of today’s politics have resulted from the deep-seated Irish need for independence and fear of a return to British dominance. (Kennedy 1996) Not truly its own state, unionists in Northern Ireland strive to remain united with Britain to stave off the discrimination that they feel will be thrust upon them by a Republic that will not represent their interests. The substantial Catholic minority complicates the issue and has radicalized the unionist-nationalist debate through intersectarian violence. This conflict, defined in religious terms, has been perpetuated by Northern Ireland’s international status, torn between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, with members of both segments of society simply trying to protect their own interests.
Conclusion

Christianity, with its social power and potent effects, has long served a political role in the society of many states. It has, at times, served to draw together and unite a fractured society. In other cases, Christianity has served as a catalyst for division, provoking a state to tear itself apart through internecine strife and sectarian violence. The actions of important state leaders have served as a powerful determinant of which function Christianity will serve within a particular state. In Rome, Constantine's religious justification of civil war helped him bring the empire under his sole control, while his social policies increased Christianity's profile and political power, helping to turn Christianity into a powerful factor in the unification of the empire. Constantine's explicit focus on consensus fostered the integration of Christianity into Roman society, helping to unite the empire. In Northern Ireland, state leaders have created the opposite effect, using Christianity to deepen the divisions between the Catholic and Protestant segments of society and perpetuating sectarian conflict. Individual state leaders are not the only crucial factor in the political role that Christianity assumes in a state. The religious and cultural toleration of the respective states plays an important part, also, helping to determine how Christianity is received and integrated into a society, and thus dictating what its effects will be. While the religious toleration that characterized Rome allowed Christianity to permeate society and unite the empire, the inability of Catholics and Protestants to accept each other's cultures continues to divide Irish society. The state's role in the international system further complicates the issue, as the state's political power in the world helps determine the influence that religion will have over society. Rome's power over the ancient world contrasts sharply with the insecurity of Ireland that makes personal identity and religious identification so important to members of both sects.

The implications of this research are many and varied. The results of this study carry the potential to be generalized far beyond the two cases I have studied. Studying the factors that influence Christianity's political reception is incredibly important in states whose politics have been heavily influenced by religion. An understanding of the underlying causes of religious conflicts, and the factors that play into their perpetuation, is essential for the success of peace attempts. The study of the factors that I have outlined in this article: the actions of state leaders, the religious tolerance of an affected society, and the state's role in the international system, can be applied to many other cases throughout history, both ancient and modern. Analyzing these factors in states with ongoing religious conflicts could help further the understanding of the disputes' causes and ultimately lead to successful negotiation. It would be fruitful to apply the study of these factors to other cases where Christianity affects politics, but it would be equally interesting to apply studies such as these to cases involving other religions. Analyzing both the internal divisions within modern Islam and the troubles in the Middle East, where religion has affected both internal and international politics, are just a few examples of the direction that future research into this subject could take. Religion, as evidenced by my cases on Christianity, is an incredibly powerful political force even in the modern world. A true understanding of the relationship between religion and politics, and the way religion is able to both unite and divide, is a powerful tool in the analysis of religious conflict, and provides a virtually limitless potential for research into its implications.
REFERENCES


