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Getting Religion: Has Political Science Rediscovered the Faith Factor?

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To judge by the absence of religion from the pages of the American Political Science Review in its first century, most political scientists have embraced a secular understanding of the political world. We explore the evolving status of religion in the discipline by examining patterns of scholarly inquiry in the discipline's flagship journal. After finding religion an (at best) marginal topic and rejecting some plausible hypotheses for this outcome, we examine the major reasons religion has received so little attention—the intellectual origins of the discipline, the social background of practitioners, the complexity of religious measurements, and the event-driven agenda of political science. Despite the resurgence of scholarly interest in religion during the 1980s, the status of the subfield remains tenuous because of the intellectual isolation of research on the topic.

Rooted in moral philosophy, modern social science owes much to the reformist zeal of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (See Figure 1 for graphic evidence.) The many pioneers in sociology, economics, and political science who had strong religious backgrounds, who often were themselves clergy or children of clergymen, attest to the influence of the Social Gospel in the early behavioral sciences (Blum 1956; Fox 1993; Reed 1981; Ross 1991). As political science became a professional academic discipline, responding to the imperatives of the academy and scientific specialization, the religious and missionary zeal that characterized the early years waned (Somit and Tannenhaus 1967). Although political scientists in fields like political philosophy and public law continued to explore religion and public order, there was much less interest in religion among the profession as a whole, especially when the behavioral approach gained ascendance after World War II. Work on religion was largely relegated to the margins of the discipline, not to return until the 1980s. Using the *Review* as a case study, we examine the trajectory of scholarship on religion in politics.

THE TREATMENT OF RELIGION IN THE REVIEW

Apart from economics and geography, it is hard to find a social science that has given less attention to reli-

gion than political science. Unlike most social sciences, political science has no specialized journal of religion and politics, although such a journal is currently being organized. To see how religion has been treated by the mainstream of the discipline, we thus turn to the flagship journal of the profession. The *American Political Science Review* has long been the most selective and influential journal in the discipline, the agenda-setter for political science (Garand and Giles 2003). Access to its pages has provided an imprimatur available from no other outlet.

Utilizing the Jstor archive, we initially conducted a title search for articles using a comprehensive list of religious terms.¹ The search yielded a total of 35 articles that used one or more of the terms. A record of one article with religious content every 3 years seems to illustrate inattentiveness. Even that estimate overstates the recognition of religion because it includes articles in which the religious term was purely descriptive rather than analytical. For example, though ostensibly a religious study, Modelski's "Kautilya: Foreign Policy and International System in the Ancient Hindu World" (1964) used "Hindu" largely to locate the study geographically rather than as an important element in the analysis. By contrast, Sarkar's "Hindu Theory of International Relations," published in 1919, was much more anchored in Hindu religious texts and centered on the transmutation of religious ideas into the political realm. Of the 35 articles with a religious term in the title, we judged that 21 were strongly concerned with religion—a rate of one such article every 4-plus years.

Relying on title alone might underestimate the representation of religion in the pages of the *Review*. From abstracts that became available only in 1978, we found an additional 27 articles with one of the designated religious terms. This additional set of articles does not indicate a commensurate growth in centrality of religion to political science research. Articles with a religious term

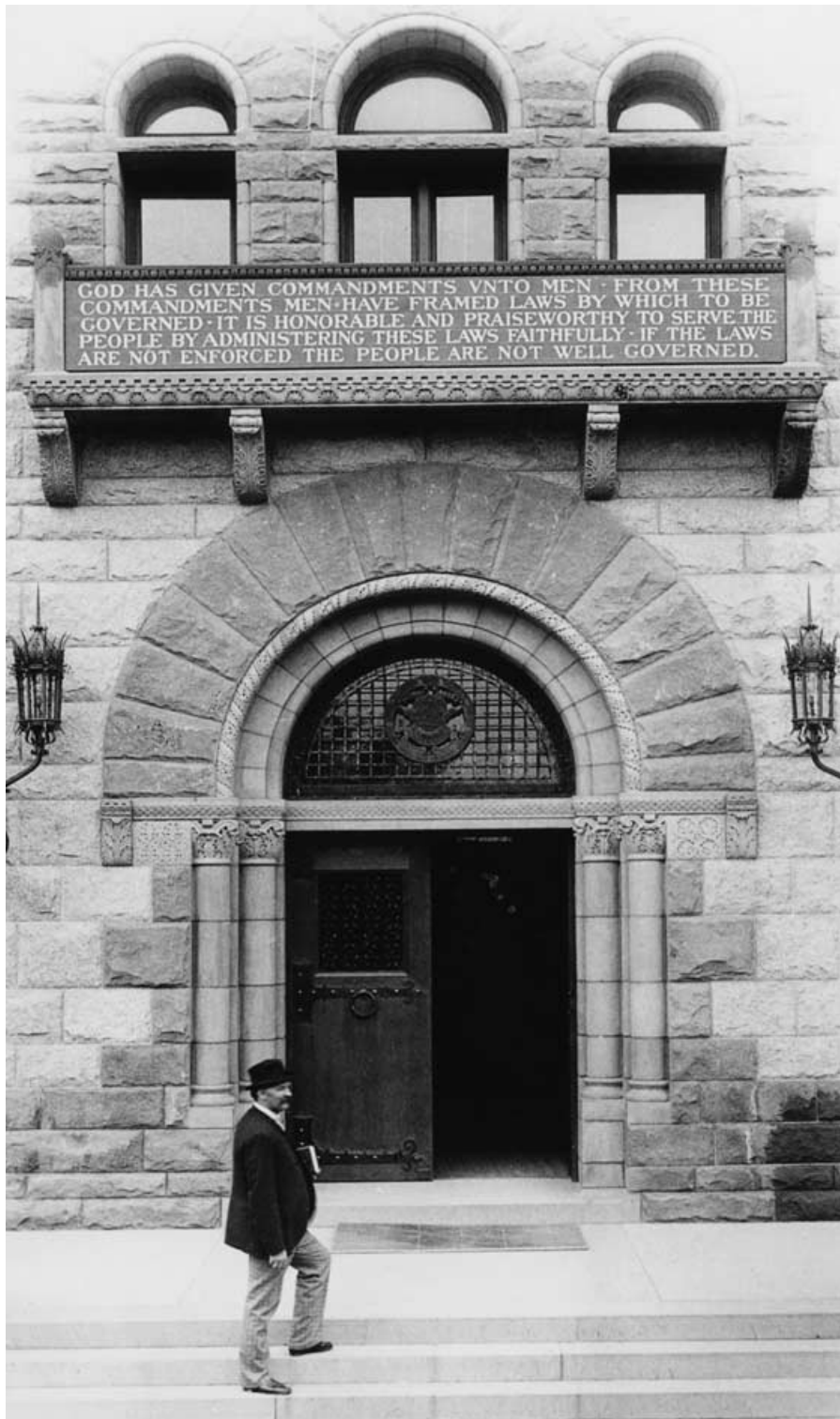
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¹ The list of includes all variants of religion, Christianity, monotheism, polytheism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Bible, Koran, Torah, God, Allah, Jehovah, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Evangelical, Islam, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, temple, mosque, church, synagogue, Confucius, Taoism.

FIGURE 1. Inscription on the Cambridge (MA) City Hall shows the fusion of religion and political thinking in the late nineteenth century



Courtesy of Frederick H. Rindge photograph album, Cambridge Historical Commission

in the abstract alone were much less likely to evince a strong interest in religion than studies with a religious term in the title. Specifically, just four of the 27 articles with religious terms in the abstract alone were strongly concerned with religion as a political factor. The use of a more liberal search strategy reaffirms religion's marginal status in the discipline's flagship journal.

The marginality of the topic is further evident in the subfield concentrations of articles with a religious term in the title and/or abstract. Religion was most likely to be a central concern in articles classified as normative/political philosophy and public law, with much smaller representation in the other subfields. Half of the 62 articles with religion in the title and/or abstract were concentrated in public law or political philosophy. Narrowing the range to just those 25 articles in which religion was the central intellectual focus, these two fields alone supplied more than 80% of the religious articles, leaving religion largely absent from other subfields. Indeed, prior to 1960 only a single *Review* article sought to use religion as a variable to explain empirical phenomena. Six studies were published during this period exploring religion and political theory, and four that investigated church-state issues in constitutional law.

With the upsurge in religiously-based political conflict in the United States and the Muslim world in the early 1980s, we expected greater coverage of religious themes in those fields. But from 1980 on, just one article in *American Government* put religious factors at the center of analysis; and just two, in comparative politics. One article so identified was Lijphart's seminal comparison of electoral cleavages in four multicultural societies. Tellingly, Lijphart explained the strong religious differences in contemporary vote choice as remnants of a "frozen" cleavage structure inherited from the nineteenth century rather than the reflection of a vital conflict with a future.

The inattention to religion in the *Review* might reflect a general lack of interest in cultural variables, a dearth of publishable research on the subject, or the same indifference to religion exhibited by other social sciences. We can reject these plausible scenarios with data based solely on title terms. Prior to 1960, the *Review* had published as few articles about race ($n = 6$) and gender ($n = 10$) as about religion ($n = 10$). During a period of global identity politics from 1960 to 2002, when the *Review* allocated space to just 25 articles with a religious term in the title, it published 22 articles about gender and 38 on race, suggesting that the problem was not lack of interest in cultural variables per se. Nor does the explanation for the scarce appearance of religion in the *Review* appear to be an absence of publishable work. During the 1960–2002 period that produced just 25 *Review* articles titled with a religious term, the *Journal of Politics* found room for 42 articles and *Political Theory*, which began only in 1973, published 47 such pieces. In just 3 years when it was edited by a political scientist, the interdisciplinary *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* published more articles on religion by political scientists (28) than the *Review* managed in the entire post-1960 period. The hypothesis

that inattention to religion in the *Review* typifies the social sciences is undermined by publication patterns in sociology. From 1906 to 2002, the *American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review* each printed four times the number of articles with a religious title term as their political science counterpart. The openness of the *Review* to cultural variables and the publication of so much research on religion by other top-flight journals in political science and sociology suggest that something militated against the representation of religion in the pages of the discipline's flagship journal.

SOURCES OF NEGLECT

If religion has been relatively neglected by the discipline's major journal, there were doubtless a number of reasons. For some critics of the academy, the underrepresentation of religion reflects an antireligious bias said to permeate academe in general and political science in particular (Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005). We believe the answer is far more complex and originates with the nature of political science as an academic discipline, specifically the intellectual development of the field, the social backgrounds of scholars, obstacles to empirical research on this subject, and the agenda-setting process in political science.

Disciplinary Origins

Had political science drawn as heavily on classic European social theory as did sociology, it might well have paid more attention to religion as a vital force. Although they differed considerably, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim shared a strong interest in the role of religion in society and politics. Coming from politics with strong confessional parties, they took for granted the political significance of the religious factor in a way that American political scientists did not. To the extent that these classic thinkers influenced subsequent scholarship in American political science, Marx's reductionist approach to religion captured most of the interest. Consider Stuart Rice's oft-quoted characterization of elections as the democratic expression of class struggle. Perceiving class as the "real" underlying force in electoral behavior, political scientists seldom recognized the religious dimensions of mass politics so ably chronicled by other social scientists. Even when recognized, as Lijphart's comment (above) suggested, religious forces were perceived as epiphenomenal, fossilized remnants of an *ancien regime*.

Perhaps the religious factor was relatively neglected in the *Review* because it fit neither the legal-institutional framework that dominated the early years of the discipline nor its later positivist turn to behavioralism and empiricism. An extra-legal component of a liberal political order, religion was not central to the institutional realm of government except insofar as it impinged on law, thus confining early work on religion to church-state matters. The empiricist/behavioral approach similarly offered relatively limited scope for

religious inquiry, perhaps because of data issues but also because political science paid attention to a narrower range of dependent variables than did sociology.

Even had they been disposed to recognize the significance of religious conflict in politics, the overwhelming commitment of American political scientists to liberal values and the democratic ethos (Crick 1967) may have deterred academic investigation. From the founders onward, institutional religion was widely perceived not as a constituent element of the democratic order but as a potential threat to it that needed to be tamed. This reflexive Madisonian orientation is perhaps most visible in the “modernization” approach in post-World War II comparative politics. Modernization theorists treated religion as part of the traditionalist order destined to be swept away (secularized) or compartmentalized (privatized) by the inexorable march of urbanism, science, and the market economy. In the realm of governance, students of political development defined modernization as “separation of the polity from religious structures, substitution of secular modes of legitimation and extension of the polity’s jurisdiction into areas formerly regulated by religion” (Smith 1974, 4). By definitional fiat, religion was conceptualized as an obstacle to effective development, capable of a positive contribution only in its capacity to promote social mobilization.

Social Background

The Carnegie national surveys of college faculty in 1969, 1975, and 1984 confirm that most political scientists have little interest or involvement in religion.² With little exposure to religion and few colleagues or friends who were religious, political scientists naturally accepted that religion was of little and declining importance to politics. One certainly does not have to be religious to study religious influences in politics, but a lack of familiarity with religion is likely to discourage inquiry.

Although nearly all political scientists in these surveys reported having been raised in a faith tradition, nearly a third in 1969 and 45% in 1984 reported “none” as their current religion. The 1969 survey included enough political scientists to explore differences across faith traditions. Between 27% and 33% of those raised in a Christian or Jewish faith reported no current religion, as did 20% of those raised in an “other” faith tradition. Political scientists (and other social scientists) are significantly less likely to have a religious attachment than are faculty outside the social sciences.³

² The first 1969 and 1975 surveys of college faculty were conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of California-Berkeley on behalf of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education and the third, funded by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, was administered by the Opinion Research Corporation. The unweighted Ns for 1969, 1975, and 1984 were, respectively, 60,028, 25,262, and 5,057. The 1969 survey is available from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. The 1975 and 1984 waves are archived by the Roper Center.

³ These included economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, geography, and “other social science.” We did not include social work,

Political scientists also show low and declining levels of personal religiosity. In 1969, more than 61% attended church a few times a year or less, and most of these selected once a year or less (the survey did not have a “never” option).⁴ In 1984, only 6% of political scientists reported being deeply religious, compared with 53% who were indifferent or hostile to religion. Indeed, more than twice as many political scientists reported being hostile to religion in 1984 as were deeply religious. But political scientists are far more likely to be indifferent to religion than hostile. Hostile scholars might investigate the impact of religion on politics, whereas the indifferent merely underestimate it.

Moreover, in each survey, those who were the most professionally active—who attended the most professional meetings, published the most articles and books, who thought of themselves as researchers more than teachers, and who taught at top-ranked Ph.D.-granting universities—were more likely to be secular than other political scientists. In the 1969 survey, scholars who spent more time on research, who considered research to be their top priority, who published the most articles, and who worked at the most prestigious institutions were all less religious than others in the discipline. Among those who were affiliated with top- or medium quality universities or top colleges, who spent an hour or more a week on research, who made research their top priority, *and* who had published 11 articles or more in their career, nearly 90% attended church a few times a year or less, nearly 80% were indifferent or hostile to religion, and nearly two-thirds listed “none” as their current religion.

Thus, those who set the research agenda for the profession were almost universally uninvolved in organized religion and indifferent to it more generally. Almost certainly their colleagues, and most likely their friends and neighbors as well, were nonreligious. It is not surprising that they largely ignored the role of religion in explaining politics.

Complexity of Subject and Measurement

For scholars with little exposure to religion, its sheer complexity and the challenges of measuring it constitute a barrier to entry to the topic. Scholars have shown that it is important not merely to know how religious one is, but also how one is religious (Leege and Kellstedt 1993). And how one is religious can be conceived of and measured in many ways (Leege 1996).

Consider briefly the complexity that faces scholars seeking to incorporate religion into models of voting in the United States. Early studies distinguished among Protestant, Catholics, and Jews, but the National Election Study in 2004 had 135 categories of religious affiliation, including 18 for Baptists alone. And growing

which is generally classified as a social science in the surveys, nor history, which is generally included with the humanities. In separate analyses we included history as a social science, but this did not change the results.

⁴ There were differences across faith traditions. A large majority of Catholic political scientists attended church once a week or more, while more than 60% of Jews attended once a year or less.

numbers attend nondenominational megachurches and worship outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, which make denomination complicated. Denomination is even more complicated in settings outside of the United States, for the same faith tradition may take on radically different political configurations in different countries.

Over the years the NES has asked about religious affiliation, behavior and practice, doctrine, and identities, exposure to elite communications from televangelists or groups that pass out voter information in churches. From this, scholars have operationalized groups like “evangelicals” using denomination, doctrine, or self-identification, and drawn distinctions among theological groups with more obvious similarities than differences.

Religiosity is more complex than frequency of attendance at services; some faiths have more regular private and semipublic rituals, and in many traditions private devotionality may be associated with different political attitudes and behaviors than public involvement in religion. Religious beliefs also matter, as doctrine helps some people form and prioritize political opinions, but the implication of the same doctrine may differ according to race, gender, region, and other factors. Doctrinal differences have been extensively studied among conservative Protestant Christians, with inconsistent terminology and differing operational definitions, but less studied among Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and others, and far less studied outside of the United States.

Individual congregations form cohesive political communities, which can have an influence beyond that of denomination and doctrine. Some churches become more political than others, even within the same faith tradition and the same community, as religious elites or communities of congregants come to see connections between their faith and politics. Some faith traditions are centered in a text, which may provide resources for religious elites to mobilize adherents; others are based on accumulated doctrine or ecstatic experience. And the meaning of each of these varies within the same tradition across nations, and across cultures within nations. To add yet more complexity to the measurement challenge, some traditions cohere primarily not around doctrine but around common sacraments that affirm predominantly communal, quasi-ethnic bonds of loyalty.

The Issue Attention Cycle in the Discipline

The *Review's* relative indifference to religion may also have owed something to the dynamics of the discipline's agenda. A flagship journal is likely to reflect real-world developments and headlines that intrude on the attention cycle of political scientists, driving the academic agenda and structuring grant opportunities.

For most of the postwar era, religion did not command headlines or become the basis for lucrative grant research. Federal agencies that sponsored broad-ranging programs of academic grants were leery of religion because of the church-state boundary. The

inclusion of a religious preference question in the 1957 Current Population Survey occasioned a ferocious counterreaction that precluded such queries in subsequent surveys (Foster 1961). Private foundations did invest heavily in academic research to reduce intergroup tension and promote religious tolerance, but they funded mostly psychologists and sociologists. When religion briefly came to public attention in the 1960s with the issue of John Kennedy's Catholicism, most commentators read the election as evidence that religiously based electoral conflict had been put to rest.

In the late 1970s, several developments forced even the most resolutely secular of academics to recognize the importance of religion. The Islamic Revolution in Iran was a particularly telling blow to secularization theory in political science. The Shah's Iran was often cited as an exemplar of Third World modernization and Reza Shah Pahlevi himself, more so than any candidate since the arch-secularist Attaturk, seemed the prototype of the modernizing leader. Whereas few might have been surprised had a Khomeini-like figure emerged in other societies, this was altogether unexpected in Iran.

As Iran became an Islamic republic, the United States developed its own theopolitical social movement, the Christian Right. The sudden emergence of Christian conservatism as an organized political force surprised observers who were unaware of the constancy of religiously inspired political activism in American history (Lienesch 1982). Observing the prominent role of clergy in liberal campaigns for civil rights, peace, and social justice causes, scholars were prone to overlook the portents in grassroots campaigns against the Equal Rights Amendment, gay rights laws and “godless” textbooks (Crawford 1980). Hence few political scientists anticipated the emergence of a conservative Christian movement calling for a return to traditionalist Biblical values.

As if more stimulus were needed, scholars also observed the growing power of religion in political conflicts around the globe. In Bosnia, where religioethnic tensions were thought to have been successfully managed by Tito's Yugoslavian regime, ambitious politicians seized the mantle of religious nationalism as a path to power. The consequence was a bloody civil war. The officially secular Indian state was rocked by several outbreaks of religious violence that culminated in the electoral victory of a Hindu nationalist party. Various European states are now grappling with a new series of church-state issues that have arisen with the Muslim influx. In the Americas, the rise of evangelical Christianity has re-defined some political alliances while the United States has experienced the increasing salience of religion to candidate and party mobilization. With such ferment in American, comparative, and international politics, how did the discipline react?

THE REDISCOVERY OF RELIGION

From 1980 on, the *Review* still published few studies about the subject, but scholarship on religion and

politics was institutionalized in several key domains. Perhaps the most important development was the formal establishment of the Religion and Politics section within the American Political Science Association.⁵ The section grew out of the “Caucus for Faith and Politics,” a group of Christian political scientists, predominantly Americanists, who did not want to segregate normative faith and academic scholarship. An affiliated group of the APSA, the Caucus received a few coveted slots for research presentations at the APSA annual meeting. When the Association chose organized sections as the principal means for allotting panels, sectarian affiliated groups had an incentive to transform themselves. After reformulating itself as a nonreligious organization devoted to scholarship, open and welcoming to all APSA members, the Caucus petitioned for section status, obtained such recognition in the late 1980s, and dissolved as a separate organization.⁶ The resulting Section on Religion and Politics has thrived, with a recurring membership of approximately 500 political scientists.

Recognition of the subfield owed much to encouragement from senior scholars not affiliated with the Caucus and not generally considered specialists on religion and politics. Their support arose because their own research turned up persuasive evidence of the significance of religion in contemporary American political life. Some of the major works included Miller and Shanks’ *The New American Voter* (1996), Verba, Scholzman, and Brady’s *Voice and Equality*, (1995), and Wildavsky’s (1984) studies of political leadership in the Jewish tradition. The work of these disciplinary stalwarts and APSA leaders helped confer legitimacy on research about religion and politics outside of normative political theory.

The emerging research field received further impetus from the American National Election Studies (ANES). Supported by National Science Foundation grants, ANES produced large biennial surveys of the American population that played a central role in studies of mass politics. Although the scholars who created ANES recognized the importance of religion in their scholarship (Converse 1966), the religious questions on the survey were limited and afflicted with severe measurement error. Students of religion in American elections often turned to alternative datasets because of these flaws. Prompted by the ANES staff and the research community, the ANES Board improved and expanded religious coverage (Leege and Kellstedt 1993), making it easier for scholars to explore religious influences on participation and vote choice. Em-

pirical research also progressed thanks to the periodic religious module in the General Social Survey, specialized surveys on religion and politics conducted by the Pew Center, and the development of cross-national surveys like the World Values Study and the Eurobarometer.

Notwithstanding these developments, we are not confident that the subfield of religion and politics can take for granted its centrality to the discipline. The failure of the *Review* to publish more articles about this subject despite propitious circumstances in the world emphasizes just how tenuous the field’s newly found popularity may be. With the discipline’s agenda subject to fashion and events, the subfield of religion and politics may lose interest as quickly as it was attained—the fate of political socialization research. To avoid that, scholars in the subfield must demonstrate scientific payoff and eschew scholarly isolation. Yet review essays about religion in American politics argue that the subfield has paid insufficient attention to the intellectual significance of its work for the larger discipline (Jelen 1998, Leege and Kellstedt 1993, Wald et al. 2005). Whether dealing with the Christian Right in the United States, Muslim politics following 9–11 or other topics, much research on religion in politics has adopted a “current events” perspective that does not tie inquiries to broad questions that engage the discipline. Such work suggests that religion in politics is of interest only to people with strong religious values, not to political scientists generally.

Patterns of membership in the organized section on religion and politics provide some evidence of scholarly isolation. Scholars from religiously affiliated colleges and universities constitute about a fifth of the section, a percentage we suspect is far higher than in the entire APSA membership. Although these members come from a wide variety of institutions, often received their training in nonreligiously affiliated institutions, and vary widely in terms of interests and focus, the large proportion of such faculty at least suggests the possibility that the Section has an identity politics flavor.

More significant, members of the Religion and Politics section are unusually concentrated in their scholarly interests. The Religion and Politics section has the lowest rate of organized section cross-membership of any of the 36 organized sections. Although there are concentrations of Religion section members in a few other sections, the largest cases of overlapping membership are in fields where research on religion has been traditionally ensconced, public law and political philosophy, rather than fields where religion would represent a new line of inquiry. As a comparison, consider the Race and Ethnicity section, which is close in size to the Religion and Politics group. A fifth of the members of that section also belong to the Women and Politics section and an equal percentage are affiliated with the Urban Politics organized section. If we assume that section membership tells us something about patterns of disciplinary communication, these differences suggest that research on race and ethnicity is more likely to be informed by the insights from other subfields and less

⁵ Scholars in comparative and international politics already had such institutions in place well before the Americanists organized the APSA section. The European Consortium for Political Research and the International Political Science Association both supported subsections on religion and politics. The disciplines of Sociology and Psychology similarly had such divisions at an earlier time.

⁶ The Caucus was reconstituted in the early 1990s as “Christians in Political Science,” a dues-paying organization of approximately 200 members who hold conferences and offer a few panels at APSA meetings. It has no formal relationship with the Section on Religion and Politics, although there is membership overlap.

likely to be self-referential than work on religion and politics.

The data also speak to the exposure of other fields to scholarship on religion and politics. In the other section to which they are most likely to belong, Foundations of Political Theory, scholars of religion and politics constitute just 13% of the membership. By contrast, researchers from the Race and Ethnicity section make up nearly a third of the membership of the Urban Politics section and a fifth of the membership in the section on Women and Politics. We should thus expect the insights and findings of work on race and ethnicity to be disseminated broadly among related subfields, whereas scholarship on religion and politics is appreciably less likely to attract attention in its cognate fields. In fact, research on race alone has grown “massively” in the last decade, penetrating diverse scholarly subfields from which it was largely absent for most of the discipline’s history (Smith 2004, 43). There has been less contagion in religion and politics.

CONCLUSION

The current interest in religion and politics among political scientists developed in the face of serious obstacles due to the social background of professional political scientists, the intellectual origins of the discipline, the sheer complexity of mastering religion as a field of inquiry, and the issue-attention cycle in the discipline. Although the last of these factors has been favorable to the growth of scholarly research, even in the pages of the *Review*, albeit in a somewhat diluted form, the trend is unlikely to persist unless specialists in the subject tie their work to broader theories of political behavior and change.

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