

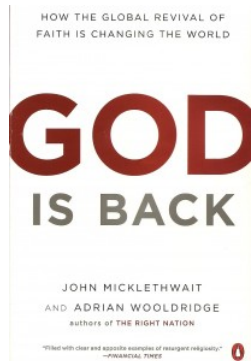
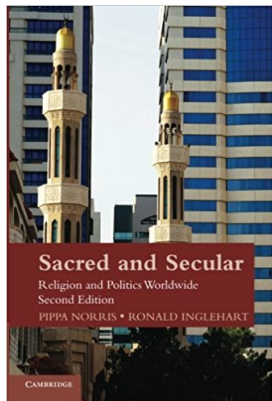
Can Religious Reinterpretations Bridge the Secular-Religious Divide? Experimental Evidence from Tunisia

Sharan Grewal (W&M) and Matthew Cebul (USIP)

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Religious Resurgence



- Secular-religious cleavages prone to polarization, gridlock, conflict
 - **American Politics:** Religion fueling the culture wars (Layman 2001; Jacoby 2014)
 - **Comparative Politics:** secular-religious cleavages prevent democratic transition/consolidation (Rustow 1970; Kalyvas 2000)
 - **International Relations:** religious conflicts less negotiable, more intense (Fox 2004; Svensson 2007)

Are Religious Reinterpretations a Solution?

- Religious reinterpretation = progressive versions of religious scripture
 - Thought to facilitate compromise by engaging religious conservatives “in their own language”
- Evidence of successful reinterpretations:
 - Progressive appeals from religious elites increase tolerance for homosexuality + immigration reform (Adkins et al. 2013; Wallsten & Nteta 2016; Margolis 2018)
 - Quranic reinterpretation increased support for gender equality (Masoud et. al 2016)

- Little scholarship on reinterpretations deployed by people who are not religious authority figures
 - Studies of non-attributed reinterpretations reach divergent conclusions – we remain unsure about their efficacy (Masoud et al 2016, Hassan and Shalaby 2019)
 - Source of religious messaging matters (Robinson 2010) – reinterpretations from secular actors could backfire
 - Practically speaking, want to know whether reinterpretations are effective tools for progressive/secular activists

- **Research Question:** Do religious reinterpretations facilitate political compromise? If so, under what conditions?
- **Argument:** Reinterpretations in everyday dialogue between religious conservatives and secular liberals may *decrease* likelihood of compromise, via two mechanisms: (1) conservative backlash; and (2) liberal emboldenment

- Religious conservatives resist reinterpretations that threaten dominant religious beliefs and identity
 - Motivated reasoning + “identity-protective cognition” (Kahan 2013, Trevors 2019)
 - Out-group challenges trigger perceptions of threat

- Reinterpretations embolden liberals to refuse accommodation with religious conservatives
 - Reinforces idea that traditional/conservative policy preferences are hypocritical or inconsistent
 - e.g. Buttigieg on immigration: “We should call out hypocrisy when we see it. And for a party that associates itself with Christianity to say that it is OK to suggest that God would smile on the division of families at the hands of federal agents, that God would condone putting children in cages, [that party] has lost all claim to ever use religious language again.”

Our Approach



- **Design:** 300 Citizen Debates in Tunisia (liberal v. conservative)
- **DV:** Behavioral measure of compromise
- **Primes:** Provide liberal with reinterpretation

- Topics of Debate

- Selected for political salience and presence of reinterpretation
- **Topic 1:** Restricting Sale of Alcohol (2016-17)
- **Topic 2:** Women in Political Office (2018)

- Priming Experiment

- Provide both sides an argument to help prepare for debate
- Treatment (**Religious-Religious**): liberal receives a reinterpretation; conservative a religious argument
- Control 1 (**Secular-Religious**): liberal receives secular argument; conservative a religious one
- Control 2 (**Secular-Secular**): both sides receive secular arguments

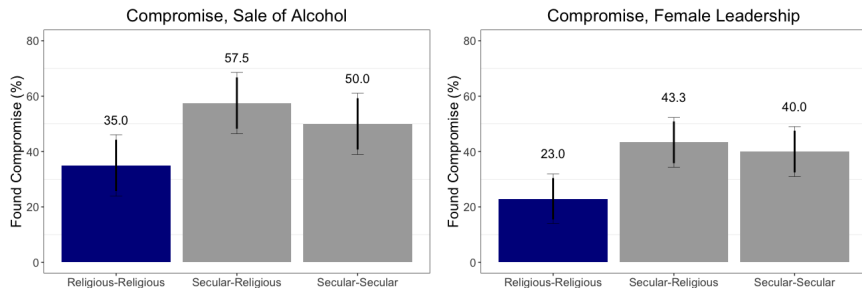
Alcohol:

Several verses of the Quran permit the consumption of alcohol. For instance, sura Quran 16:67 states: "And of the fruits of the date palms and the grapes, you obtain alcoholic drinks and goods. Verily in that is a sign for people who reason."

Female Leadership:

And they rely on a verse from Surat al-Tawba in the Holy Qur'an that says, "Believing men and believing women are protectors of one another." And they interpret it to mean that God does not distinguish between men and women in their capabilities. They also rely on a verse from Surat Ali' Imran: "I shall not lose sight of the labor of any of you who labors in My way, be it man or woman; each of you is equal to the other."

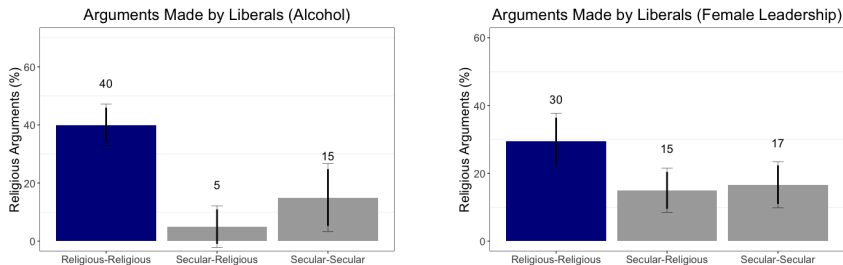
Figure 1: Compromise by Treatment Group



Reinterpretations backfired, cutting the rate of compromise in half

Were liberals actually using our reinterpretations?

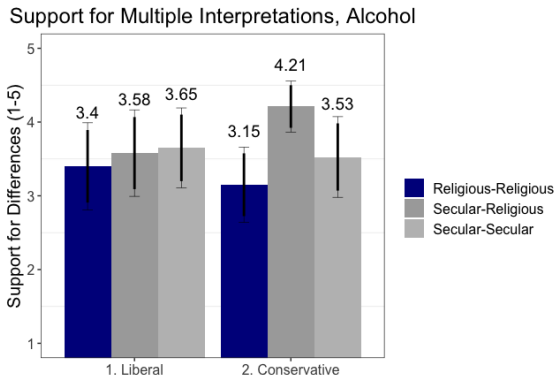
Figure 2: Reasons used in Debate



Yes, and our results hold only among the compliers

Why did reinterpretations backfire?

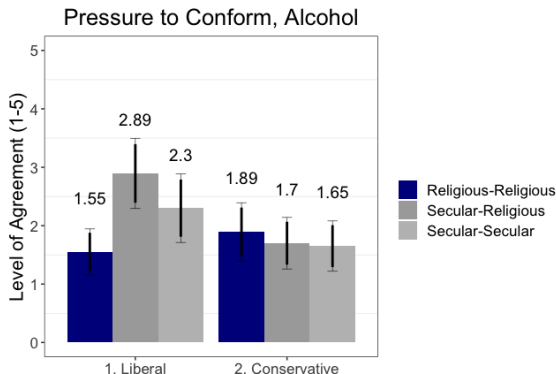
Figure 3: Conservative Backlash



Conservative became less supportive of
“differences in interpretations of religious matters”

Why did reinterpretations backfire?

Figure 4: Liberal Emboldenment



Liberal felt less “pressure to conform to the opinions of members of my religious community”

- **Religious reinterpretations undermine compromise**
 - Could be a function of interlocutor
 - Literature shows they work for religious authorities
 - But we show they don't for everyday citizens
- **Defensive Conservative**
 - Religious conservatives may not be 'inherently' dogmatic
 - Only when interpretation/identity is challenged
- **Emboldened Liberal**
 - Liberals were partly to blame for breakdown in dialogue
 - Parallels across Arab Spring

Thank you!

Comments welcome at
ssgrewal@wm.edu or mcebul@usip.org