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Civil War Secularity Talk

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Abstract: Despite important advances in the study of war and religion, the role of the secular remains under-analyzed. This article develops a theory of secularity talk in civil wars, examining two instances where actors have made religion and sect salient. In comparing patterns of secularity talk among non-elites found in oral history sources from the Syrian civil war and the Northern Irish Troubles, this article contributes to the recent peace turn in the religion-and-conflict literature. Greater attention to religion's borderlands, to how actors distinguish religion from other arenas of human life can tell us more about what happens to the secular when people are under extreme pressure, including during war. This approach also sheds light on non-elite ambivalence towards elite mobilization of religion to fuel conflict, a common but as-yet under-theorized phenomenon.

Keywords: secular; conflict; religion; sectarianism; Syria; Northern Ireland; multiple secularities

1. Introduction

Over the past 15 years, scholars have made good headway in understanding relationships between religion and war, where religio-ethnic entrepreneurs mobilize a cocktail of religious and other symbols to compel supporters to fight or back the fight. This literature has addressed issues of 'religious' conflict prevalence and definition (Fox 2004; Basedau and Schaefer-Kehnert 2019), the role of religion in conflict onset (Brown 2019; Isaacs 2017; Basedau et al. 2016) and intensity/duration/escalation (Cousar et al. 2021), impact of the content of religious claims on conflict dynamics (Isaacs 2017), how to conceptualize the entanglement of religion with nationalism and ethnicity (Huang and Tabaar 2021; Turkmen 2018; Brubaker 2015), and these issues in combination (Svensson and Nilsson 2018). In recent years, scholars have turned to conflict termination and peacebuilding across comparative case studies (Kapshuk and Deitch 2022; Odak and Cehajic-Clancy 2021; Nilsson and Svensson 2020; Deitch 2020; Gurses and Ozturk 2020; Vüllers et al. 2015; Svensson and Harding 2011).

This article offers a conceptual addition to this recent 'peace turn' in the religion-and-conflict literature. It calls for new attention to religion's limits and borderlands, to how actors distinguish religion from other arenas of human life: what Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt have called secularity. Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012, p. 12) define secularity as the 'cultural and symbolic distinctions, as well as institutionally anchored forms and arrangements of differentiation between religion and other social spheres'. Bringing to bear insights from the globally comparative Multiple Secularities project to the conflict literature for the first time, this article develops a theory of wartime 'secularity talk'.

The study of religion's limits is promising because people have ambivalent attitudes toward the very elite ethno-religious mobilization that fuels violence, something not yet acknowledged by the academic literature and well-integrated into theory (Gutkowski 2020, pp. 242–43). Critically, the literature on religion and conflict remains under-developed on how non-elites absorb and critique what entrepreneurs say (Brubaker 2015, p. 10). They are not simply a captive audience. They refract elite messages through the lens of their own experience (Gutkowski 2020, pp. 242–43) which is potentially very important for peacebuilding because individuals are less likely to condone religious violence than states (Cousar et al. 2021).

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The article examines in detail two civil wars where actors have made religion highly salient, Syria (2011–present) and the Northern Irish Troubles (1969–1998). It focuses on the Arab Sunni majority in Syria (with some examples from Arab non-Sunni minority members) and Presbyterians in Northern Ireland, the largest Protestant group. Despite obvious differences between the case studies (Protestant Christian/Sunni Muslim; democracy/dictatorship; politically powerful minority/disempowered majority; baby boomers/millennials and Generation Z; hindsight of 20 years/war still ongoing), there are persuasive grounds for comparison. At the onset of these civil wars, Syrian and Northern Irish societies were highly pious, post-colonial societies, with religion playing a powerful, public role. In both cases, ethno-religious identity was an important form of social glue. Extended family and local geography were key vectors of social organization, with sectarianism mapped onto this as a remnant of colonial rule mobilized by subsequent governments. In both states, sectarianism and ethno-religious differences were part of the structure of privilege in society, though in different ways. In terms of their structural arc, both civil wars originated in violent crackdown on peaceful civil rights protestors. The wars' impacts varied greatly geographically, based on local conditions. Both societies today face challenges of how to live together after a bitter conflict which balkanized everyday life. Both cases include people who resisted cynical attempts to divide them by religion, sect, or ethnicity, even at the height of war.

The research questions animating the comparison are: how do non-elite non-combatants engage in 'secularity talk', drawing distinctions between religion and other social spheres during civil wars? What best accounts for similarities and differences between these case studies? The article argues that non-elites in both Syria and Northern Ireland use secularity talk mainly when considering two topics: (1) to normatively distinguish good, ethical religion from bad politics and (2) to discuss humanity's relationship with God. Among Northern Irish Presbyterians, *implicit* secularity talk predominates while among Arab Syrian Sunnis, there was more *explicit* secularity talk, particularly when speakers discussed secular political arrangements and liberal, 'secularist' identity. Despite differences between the case studies, based on the data analyzed, the key difference for variations in secularity talk was the pre-existing relationship between religion and state immediately prior to the war rather than simply differences between Presbyterian Christianity and Sunni Islam.

This theory of secularity talk was built out of a 'multi-grounded' theoretical approach (Goldkuhl and Cronholm 2010). Using methods of researching intersections between war and the secular I have previously developed using written archives, interview transcripts, and published memoirs (Gutkowski 2020, pp. 245–51; 2014), I conducted textual analysis and two stages of hand coding of oral history sources on the Syrian revolution and civil war (2011–present) and the Northern Irish Troubles (1969–1998). Simply put, secularity talk is religion talk—to see it, we must first look at when and how people talk about religion, including sect. Then, we must take a second interpretive step to determine the main themes: how, when, and why do people discuss religion's edges, marking its boundaries?

The five texts featured are: *Considering Grace: Presbyterians and the Troubles* (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019); *We Crossed the Bridge and it Trembled: Voices from Syria* (Pearlman 2018); *My Country: A Syrian Memoir* (Eid 2019); *Dispatches from Syria: the Morning They Came for Us* (Di Giovanni 2017); and *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018). I analyzed two further texts for triangulation: on Northern Irish Catholic (and other Protestant) perspectives (Brewer et al. 2013) and on the perspectives of rural Arab Syrian Sunni women from working class families, a demographic not well represented in the other books (Watad and Watad 2021).

Why do I highlight these texts? Commissioned by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), *Considering Grace* is based on 120 interviews conducted between June and December 2017, almost 20 years after the Troubles ended. Among non-elite oral history on the Troubles, few focus on the churches and questions of Christian faith, and there is nothing comparable in scope on a single sect. There is no single text which captures Syrian voices as comprehensively. Syrian oral histories and memoirs are very limited, though growing,

and none specifically discuss religion. I chose four books to try, imperfectly, to mirror *Considering Grace*'s scope. *We Crossed a Bridge* is organized chronologically, structured by the voices of 87 displaced Syrian interviewees, without author commentary beyond the introduction. *My Country* is the memoir of one Syrian activist. Most is written in retrospect, since he left Syria, but it also reproduces his real-time journal from his October–December 2013 hunger strike. *Dispatches from Syria* was written by an American journalist who was based in Syria from 2012 to 2013. She quotes a wide range of Syrian voices, including regime supporters, at the moment when Syria's peaceful revolution transitioned to civil war. *Burning Country* is an analytical, historical account co-authored by a Syrian human rights activist and a Syrian media commentator/novelist. They provide critical insights into the period 2014–2018, when foreign actors began driving events on the ground, Islamic State rose, and a dynamic series of alliances emerged beyond pro- and anti-regime forces. Beyond their own inside knowledge of the Syrian uprising and war, they also quote many Syrian opposition activists. Like *We Crossed a Bridge*, *Burning Country* captures geographic diversity and also non-Sunni Arab minority voices.

The article is structured as follows. First, it develops in greater detail the concept of secularity talk. It then turns to the Syrian and Northern Irish case studies respectively to illustrate the concept, to make the discussion concrete, and to develop a distinction between explicit and implicit secularity talk. The article then compares the cases and offers exploratory conclusions on both secularity talk and the wider relationship between war and secularity.

2. War-Time Secularity Talk

Scholars engaged in the Multiple Secularities project have studied a range of global contexts, including culturally Christian and Muslim ones, comparing and contrasting inflections of secularity and secularism to develop nuanced concepts designed to hold cross-case. Scholars have skillfully demonstrated through rich empirical work, that 'the rejection of concepts such as secularisation and secularism in large parts of the Islamic world is not necessarily bound up with the absence of differentiation between the religious and the secular' (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2017, p. 14; Zemmin 2019; Krämer 2021; Dressler et al. 2019). In doing so, they offer a persuasive alternative to a line of argument that what happens in Muslim contexts is best understood as Islamic doubt, ambiguity, or deviance from social orthopraxy (Dahlgren and Schielke 2013).

I borrow the core distinction between 'secularism' and 'secularity', set out by Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012). They define secularity as the cultural, symbolic, and institutional differentiation between religion and other social spheres, even though religion and these other spheres are fundamentally entangled. Secularism then is an explicit philosophical position that religion and politics should be kept separate, plus the political arrangements that maintain this separation. In later work, Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr (2020, p. 14) fractionate secularities further, delineating processes of social differentiation (in institutions, law, space, and habits) from conceptual differentiation (through language and symbols). They argue that actors do both. My data are not sufficiently fine-grained to incorporate these nuances, so I use Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt's (2012) definitions here, focusing on discourse.

Much of the work of the Multiple Secularities project has been at the macro level: states, societies, and civilizations. Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr (2020, p. 39) have recently highlighted the need for more research on the individual level, the 'lifeworld dimension of secularity', including dress, food, space and time, and lifestyles. I agree, and I have previously used Schutz's idea of the lifeworld, connecting it to Bourdieu's conception of habitus and field. Analyzing the lifeworlds and secular habitus of millennial Jewish Israelis, I argued that both lifeworlds and habitus have been shaped by ethno-religious competition for capital in the social field of Palestine-Israel (Gutkowski 2020, pp. 42–44). This framework still shapes my thinking for this article. Secularity talk seems to emerge

at the level of the lifeworld when religion becomes an object of competition and violent contestation in the political field (cf. Gutkowski 2020, pp. 42–43).

The oral history data analyzed for this article does not lend itself to greater in-depth engagement with a Bourdieuian frame. However, the two new cases produce an additional insight which could be explored further in the future. In the Jewish-Israeli case, there is a highly visible Jewish secular habitus among approximately 40% of the population (Cooperman et al. 2016), underpinned by a Jewish popular culture (Liebman 1998). Unsurprisingly, 'secular' Jews in Israel engage in secularity talk about the conflict with Palestinians. In Northern Ireland and Syria, however, a strong pious habitus predominated. These two cases suggest that widespread secular habitus is not actually a *requirement* for secularity talk to emerge or to be real and felt at the level of the lifeworld. Rather, secularity talk is found among those of strong faith as well as none, and all variations in between, in wars where questions of religion are begged in the context of violent competition over the state (competition for capital in the social field, in Bourdieu's terms).

The Multiple Secularities project has not yet addressed war and violence. However, some insights from Sohrabi's (2019) paper on the (non-violent) Iranian constitutional revolution (1905–1911) informed my thinking as it deals with a period of intense political change and competition for capital in the political field. From Sohrabi, I borrow the idea of contingency and reversibility in how secularity talk develops in civil war. As Sohrabi (2019, p. 4) put it, 'luck matter(s)', contingency matters, in how secularity talk emerges in times of dramatic political change. He also defines secularity as the 'non-ideological separation that comes about unintentionally,' though it is 'agent-driven', and argues that 'the attained separations may be reversed' (Sohrabi 2019, p. 3). Secularity talk as I see it is agent-driven in that it is people demarcating religion from other spheres. However, it does not require that the speaker support an ideological position that religious commitment should be separated from political life (secularism). Indeed, those engaged in secularity talk in Syria and Northern Ireland accepted a strong role for religion in community life and politics. They often used secularity talk to argue for the protection of good 'true religion' from political distortion and exploitation.

I understand secularity talk as a discourse which becomes visible at the grassroots level during war time, whereby speakers differentiate between religion and other social spheres, primarily politics, while simultaneously accepting that religion and other social spheres are fundamentally entangled. Such discourses build on what secularities were observable in society pre-war. The pre-war era creates what Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr (2020, p. 37) call 'path probabilities' for what forms secularity talk will take in war. However, based on the two case studies analyzed here, I suggest it would be best to study the phenomenon as time-limited, to observe changes at the 'critical junctures' (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2020, p. 37), at the onset of violence and then at its end (turning points which are notoriously blurry, as war and peace coexist), to be precise about when, how, and why it evolves.

Secularity talk happens primarily in wars where actors have made religion salient. In such wars, typically, elites have mobilized religious idioms at some stage, often combined with ethnicity, nationalism, or other forms of potential collective 'identification', in Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) meaning of the term. Secularity talk happens primarily but not exclusively in wars where large numbers of people begin to see such religious idioms as a part of their feelings of '"groupness"—the sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded, solidary group' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 20), even if society as a whole does not have high levels of active piety. Feelings of groupness emerge from multiple, interlocking directions though (cf. Pinto 2017), rather than as purely catalyzed by elites. Such feelings of groupness are more usually latent within a society rather than novel and artificial. Such collective feelings of being a group must become sufficiently strong to 'imperatively require interest-threatening or even life-threatening action' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 13) by individuals rather than 'more loosely structured, weakly constraining forms of affinity and affiliation' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 21). In this article, my focus is on secularity talk

among the grassroots, though bearing in mind how these are shaped by state and non-state elite (e.g., religious leaders) 'master narratives' of conflict (Løland 2019).

Still, as I have argued previously, 'most objectives in war—gaining or holding territory, killing the enemy, undermining the ability of a military are . . . areligious and asecular' (Gutkowski 2014, p. 212). Secularity talk needs to be 'provoked' or set into motion by actors mobilizing religious symbols (cf. Gutkowski 2014, p. 212). As Al-Azmeh (2019, p. 126) has observed in his work on secularism in the Arab world, 'life is of its nature worldly . . . [something] come[s] to acquire a secular stamp when' actors invoke religion and its limits in some way. This happens more often in wars where religion has been mobilized, many but not all of which have been civil wars. Against the grain of scholarly arguments over the threshold question of what, if anything, counts as a war involving religion (e.g., Does it require theological claims? The mobilization of religious symbols for national claims?), I hypothesize that such threshold questions may not be relevant to determining where we could begin look for secularity talk (cf. Svensson and Nilsson 2018). Rather, based on my analysis of Syria and Northern Ireland, I hypothesize that what matters most is the mobilization of religious symbols *somehow* and to some extent, raising the salience of religion in the minds of non-elite actors, paving the way for secularity talk. Threshold may 'matter' only in so far as preventing us from pursuing wildly fringe cases.

Finally, there is no single conceptualization of 'the secular' that can capture its meaning in both Syria and Northern Ireland. For example, in Syria, the term has been associated with multiculturalism, socialism, and non-Islamism, while in Northern Ireland, the term is more associated with diminishing social importance of religious authority, faith, and practice. The purpose of the article is to identify practices with a family resemblance in different contexts, not to impose one single concept of the secular. The case studies that follow set out the relevant terminology and historical background for understanding each case on its own terms. They highlight three themes of secularity talk in each case which have important commonalities but also which need to be understood on their own terms to capture nuance. Rather than being problematic, this showcases how diverse secularity talk is as social practice.

3. Syria

Inspired by Arab Spring protests in Egypt and Tunisia against authoritarian rule, the Syrian revolution began in March 2011 with locally based protests opposing the regime, which soon spread across the country. In 2012, protests gave way to militarized resistance to the regime's use of its military might against unarmed protestors. Soldiers and officers defected and formed the Free Syrian Army. By 2014, war had engulfed the whole country, sparking waves of forced migration to neighboring states and Europe, with Iran and Hezbollah supporting the regime as Gulf funding poured in to support what was by now a highly fractured mosaic of opposition fighters. In 2015, Russia entered the war to shore up a tottering Assad regime and a US-led coalition targeted Islamic State but not Assad. Turkey intervened in 2016 to prevent the formation of a sovereign Kurdish entity on its southern border. The war morphed from a regime-opposition axis to a multi-front battle involving the Syrian regime, opposition groups, foreign actors and shifting alliances. By 2019, the regime again controlled most of the country, decimated by a decade of conflict.

From 2012, the Syrian civil war was religionized (infused with religious idioms) by elite and grassroots actors in two related ways: through the mobilization of Muslim and non-Muslim religious idioms, including those of Islamic sect, and through the mobilization of political Islamism. As Pearlman (2020, p. 522) has argued, such mobilization 'was largely an outgrowth of contentious dynamics not particular to Islam, including state repression, regime strategies of divide and conquer, and the impact of horrific violence in reshaping actors and understandings.'

Elite mobilization of religious, ethnic, and Islamic sect group identification during the Syrian conflict began gradually but accelerated in 2012. Paulo Pinto (2017) identified four dimensions of sectarianization in Syria. These dynamics can be applied more broadly

to how feelings of sub-national group solidarity on the basis of religion, ethnicity, or sect strengthened as national solidarity fractured: top down (regime-driven), bottom up (emerging from the grassroots), outside-in (where external actors using religious, sect, or ethnic idioms joined the fight), and inside-out (where religious, ethnic or sect mobilization during the Syrian civil war impacted neighboring states, particularly Iraq and Lebanon). Some scholars have highlighted the pivotal role played by the regime in fracturing national and local solidarities and raising the salience of sub-group identification on the basis of religion, ethnicity, and sect in the conflict in 2012 (Phillips 2015; cf. Knapp et al. 2016). Wedeen (2019), a social anthropologist, has countered that sectarianism (what I would call group affiliation) was latent in Syrian society prior to 2012. It was invisible below regime 'claims of multisectarian accommodation and national unity' but several factors allowed it to 'percolate to the surface . . . and congeal', becoming integrated into the matrix of conflict between the regime and the opposition (Wedeen 2019, p. 151). These were: how regime supporters were long conditioned by authoritarian rule to believe rumors they know not to be true, such as about Sunni gangs attacking minority villages; that there is a complex structure of loyalty between the regime and its thugs (*shabiha*) which made this group already primed for the regime to manipulate group-based fears; and that fringe opposition groups in the early stages of protests used group-based language. The regime was able to plausibly paint the revolutionaries as Sunni chauvinists to its supporters, capitalizing on the fact that Friday protests originating in mosques as the only sites free from the hand of the regime and that alongside mainly secular, national chants, 'God is Great' also featured. Wedeen notes that non-Sunni Muslim and non-Muslim minority groups upon whose support the regime relied were already 'primed from the beginning to fear the worst,' i.e., an Islamist hijacking of the revolution, while Arab Syrian Sunni preachers based in the Gulf were preaching Sunni chauvinist messages to a Syrian audience via the Internet, boosting Syrian fears of jihadists and of Gulf military intervention (Wedeen 2019, pp. 141–59). These factors created a captive audience for group entrepreneurs of all stripes.

It is important to recognize the limits of religious, ethnic, or sect idiom mobilization for explaining the conflict in Syria. Positions supporting or rejecting Assad on the one hand, and local identities and dynamics on the other, far outweighed ethnic or religious solidarities. This was true even at the height of grassroots and elite mobilization of ethnic, religious, and sect idioms during the civil war. Strong localism is a legacy of Syrian state formation and modernization processes as well as its rural geography (Van Dam 2011). Localism outlasted attempts by first the French and later two Assad regimes (1970–2000; 2000–present) to manipulate ethno-religious group configurations under the guise of state-building, while simultaneously heralding national unity amidst demographic diversity (*tanawwu'*) and Syria's 'multicultural secularism protective of minorities' (Wedeen 2019, p. 31). Unsurprisingly, war dynamics varied widely across the state. Military alliances among opposition groups were more often determined by local power constellations and expediency than the national picture or sub-national religious or ethnic identities.

The conflict became rapidly religionized along a second vector in 2013 with the rise of armed groups expressing their identity through Islamist idioms. Some had politically Islamist aspirations; others were simply, as one Muslim speaker put it, 'angry Muslims', using identities which were culturally resonant, 'referencing their neighbourhoods . . . [in a] more communitarian than religious' way (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, p. 121), often as a way to attract Gulf funding. The most notorious group, Daesh (Islamic State), appeared in 2013. It declared a caliphate in Syria and Iraq in June 2014, attracting both Sunni foreign fighters and Syrians disillusioned with Assad's continuing grip on the country. Though the regime was supported militarily by Hezbollah and Iran from 2012, in 2015, Iran began recruiting Shi'ites first from Iraq and then from across the Middle East and beyond to fight in Syria through the idiom of defending Shi'a mosques from Sunni jihadists.

To understand the emergence of secularity talk during the war, we also need to understand dynamics of secularity in Syria before 2011. Similar to most other Arab states, Article 3 of the Syrian constitution (1973) declares that the president must be a Muslim and

Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of legislation. Atheism is illegal. It is a multicultural society. Sunni majority areas of the countryside are shaped by traditional, often Sufi-influenced social norms, with religiously mixed rural areas similarly socially conservative. The urban centers in the west of the country have more mixed populations and many include people with a more liberal lifestyle.

Under Hafez Al-Assad (1970–2000), the authoritarian Ba'ath regime emphasized socialism, modernization, and secular nationalism, while simultaneously privileging non-Sunni minorities in the army and bureaucracy, particularly Alawites, the group to which the Assad family belong. This changed after the 1976–1982 Muslim Brotherhood led uprising. After crushing the uprising and killing, jailing, or exiling its Sunni leaders, the regime took a two-pronged approach. In official discourse, the regime convincingly 'sold' Ba'athist state secularism as a form of multi-cultural, secular security to religious minority groups. This approach was part of the legacy and inheritance of the French Mandate in Syria: to declare equality among sects (multicultural secularism), while manipulating sect sentiment by privileging some over others. At the same time, the regime also portrayed itself as a defender of Sunni Islam to the Sunni majority (Wedeen 1999, p. 47). It co-opted the Sunni ulema, particularly in Damascus and Aleppo in the 1990s, to bolster its credibility (Pierret 2013). Under Bashar al-Assad (2000–present), in the main cities and smaller urban centers, people who benefitted from the regime's new, neoliberal economic policies regardless of sect showcased capitalist trappings and consumption patterns, including in dress and leisure (Wedeen 2019). Those who maintained a more visibly conservative lifestyle were either more explicitly pious, rural-dwelling, or poorer.

Prior to the 2011 public protests in Syria, inspired by other Arab Spring revolutions, Syrians shared among themselves several pre-existing discourses about the secular. First, the Assad regime promoted anti-religious (i.e., anti-Sunni religious) sentiments among Alawite officers in the armed force after the 1976–1982 Islamist uprising, extending this to promoting personal non-piety. For example, Eid (2019, p. 19) recounts in his memoir bringing a classmate to the Sunni mosque to pray, not knowing he was the son of an Alawite army officer, a group for whom public prayer was forbidden and who could be punished for his son's actions. After 2011, security services enacted dark legacies of the Assads' promotion of an anti-religious, anti-Sunni, secular fundamentalist stance. Hussein, tortured in prison, said: 'One guard pull[ed] a man up by his ear and said, 'Say Bashar al-Assad is your God'. The man replied, 'I have no God but God,' and the guard shot him . . . the guard looked up at the others, defiantly. 'Assad is your God!'' (Di Giovanni 2017, p. 69).

Second, prior to 2011, 'secularist' was a term people applied to leftist intellectuals to distinguish them from Islamist activists who led the 1976 uprising. The term denotes support for a civil state (*dawla madaniyya*), but also describes a liberal lifestyle which includes participating in many Syrian cultural norms. It does not mean atheist or anti-religion. (Minority leftists were identified by both their politics and sect.) After 2011, Sunni opposition activists continued to distinguish themselves from political Islamists, including those who were part of the early street protests. As one activist put it, 'three quarters of activists in Aleppo in 2011 were secularists. The rest were moderate Islamists' (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, p. 95). The term took on greater importance for distinguishing themselves from the more religiously fundamentalist end of the Sunni jihadist groups (most notoriously Daesh) who proliferated on the Syrian battlefield after 2013.

In an article on religious mobilization during the Syrian revolution and civil war, Wendy Pearlman (2020, p. 522) helpfully distinguishes and discusses 'two dimensions of religion: as a set of beliefs and practices with political implications for ideology, public piety and state policies (religion); and as a collective identity, social structure, and marker of difference within a heterogenous society (sect)'. This is the distinction in Arabic between *din* (religion) and *taifiyya* (sectarianism). Syrians themselves make this distinction. In my words, this distinction underpins Syrian secularity talk, with sect seen as a more 'secular' social marker as opposed theologically infused conceptions of politics and public order, such as those proffered by various forms of Islamism. To Pearlman's rubric, I would add a

third dimension to our analysis of religion in the Syrian war. For Syrians, personal piety is something which is simultaneously individual and often part of the fabric people's closest relationships (with family, friends, neighbors) (cf. Lakitsch 2018, pp. 10–12).

The article now turns to three main themes of secularity talk among the Syrian opposition, most but not all of whom were Sunni.

3.1. Distinguishing Sectarianism from Multicultural Conviviality

A consequence of the regime's promotion of multicultural, secular nationalism was that before the war, most Syrians, like Iraqis prior to their own civil war, claimed not to not see religious or ethnic group differences. Sham said, 'I swear, in Syria nobody used to ask whether you're Muslim or Christian. We had no idea what religion our friends were', (Pearlman 2018, p. 205). The anti-sectarianism of many revolutionaries in 2011 was summarized by an early chant, 'Religion is for God, but the nation is for all', recounted by Aziza from Hama (Pearlman 2018, p. 146). Ziyad from Homs recounted,

> Once, a young man entered one of the mosques in Homs. You could see a necklace around his neck . . . He lined up and prayed with everyone else. And when he bowed, the necklace fell out. The pendant was a cross. People said to him, 'Either you're wearing that necklace by mistake, or you came to the mosque by mistake' . . . [He replied,] 'I came here to go out in the demonstration with all of you' (Pearlman 2018, p. 72)

Protestors appropriated *Allahu Akbar*, particularly while departing mosques after Friday prayers. In this early phase, the loose, cross-group alliance of protestors also appropriated the pre-revolutionary regime discourse about Syrian nationalism as multicultural secularism. Later, its loss was something to be mourned: 'There was a feeling of belonging in Zabadani that the regime deprived us of . . . We felt Syrian more than any ethnic or religious denomination,' (Di Giovanni 2017, p. 98).

As the regime painted non-violent revolutionaries as Sunni jihadist terrorists during the first year of the uprising, regime supporters from minority groups also used the regime's old multicultural secularism security discourse to defend their own stance. For example, Mayada, Ismaili and married to an Alawite in Homs, said, 'Some people here hate . . . But some get much closer to each other because there are people like me who stay neutral. We bond with our neighbours because we are all fed up' with the fighting (Di Giovanni 2017, p. 115).

Like Mayada, Adam embraced multicultural conviviality, but he placed blame squarely on the regime and its allies for provoking group identification during the conflict and breaking a sense of Syrian national solidarity. His criticism was highly typical of the opposition, repeated in the texts analyzed by Syrians from all backgrounds:

> Bouthaina Shaaban, the regime spokesperson got on TV and said, 'Those radicals, they want to make strife between the Shia and blah blah blah.' Are you kidding me? Our children are in prison, and we have a shitty government and you're talking about Shia and Sunnis? I didn't even know the difference between Shiite and Sunni until this whole thing started, because nobody cared. Don't get me wrong—Shia and Sunnis have been fighting forever. But nobody was mentioning any of that in Syria at the time. In 2011 . . . the goals were political reform, participation, real representation and some actual active citizenship in the country . . . the regime was basically doing everything possible to put sects against each other and create a toxic environment, where nobody trusts anybody and nobody knows who's in control. (Pearlman 2018, pp. 106–8)

For supporters of the opposition, the subtle secularity talk dimension to their critique was in highlighting the regime's manipulation of sect as political identity, counter to its promotion of multi-religious conviviality and indeed the very religious, Islamic ethics that prior to the revolution the regime sometimes claimed to defend.

Marcell Shehwaro's comment supports Wedeen's insights into the 'congealing' of sect sentiment in the transition from revolution to war:

> The sensation of Sunni identity is based on something real—I can't pretend that the regime isn't sectarian, that there haven't been sectarian massacres. Look, there were stages on the way. When they started killing Sunni civilians randomly as opposed to just those protesting . . . When they played Shia songs at the checkpoints in all-Sunni neighbourhoods. Then my atheist friends began asserting their Sunnism, which is now more of a social than a religious identity. (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, p. 110)

Marcell's last comment is an interesting, non-standard, snippet of secularity talk. While it should be noted that Marcell is Christian, her comments are not a function of her sect but shared among revolutionaries. Like Adam, Marcell distinguished between Sunni sectarianism, a 'real' but also opportunistic and politically manipulated identity, and her friends' 'true' religious identities as non-pious atheists. Atheists could 'become' Sunnis in the context of a war where sect becomes solely political, distinct from personal piety.

3.2. True Piety and Bad Politics

Some Syrian secularity talk was explicit. For example, protestors who self-identified as secularist were keen to highlight their existence to an international audience. Sham from Douma did so while simultaneously using culturally resonant religious metaphor: 'the world thinks we are religious fundamentalists in Syria but we are secular—but none of that matters anymore . . . I am disgusted by humanity—we'll all go to heaven and leave Bashar to rule over an empty country' (Pearlman 2018, pp. 205–6). Mustafa, a Marxist Ismaili from Salamiyah commented, 'the regime didn't want to believe they were fighting any secular entity' (Pearlman 2018, p. 120).

Other revolutionaries talked about their relationships with more pious, Arab Sunni compatriots. For example, Ayham, an Arab Sunni from Damascus, talks about revolutionaries gathering in the mosque on Laylat al-Qadr, the holiest night of Ramadan:

> I don't pray, but I always participated in preparing the meal, because I thought it was a beautiful social event. People started arriving. There were a lot of old people [at the mosque for the holiday] but also guys with body piercings and strange haircuts. You could see they had no idea what to do. Some guys were wearing shorts, which you aren't supposed to do in a mosque. Out of respect, they were trying to pull their shorts down toward their ankles. But that exposed their backsides. It was a beautiful scene of the complex social fabric we had in Damascus . . . The prayers started and the imam said, 'God protect us from those who harm us.' People started shouting, 'Amen! Amen!' It's a religious word and the majority of people there knew nothing about religion. But you could see them crying and shivering. I don't believe in prayer, but I believe in the emotional charge that prayer carries . . . Prayer ended. Silence. Then one person shouted, 'Freedom!' (Pearlman 2018, pp. 125–26)

The protestors then left the mosque to demonstrate and were met with an immediate, armed response, including sniper fire. In terms of secularity talk, Ayham with gentle humor distinguished between pious and impious ways of life, but he stressed the pre-war, grassroots Damascene conviviality which transcended regime discourse about multicultural secularism (cf. Bandak 2014).

With the rise of Islamist groups, things changed. Husayn from Aleppo recounted early good relations with Islamist protestors:

> Whenever people went to pray, I'd keep doing whatever I was doing. No one ever pressured me to join. They knew that I'm secular but treated me with respect . . . One activist friend became a Salafist and grew a long beard . . . He told the others that if he couldn't make meetings, he gave me permission to vote on his behalf. There wasn't religious extremism in the beginning . . . We created the first

> movement against Islamization after Islamic groups killed a fourteen-year-old who used to sell coffee on the street. Three Islamists—an Egyptian, a Tunisian and a Syrian—wanted to take coffee and pay the boy later. He told them, 'Even if the Prophet Mohammed came I wouldn't give it to him on credit.' The Islamists considered that blasphemy and killed the boy. (Pearlman 2018, pp. 166–67)

The secularity talk aspect of Husayn's narrative is in his distinction between his good Muslim Islamist co-revolutionaries and the unethical behavior of the hypocritical jihadists who claimed to be pious but murdered a child. This was a common discourse. For example, Khalil on the murder of a German doctor by Daesh: 'if that's infidel, let us all be infidels like him' (Pearlman 2018, pp. 162–63). By this he means it is better to be sincerely ethical and not a Muslim than to be a hypocrite.

In the Syrian case, there is sustained evidence on the radicalization of those who joined Islamist militias, including Islamic State. For example, Yasser Berro from Aleppo recounted:

> This is a friend who worked with us in aid distribution. He was a secularist: here you see him surrounded by unveiled women. One day a regime shell hit his house and his brother was killed. He came to me and said 'everything we're doing is useless—I'm going to fight'. Next I heard he'd joined Jabhat al-Nusra. Then he moved to Daesh . . . their brainwashing turned him into someone unrecognisable. The last time I spoke to him on the phone, he told me he'd behead me himself if I ever came back to Syria. The whole process took six months. (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, p. 138)

Others were skeptical about whether joining Islamist militias other than Daesh signaled a radical change of religious orientation or was merely a sign of who was winning on the battlefield: As Ziad Hamoud, said, 'A militia called 'Guevara' doesn't win funds' from Islamically conservative Gulf monarchies (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, p. 122). On the surface, the speakers are talking about hypocrisy. This is also however, a form of secularity talk, distinguishing between the 'truly' committed Islamists potentially nobly resisting the regime and 'fake' Islamists, changing their names for political and military expedience. This normative distinction between true religion and bad politics is a form of what I call implicit secularity talk.

For example, Khalil is a former Army officer from Deir ez-Zor who defected during the revolution. He described trying to reason with the Nusra Front when they arrived in Deir ez-Zor in June 2012. At issue was their raising of the Al Qaeda flag and removal of the revolutionary flag: 'They said, 'that's the flag of the infidels. We're raising the flag of the Prophet.' I said 'Okay, the Prophet is in our hearts. But raising this flag is going to cause us a lot of problems' in getting people to support the revolution who fear an Islamist takeover of the government. The secularity talk aspect of this is Khalil's distinction between politicized religion and Islamic faith 'in our hearts'. This distinction did not persuade Nusra, who used a form of Salafism new Syria to justify killing and strict interpretation of the sharia to govern areas under their control. For Khalil, first, the battle against Assad requires not alienating potential supporters and, second, Islamic piety (true religion) is personal, for building a good society, not for justifying killing and harsh punishment (bad politics).

Initially, Syrians who are not politically Islamist welcomed Islamist resistance to the regime and its allies but rejected what they saw as over-reach into people's personal conduct. For example, Eid (2019, p. 144) described living through the regime's siege of Moadamiya in the winter of 2013, with men and women huddling close together in front of a fire for warmth then said: 'And if the extremist armed Islamists in other parts of Syria don't like that, they can kiss my arse . . . ' He criticizes 'extremist' jihadists for insisting on separation of sexes even when people are trying to survive, using secularity talk to a boundary between what is true Islamic ethical commitment which is reasonable and flexible in a crisis (and indeed seen among some Islamists) and what is a politically distorted Islam generated in the mayhem of war-time Syria.

Speakers also criticized the regime for claiming to defend Sunni Islam before the war and abusing its symbols and practices during the war. There are consistent accounts of the regime using religion to determine targeting and timing of attacks, with Sunni mosques bombed, including in Daryaa and Moadamiya, near Damascus; the regime shelling a market in rural Idlib on Eid, while Sunnis were preparing for the final Ramadan iftar; and Ramadan fast-breaking targeted: 'They used to hear the [pilots] in the planes on the telephones saying to each other, 'We want to make them eat death. We want them to break their fast with death'' (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, p. 111). Here, secularity talk is direct, about differentiating the regime's unethical, anti-religious behavior from true piety and obedience to God. Abu Tha'ir recounted a protest originating at the al-Omari mosque in Daraa, 'They burnt holy books and wrote things on the wall like, 'Do not kneel for God. Kneel for Assad,'' (Pearlman 2018, p. 66). Di Giovanni recounts an exchange with her regime-sympathetic minder following a visit to Daryaa, a Damascus suburb brutally shelled by the regime in 2012, who was shocked the regime had destroyed the mosque. Maryam said, 'Even the French during the occupation did not destroy mosques when people took refuge in holy places . . . this is a crime against God . . . and Alawites believe in God as well as Sunnis' (Di Giovanni 2017, pp. 86–87).

3.3. Divine Boundary-Crossing

For a believing Muslim, there are social relations between humans and also between humans and God. There is also a boundary between the natural world and the divine sphere. Speakers reflected on this boundary and on their relationship with God. This reflection produced a third instance of secularity talk.

First, there is consistent evidence that Syrians used faith to cope, which scholars have identified as common practice in other wars. One interesting example which shows the entangling of faith and secularity talk is in how Syrians described praying for divine intervention in extreme moments: under fire, in prison, while fleeing Syria (cf. Watad and Watad 2021, p. 134). The is a common Syrian cultural practice for invoking good luck, regardless of how rigorously pious the speaker is or is not. In Eid's memoir, his descriptions invoking God's mercy (when arrested, while on hunger strike, while escaping across the border to Lebanon) show how cultural practice becomes inseparable from piety in life-or-death moments. For example, describing his arrest and interrogation, Eid (2019, p. 46) said, 'I heard a gun being cocked behind me. I began reciting the Martyrs' prayer in my head . . . I closed my eyes and waited'. Such discourse, from pious or cultural intent or both, marks a boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds through positing its crossing by God in time of need. It is a form of implicit secularity talk.

Most of the academic literature on the Syrian civil war concentrates on collective mobilization of sectarian and religious symbols by groups. The analyzed texts also give hints that the civil war had a diverse impact on faith, though more research would be needed to confirm. While there has been no comparative study of the impact of living through war on people's faith, Reeve Robert Brenner's (1980) study with Holocaust survivors suggests that living through extreme violence can generate a range of responses, from loss of faith to increased faith or practice. Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami (2018, p. 181) argued that religionization of the war has sparked a backlash: 'it's now easy to find openly atheist or agnostic Syrians'. For example, they quote Abo Hajar, who argued that the Syrian civil war tested and broke people's faith in God: 'People are becoming more extreme . . . And who am I to judge them? I'm in Germany now. I'm not inside. Everybody's focusing on the religious extremism, but there's all kinds. Syria has lots of extreme atheists now,' (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, p. 181). In an interesting piece of implicit secularity talk, where family love provides perhaps more emotional spiritual succor than prayer, Abdel-Halim, an FSA fighter described living through the regime's 3-year siege of Homs: 'By the end, I was just waiting for death. I'd try to calm myself by praying and reading the Quran daily. What gave me most peace was when I was able to talk on Skype to my mom and dad'.

To summarize: what did secularity talk among Syrians do during the civil war? It is not an independent phenomenon but bound up with the near-pervasive use of religious idioms during the war. First, secularity talk can be seen in practices of criticism/condemnation: of how actors, including the regime and its supporters, manipulated religious and ethnic sentiments to justify killing of unarmed civilians and torture; of hypocrisy by Sunni Islamists claiming God's mantle but acting unethically. Its second role is in expressing nostalgia and longing: for a partially real, partially imagined pre-war Syria in which a multicultural, secular *asabiyya* (solidarity) trumped *taifiyya* (sectarianism) in local communities; and for the early days of the revolution, led by secularists, before Islamists established themselves as the only credible military solution to Assad. Its third role is in articulating the boundary between the supernatural and natural worlds, as speakers pondered how porous the boundary is.

4. Northern Ireland

In Syria, the war produced 'strongly binding, vehemently felt groupness' on the basis of religion, ethnicity, and sect, a shift from 'more loosely structured, weakly constraining forms of affinity and affiliation' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, p. 21). By contrast, Christian sectarianism in Northern Ireland contributed to the outbreak of war. Centuries-long political, social, and economic inequalities between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, sustained by the Stormont government, was the backdrop against which the first peaceful, Catholic civil rights march was held in Derry in 1968. Powerful sect-centrism continued over the course of Northern Ireland's 30-year Troubles, with no dramatic acceleration point as there was in Syria in 2012. However, as in Syria, the conflict in Northern Ireland was also relatively quickly militarized, with the deployment of British soldiers in the province in 1969 and the adoption of an armed counter-insurgency campaign by the IRA. Armed conflict came to predominate over 'protest-related' and 'sectarian' violence from the summer of 1971 (De Fazio 2020, p. 1701). There were however several turning points which led to the interlocking of organized political violence and sectarianism in Northern Ireland: formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force loyalist militia in 1965 and attacks on Catholic civilians; the Stormont government's introduction of internment-without-trial policy in 1971; and with the pre-emptive arrest and imprisonment almost exclusively of Catholics regardless of their involvement in republican armed struggle, which in turn catalyzed an IRA campaign of resistance against the British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force populated largely by Protestant Northern Irish. The height of violence occurred between 1968 and 1976. As in Syria, the impact of the Troubles varied greatly by local area. West Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, and South Armagh flashpoints were not the same as middle class South Belfast or rural villages in the middle of the province.

After 1972, fear of terrorism periodically reinforced defensive sect-centrism as much as deaths and injuries over the course of thirty years' armed conflict. Kowalski (2018, p. 673) makes an important point that whether violence was *perceived* as sectarian by the community on the receiving end had as much impact on communal fears as sectarian *intent*. For example, even where the Provisional IRA saw itself as resisting the state and 'shooting the uniform' of those employed as state security forces that was not at all the experience of the Protestant community, who saw the violence as anti-Protestant and sectarian. The same could be said of the Catholic community, for example, during Operation Demetrius (internment without trial), Bloody Sunday, or when a Catholic, civilian or IRA, was killed by loyalist paramilitaries.

As with group difference in Syria, Christian sectarianism in Northern Ireland is 'a collective identity, social structure, and marker of difference within a heterogenous society,' (Pearlman 2020, p. 2). Mitchell (2006, pp. 1–2) has argued that religion's political significance in Northern Ireland during the Troubles came from a matrix of sources: cooperation between churches and politicians; historic social segregation which fed into solidarity rituals, particularly for Catholics; communal identification on the basis of theology and

ideology for Protestants. It intersects with historical patterns of political, economic, and social inequality as well as cultural differences and communal polarization (Ruane and Todd 2005).

To what extent can we say there were secular political arrangements in Northern Ireland before and during the Troubles? Unlike in Syria, public discourse on 'secularism' is mainly a post-Good Friday Agreement (1998) phenomenon within Northern Ireland. This is due in part to secularization and waning church attendance among Catholics and Protestants, and waning affiliation among Protestants. This secularization is however relative; Northern Ireland remains one of the most markedly religious places in Europe (Altglas 2022, pp. 32–33). Public discussion of secularism also tracks the search for non-sectarian ways of living together and doing politics in post-Troubles Northern Ireland. This trend is exemplified by growing electoral success of the Alliance party, take up of integrated (non-sectarian) schools, and larger numbers of voters describing themselves as 'none' rather than unionist or nationalist. These changes have been propelled by growing popular frustration with dysfunction in power-sharing administrations in Stormont (including its suspension 2017–2020), with loyalist inter-communal violence, and with dissident republican attacks. Greater inward migration of non-Christians to Northern Ireland (including the arrival of Syrian refugees) has also begun to promote new reflection on racism, sectarianism, and religious equality in Northern Ireland (Gilligan 2017).

However, we must not get ahead of ourselves. During the Troubles, the complex role of religion in public life and politics was widely, unquestioningly accepted by both Protestants and Catholics. As part of the United Kingdom, Northern Ireland was legally part of a liberal democracy with an Established Church. However, as noted, in practice, it functioned as a Protestant sect-ocracy during the Troubles, before the Good Friday Agreement, including after direct rule was imposed from Westminster. The 1960s civil rights movement articulated their claims in the language of civil and human rights and equality for Catholics rather than through a discourse of secularism and separation of religion from politics in a civil state. Successive attempts to establish power-sharing governments in Northern Ireland (1975, 1985, 1998) included the core principle of liberal consociational democracy: that power is shared by community/sect with the option that citizens may someday choose an alternative, possibly more secular, future. During the Troubles, the churches still had immense social authority, with a key role to play in public life and also sometimes politics, with Rev. Ian Paisley the most notorious example of a politician in the pulpit (Bruce 2007). This is why, unlike in Syria where there was explicit discussion of Ba'athist political secularism, there was not in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

We now turn to the three main iterations of secularity talk in Northern Ireland.

4.1. Distinguishing Good Faith from Bad Politics

In *Considering Grace*, among the mainly faith-filled interviewees, secularity talk is largely implicit, appearing mainly in the differentiation of 'true faith' from 'politics'. Faith is a central concept for Presbyterians, with many evangelically inclined Northern Irish Presbyterians calling themselves 'Christians' only when they become born again and actively welcome a pro-active, deeply intimate, daily relationship with God. They distinguish this from the social and cultural structures of Protestantism into which they were born (sect).

As in the Syrian case, Northern Irish Presbyterians used secularity talk to draw ethical distinctions. While Syrians used it to discuss the ethics of others, they used secularity talk to highlight their own correct behavior, demonstrating their own piety, distancing themselves from unethical paramilitary violence. For example, Violet, whose RUC officer father-in-law was killed, said 'We were taught the difference between right and wrong [in church]. You knew in your heart of hearts, going out and looking for revenge was not the Christian way to do things. We were taught to turn the other cheek' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 90). Others took a hard line on political violence as the opposite of being a good Christian. Craig, an RUC officer whose armored car struck an IRA landmine, killing his colleagues said, 'They have never answered on earth for what they have done. But

with my Christian belief, I know that unless they fully repent, there is a day of judgement coming. That is the only solace I can draw,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 101). By silent implication, IRA armed struggle was not justified war but un-Christian. The secularity talk aspect of this was in distinguishing IRA killings from someone doing their Christian duty (including deploying lethal force while serving in the RUC). In *Considering Grace*, IRA men were condemned for behaving immorally but not condemned as hypocrites failing to live out some self-professed Christian piety. By contrast, Syrians condemned jihadists for religious hypocrisy.

Among those not engaged in paramilitarism during the Troubles, there is a cross-community (both Catholic and Protestant) discourse about 'getting on' with things and not allowing the conflict to impact everyday life. It is a coping discourse. Among Northern Irish Presbyterians, the core distinction between 'religion' and 'politics' (including sectarianism and militancy), was powerfully shaped by this broader 'getting on' discourse. For example, Cynthia, who ran a shop in a mixed border town, said 'God created this world, and it's up to us to look after it. We are meant to be workers and we're meant to get on' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 177). Jeffrey, a teacher during the Troubles, said, 'It was our job to keep normality normal: in faith, in work, socialising in the town, shopping. Because if you didn't, then you were failing in your job. Not just as a Christian, but as a human being' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 141). Both Cynthia and Jeffrey are people of faith; the secularity talk aspect of their comments is in the implied distinction between being a good, faithful person who 'gets on with things' and the violent, unethical, political Troubles.

This distinction had several different but related iterations. For example, Andrew, a police officer married to a Catholic, talked about not 'bringing work home' with him to his family, a form of 'getting on' discourse. He said they would talk about their days, 'But you tried not to let it affect your own personal private life and your own faith' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 104). This is an important point. 'Getting on' discourse is just as much about what is said as what is made silent. For Andrew, militancy and sectarianism are not for polite conversation, to preserve family harmony and a space for faith free from politics. For those in public-facing jobs like Andrew and Liz, a nurse at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, not talking about religion or politics was critical to doing the work, particularly when serving cross-community: 'There was no talk about Catholic/Protestant/IRA. It was an unwritten policy that you just got on with it,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 144). Philip, who worked in a pathology lab near the border also kept sectarianism out of his job: 'All blood's red. There's no orange and green blood,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 131).

While a chapter of *Considering Grace* provides the views of Presbyterian victims of loyalist paramilitary violence and some brought up the IRA, the Orange Order was a more sensitive subject, sectarian but also a 'nice' form of community. Gary, a former Ulster Unionist Party councilor said, 'I enjoyed the crack [fun] of the lodge meetings, but it's when you grow a bit older you realise that these are the sort of organisations that tend to polarise when things go sour within communities,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 200). By contrast, Alex, whose father was a member, portrayed it as an outlet for sectarian pride which sapped oxygen from paramilitarism while avoiding violence (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 211). Marches were, however, often a flashpoint for sectarian rioting between Catholics and Protestants. Jeffrey, a teacher, was criticized by parents after discussing marching's incitement to violence in class: 'You boys say you're Orangemen and you represent me. You don't represent anything I stand for . . . you're standing for an Orange idea that is contrary to the symbols you're wearing,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 141). For critical speakers, the Orange Order during the Troubles was explicitly political. For speakers for whom the Order was a gentler form of sectarianism, they engaged in implicit secularity talk-through-silence, which downplays politicized, sectarian pride and plays up the fun, religious community-building aspect.

4.2. Distinguishing Good Congregational Life from Bad Politics

Secularity talk also shaped discussion of the role of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, of the role of individual ministers and congregations during the Troubles. For some, it was good that ministers retained a separation between 'true religion' and politics. For example, Robert praised his minister. He noted that there had 'been consistent teaching . . . but it's not Troubles-related [about attacks, politics, paramilitarism or sectarianism]. It's more about us and God and the fact that we all fall short and need his forgiveness,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 60). Robert's minister preserved the church as a safe haven. Not everyone shared this view. Many thought the PCI and its ministers could have more directly addressed sectarianism and violence from the pulpit. However, there was blanket criticism of Rev. Ian Paisley's interventions into politics and encouragement of violent paramilitarism. For interviewees, Paisley flagrantly violated and inspired others to violate the boundary between 'true religion' and chauvinistic political sectarianism. Other figures were lightning rods for secularity talk. For example, Joe, a former loyalist paramilitary who became born again in prison, blamed both Paisley and William Craig, leader of the Unionist Vanguard movement, for violent incitement: 'Someone [Craig] says, 'Liquidate the enemy.' . . . That means: get guns and kill people. That's what people who were wearing [clerical] collars [i.e., Paisley] were saying—we have to arm ourselves. That's a hate preacher . . . It was like a loyalist Jihad,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 123).

For Joe, a former paramilitary, the stakes of secularity talk distinction between 'true religion' and politics are high and deeply personal, as he himself chose to turn his back on paramilitarism. Other critics condemned ministers for violating the secular boundary between religion and politics by preaching forgiveness from the pulpit. For example, Beth, a seriously injured former policewoman said that many of those injured or bereaved in the Troubles 'have completely lost their faith because of what happens to them [in church] . . . [Ministers] talk about how we—the people who were shot and blew up—have to forgive these people [the IRA]. Any time my colleagues go to church they'll end up crushed by ministers. How can you say to a man who lost two legs and an arm: 'You have to forgive . . . .'' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 99). Ministers, in their own secularity talk, highlighted the challenges of keeping politics out of the church. For example, Rev. Abigail said, 'The Troubles were unavoidable [in her urban interface congregation]. You would have a baptism and people would turn up at church with their UDA . . . or UVF [paramilitary] badges on' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 40). Ministers were both praised and vilified for trying to keep the church out of politics and politics out of the church. For Tim, working class from a devout family, silence on politics drove him out of the church and into the arms of a paramilitary: 'The only thing Christians were interested in was their own personal lives. They didn't give a hoot what went on in the country,' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 126).

4.3. Exploring the Edges of Faith

In contrast to widespread discussion of sectarianism and the political dimension of jihadism among Syrians, in *Considering Grace*, the impact of the Troubles on faith and personal piety was the most common theme. Political violence had a seismic impact on faith. Some, like Rodney, became born again. As in Syria, Northern Irish Presbyterians engaged in secularity talk when they discussed divine intervention, positing a boundary between humans and God in the prospect of its crossing. For example, Rodney, an RUC officer, was transporting a prisoner when his car was ambushed. He was not a believing Christian at the time, with a personal relationship with Christ. However, he said,

> When you are in a life and death situation—and you could die—sometimes people turn to God. That's what I did . . . I cried to God, 'Help me.' I firmly believe he saved my life. Not only did he physically save all of us [in the vehicle], but there was a sense of his presence . . . It was eleven years from the terrorist incident until I had a relationship with Jesus. (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 94)

Others abandoned faith and left the church. For example, Stephen recounted that 'Some families actually turned to the church because they'd nobody else to turn to . . . Others turned away and went in a different direction. I would have seen people who turned to alcohol after a very bad incident' instead of prayer (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 143). Still others experienced temporary faith loss but eventually found their way back. For example, Sarah, whose policeman son was murdered while out on patrol said that in the immediate aftermath she felt like, 'There's no God. I'm not going back to church. But then I got over that and I got back into church,' with the help of her community and the local minister who visited daily (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 65).

The secularity talk aspect of these discussions was in how speakers engaged with the edges of their own faith and the ways in which political violence trespassed on their commitment to separating politics and their relationship with God. Many comments were couched in terms of how the Troubles shook their faith in God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence and the ability for them or their loved ones to be saved by faith alone. For example, Gayus, a member of the security forces, said,

> There was never any in-depth consideration of why things were happening . . . How do bad things happen if God has a plan? There was no explanation from a minister or anybody as to why [atrocities] were allowed to happen. [Today] I believe in Christian beliefs and Christian ideals, but I couldn't honestly say I believe God has a plan. (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 88)

Ed was a member of the police whose father was killed by the IRA while serving in the police. He said that at the time, in church, 'I wasn't getting the answers I wanted. But I still go to church. You can't blame the church . . . [I] saw a lot of bad things in the police, but I didn't become an atheist.' Ed does not take communion, as a mark of this change in his life brought on by the Troubles: 'I live by the values of the Presbyterian church and I believe in Christ, but for some reason, I can't take that step. I have questions about it all, especially daddy's death' (Ganiel and Yohanis 2019, p. 66).

To summarize: what does secularity talk do among Northern Irish Presbyterians remembering the Troubles? First and foremost, it is an expression of personal piety, faith, and 'good living'. It is a form of defensive self-differentiation from the IRA and sometimes also loyalist paramilitaries. It is a religio-class discourse of reasonable, moderate, middle-class selfhood (cf. Gutkowski 2020), establishing ethical subjectivity: we are rational, peaceful, non-sectarian moderates, able to properly distinguish politics and religion, as opposed to those dangerous, sectarian, often working class, people who blur the boundaries while they fight each other. Secularity talk also explains and justifies a major life choice (to cleave to the church over a period of decades, whatever its mixed legacy from the Troubles). Seemingly paradoxically, secularity talk is often *a restatement of faith*, in the belief that God's love transcends human politics. However, secularity talk can also be a form of silence and political denial. In positing sectarianism as political and not religious, secularity talk may help foreclose the difficult, comprehensive reckoning of the entangling of Christianity and the Troubles.

5. Conclusions

Contributing conceptually to the 'peace turn' in the comparative study of religion and conflict, this article has set out a new approach for studying possible *limits* of religionization in war by analyzing what I call secularity talk. The article identifies two types of secularity talk, implicit and explicit, present in both case studies to different degrees. Implicit secularity talk operates primarily through normative distinction. It implies that 'true religion' should be protected from those who would seek to distort and exploit faith for violent political ends. This was the dominant form of secularity talk in Northern Ireland. Explicit secularity talk was more apparent among Syrians. They discussed political secularism and secularist political identity directly. I will explain why in a moment, but it is worth highlighting that this finding may initially seem counterintuitive. Why is it not the reverse, with more explicit secularity talk in the Western, Protestant Christian, European case and

more subtle, implicit secularity talk in the case of a Middle Eastern, Islamic case? The short answer is that the contemporary relationship between religion and state in a given context and how it manifests during war seems to have a larger impact on trajectories of secularity talk than secularism's historic origins in European Protestant contexts and the historic emergence of structural distinctions between 'religion' and other social spheres (Asad 1993).

Based on the two cases, I conclude that war as a social field in Bourdieu's terms creates three 'path probabilities' (Kleine and Wohlrab-Sahr 2020) for secularity talk. The first is when militants (state and non-state) mobilize religious or sectarian symbols and communal identities to compete for capital in the social field. This increases the probability of a backlash, that some people will normatively distinguish between the bad guys who manipulate religion for political ends and good, peaceful people of faith. The second path probability to war-time secularity talk is where there is pre-war secularity talk, as in Syria: where the pre-war political system is explicitly secular and rewards a politically secular habitus; where those seeking religionized politics had already produced a counter-position to compete for capital in the social field of the pre-war state; or where there is substantial secular habitus (liberal lifestyle) among the population. A third path probability is that war increases the likelihood that people will die or be injured, something which scholars have shown can challenge people's faith in God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence. This is common to all wars, so secularity talk may only require that people of faith fight or live through political violence.

What factors, in combination, help account for variations in secularity talk between the two case studies? First, the historical relationship between religion and politics in each society made a substantial difference to patterns of war-time secularity talk. There is a clear difference in the pre-war political cultures of the two cases when it comes to the role of ethno-religious difference. Protestant/Unionist supremacy within Northern Ireland's ostensibly democratic politics was predicated on sustaining political, social, and economic differences between Protestants and Catholics following the partition of Ireland in 1921. By contrast, the two Assad regimes simultaneously exploited group differences to build a coalition of minority support with Alawites at the core and sought to downplay differences between minorities and Sunnis after 1982. That group difference was self-evident and politically entrenched in pre-war Northern Ireland may help to explain why there is relatively less explicit discussion of sectarianism and group difference in *Choosing Grace* than in the Syrian texts. The significance of faith to Presbyterians and that interviewees were explicitly asked about faith and church rather than politics also shapes this difference, but from the sources, it is not possible to determine to what extent these three factors each play a role. There was also a widely accepted discourse of multicultural secularism in the Syria's political field, part of a multi-prong regime maintenance strategy after it crushed the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1982, alongside co-opting those Sunni ulema not banished, imprisoned, or killed for association with the uprising. Young Syrian revolutionaries themselves positively associated Syrian nationalism with multicultural tolerance. This provided a path probability for the emergence of explicit secularity talk as actors discussed the mobilization of religious and sect idioms during the war and jihadist intervention as something novel and divergent from the pre-war, Ba'athist norm. By contrast, pre-Troubles Northern Ireland lacked a public discourse on political secularism. The Northern Irish case also lacks the Syrian equivalent of Muslim Brotherhood-style political Islamism, with competing actors calling for a deeper relationship between religious law and state. Further, as a backlash to the 1976–1982 uprising, there emerged among Syrians an explicit political position against the Ikhwan's vision for the state and in favor of a civil state, with this project supported by both young secularist and Islamist revolutionaries in 2011. By contrast, while unionist Presbyterians may have disagreed with nationalists over the province's position in the United Kingdom, during the Troubles there was shared consensus that, for example, religious leaders had an important social role and that the state should support people's religious beliefs and practices. There was no competition in the political field

on the role of religion in politics. There were no calls for greater secularism, just greater political and economic equality between Catholics and Protestants.

Two other factors help account for variations in secularity talk. The anti-Sunni, anti-religious secular habitus and discourses found among the Syrian army and the Alawite *shabiha* produced explicit secularity talk. This contrasts with Northern Ireland where no actors engaged in anti-religious targeting of the other side. Further, jihadists grounded their political project in theological claims. This generated explicit secularity talk among Syrians, particularly in their criticism of jihadists as not authentically pious. By contrast, the IRA used Irish national symbols and shared Catholic identity but did not make theological claims. The Syrian context provided more path probabilities to explicit and the Northern Irish context to implicit secularity talk, though the cases featured both types.

It is also worth reflecting on what factors do *not* help explain differences between case studies. First, *who* actually drove religionization did not seem to matter; that foreign actors played a greater role in Syria than Northern Ireland does not explain variations in secularity talk. Second, that Presbyterian Northern Irish were the status quo, politically powerful group in society prior to the Troubles while Arab Syrian Sunni revolutionaries opposed the regime is an important difference between cases but does not help explain variations in secularity talk. Third, although these two civil wars are arguably 'most different' cases, the structural differences between these two wars seemed to have little bearing on the secularity talk produced, perhaps surprisingly. This includes differences between the low and high intensity of the conflicts over their duration, numbers of casualties and internally and externally displaced, eventual scope of the conflicts after the initial revolutionary phase, and number and type of actors involved.

It remains unclear, however, based on the type of data analyzed, whether several other dynamics 'mattered' to differences between the two cases. While research shows that increased faith and practice often correlates with older age (Wink and Dillon 2002), it is not clear how or if this shapes differences between baby boomer Northern Irish and millennial and Generation Z Syrians. More than structural differences between the two wars, it seems that perhaps the sudden, dramatic life changes for a larger proportion of the population brought about during the early phases of the Syrian war may have generated differences in grassroots secularity talk, but it is not possible to fully confirm with these sources and research method. It is also not clear what if any impact the length of time between the events and the interview had on variations. Additionally, the data do not allow for me to analyze in a fine-grained way the impact of 'critical junctures' on how secularity talk evolved during the wars.

Finally, the cases suggest a hypothesis about the relationship between war and secularity. How societies differentiate between religion and other social spheres, i.e., the contours of secularity, seems to remain largely the same before and after war, regardless of how fluid they may be *during* the war. This supports my previous argument that war's ability to generate wider social change through its revolutionary potential also applies to religious change, including the evolution of secular dynamics (Gutkowski 2014, pp. 216–38). However, it further nuances my earlier conclusion. Instead, the Northern Ireland case suggests that we must integrate a core insight from the Multiple Secularities project that changes to secularity occur by and large slowly, over the long durée. In this way, secularity has a 'sticky' quality to it, even in the context of dramatic social rupture. While such social rupture may produce, as Sohrabi (2019) suggested, contingent opportunities for secularity to emerge (and potentially then reverse), other factors need to be in place to sustain long term changes around how people understand religion's boundaries, conceptually and socially.

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